

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

JAZZ INFLUENCE IN CONTEMPORARY COMPOSITION:

AN OVERVIEW OF FOUR WORKS FOR SAXOPHONE BY BENJAMIN BOONE

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Since its emergence in the early twentieth century, jazz has exerted influence on concert music. Many of the first American concert works that incorporated jazz did so in order to bring recognition to the new genre as art music. One of the first of these works, George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), transplanted the dance band into the concert hall and applied jazz style and instrumentation to the traditional concerto form, providing a means for jazz to be perceived in a more formal and serious setting. William Grant Still composed his First Symphony, the *Afro-American*, believing that bringing jazz (specifically the blues) to the symphony orchestra was the best way to recognize its value and have it appreciated by the serious musical world. In the 1960s and 1970s, jazz gradually gained a position in music education, helping secure its association with academic music. Today, composers and musicians feel less of a need to justify jazz as something more than popular music. It is no longer unusual for composers to incorporate elements of jazz into concert works. As jazz is an internationally appreciated music with American origin, American composers can use it as a way to ground their works in American tradition and at the same time as a jumping-off point into new musical territory.

Composer Benjamin Boone (b. 1963) uses jazz to both of these ends in his works for saxophone. A saxophonist himself, Boone majored in jazz performance at the University of Tennessee and became interested in composition as an offshoot of jazz studies. When asked why so many of his works exhibit jazz influence, Boone responded, "I guess that music is in my bones."¹ The music community is fortunate that jazz is in his bones, for Boone has contributed a great deal to what could be considered a new

¹ Boone [e-mail], 2006

subgenre of music: concert jazz. For the purposes of this study, concert jazz will be defined as a category of concert works of varied instrumentation that openly make reference to jazz language and style, and that require performers to have some knowledge of jazz performance practice in order to effectively execute a performance of the work. There are several motivations for composing concert jazz works for saxophone; as an instrument closely associated with jazz, the saxophone can be especially effective in communicating jazz techniques and style. Because of the limited repertoire of the infant saxophone (patented in 1846) as compared to other instruments', professional saxophonists tend to be particularly interested in commissioning and performing new works. Boone "adore[s] the sound"² of the instrument and enjoys the fact that contemporary saxophonists are supportive of his compositions.

Election Year (1994) for solo saxophone is a programmatic work that parodies the scandal and deception in the political atmosphere that occurs each election year. Jazz influence in the piece appears in the form of intense syncopation, bop-like passages, and the placement of accents and articulations. Boone's use of triplet eighth notes, dotted eighth followed by sixteenth-note patterns, and common swing rhythms suggest that the piece should be performed with jazz interpretation instead of strictly accurate rhythms. Stylistic descriptors in the score include "cunningly," "buffoonishly," "disputatiously," "sleazily," and "drunkenly."³ These instructions contribute to the program of the work but are deliberately ambiguous as actual performance information, giving the performer some interpretive freedom and ensuring that no two performers will execute the work in the same way, a concept that is valued in jazz. For example, one saxophonist might make

² Boone [e-mail], 2006

³ Boone 1-3, 1994

a string of sixteenth notes sound “sleazy” by dramatically slowing and then increasing the tempo, and another saxophonist might alter his tone and vibrato, and either interpretation could be considered correct. Boone makes use of the saxophone’s extended techniques such as glissandi, smears, growling, and one multiphonic; these effects are common in jazz improvisation but rare in traditional concert literature. In order to make the work accessible to more saxophonists, Boone gives a brief explanation of how to achieve each effect on the saxophone in the program notes. He suggests fingerings for altissimo register notes, and offers alternative passages to replace those containing altissimo that saxophonists unfamiliar with the highest register of the instrument may substitute when performing the work.

Election Year gives the listener no sense of tonality, and the meter and tempo change so frequently that a steady pulse is scarcely felt for very long at any point in the five-minute work. Boone has abandoned the restrictions of tonality and time in order to explore the expressive capabilities of the saxophone. Extended techniques are used not as gimmicks but as artistic means of conveying certain emotions. In three instances Boone writes “shriek”⁴ or “scream!”⁵ above one note or group of notes to encourage the saxophone to imitate a human voice crying out. Boone uses repetition as a unifying theme throughout the work, employing several different single beat rhythm patterns that repeat a number of times. One of these mini-themes that permeates the entire piece is a simple four note pattern consisting of three triplet sixteenth notes and an eighth note. In many of its appearances the riff repeats several times, usually accompanied by a crescendo and sometimes by an accelerando. In the measures leading to the climax of the

⁴ Boone 1, 1994

⁵ Boone 3, 1994

piece at measure 93 (the “scream!”), the saxophonist performs the pattern thirty-four times while increasing volume from piano to fortissimo (*fff*) and increasing tempo “to as fast as possible,”⁶ then adding a growl for the last three measures to heighten the intensity as much as possible. The end of the piece is similar but even more intense; the same pattern is played thirty times and then repeated at will by the performer, all while accelerating to “as fast as possible” and “as loud as possible.”⁷ Boone is clearly pushing the conventional limitations of the saxophone in order to have it reach its full expressive potential.

PsychoTherapy: A Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano (2004) consists of four movements named for stages of psychotherapy. The piece is unique in that it is psychologically programmatic, intending to convey specific emotions and experiences of a patient undergoing psychotherapy. The first movement, *Anger Management*, is atonal and rhythmically aggressive in both the saxophone and piano. The movement has intense momentum that drives to the end of the piece with no real break or moment of relief. Yet, the tempo is moderate ($\text{♩} = 92$), and Boone does not allow the instruments to fully let loose in any climactic moment, communicating the program of attempting to control a wild anger that wishes to break free. The title of the second movement, *Finding the “Angle of Repose,”* refers to the maximum angle at which objects can balance on an incline without beginning to roll. The movement is calm yet agitated, with a lyrical melody in the saxophone based on the Aeolian mode and rolling arpeggios in the piano. The constantly shifting mixed meter makes each downbeat a surprise to the listener and

⁶ Boone 1, 1994

⁷ Boone 1, 1994

expresses the feeling that the delicate balance maintained between the two instruments could be easily lost at any moment.

The third movement, *Attitude: Fun with Funk*, begins with a funk groove established by the piano in irregularly alternating standard and mixed meters. The saxophone enters with a composed solo in an improvisatory style. In the first edition of the piece (2004), this movement offers improvisation as an option for the performer in an eight-measure section near the beginning, the optional unwritten cadenza, and the section immediately preceding it in which the performer is to “play crazy harmonics... like someone blessing someone out.”⁸ In collaboration with saxophonist Clifford Leaman, who commissioned and premiered the work, Boone produced the 2006 version of the movement which offers composed versions of the first section and the cadenza while still offering the option for the performer to improvise or compose his own cadenza. The section of “crazy harmonics” remains unnotated. Boone utilizes techniques that a showy soloist might use to create excitement such as tone color trills (fingerings are explained for each), glissandi, and dropping the jaw while trilling for a quarter-tone effect. This movement most closely resembles jazz as the saxophone performs an exciting solo while the piano acts as the rhythm section.

The final movement, *Action: Vandermarking*, is named for jazz and avant-garde saxophonist Ken Vandermark, whose musical influence permeates the movement. Marked “hyperactively” at $\text{♩} = 240$, this brief movement lasting just under two minutes is a energetic display of polyrhythms and superimposed rhythmic patterns over constantly changing meters. It is difficult for the listener to cling to any rhythmic pattern for very long; each appearance of one particular rhythmic theme that first appears in the

⁸ Boone 20, 2004.

saxophone in measure 12 is followed by its repetition with one or two beats added to the end, surprising the listener each time. From letter F to I the saxophone plays a bluesy lick over what sounds like an extended blues form in alternating 3/4 and 2/4 time signatures, with the occasional 4/4 bar inserted to prevent the pattern from becoming too predictable. The next section uses material from the first and builds to a dramatic climax by way of virtuosic upward-running triplet eighth notes in the saxophone accompanied by fierce clusters in the piano. Except for the very last beat, the last measures of the piano part are unnotated, instructing the pianist to execute “unmeasured, violent cluster tremolos between hands, expanding gradually until extreme high and extreme low clusters are reached.”⁹ Boone also indicates that notated tone clusters may instead be played with the fist, a technique reminiscent of the striking early twentieth century piano compositions of Henry Cowell. In the conclusion of the work, Boone finally provides the climax that has been imminent since the first movement, pushing the limitations of both instruments with racing runs into the saxophone’s altissimo register and banging clusters progressing to the low and high ends of the piano keyboard.

Squeeze for alto saxophone and orchestra (1997) is a single-movement, fourteen-minute concerto that showcases the capabilities of the solo saxophone. Two additional versions of the piece exist: one for alto saxophone and band and another for alto saxophone accompanied by two pianos and percussion. Unlike many of Boone’s works, the piece remains in 4/4 time throughout. The work is a kind of dialogue between saxophone and orchestra. The saxophone begins rather calmly, interjecting smooth, syncopated licks between the statements of the orchestra which include an incessant riff of a descending perfect fourth in a dotted quarter followed by eighth note rhythm that

⁹ Boone 31, 2006.

seems to increase in forcefulness with each repetition. The saxophonist, at first seemingly reluctant to show off, is encouraged (or “squeezed”) by the orchestra to perform more complex and intense passages and to venture into jazz idioms. As the saxophone develops motifs, the orchestra responds by echoing its favorite licks, much like a jazz rhythm section does when comping. During this section, the orchestra drives to climactic moments several times, and each time the mellow syncopated motive constructed of perfect fourths returns as if to attempt to calm the dynamic orchestra. After a climactic moment at measure 182, the saxophone can no longer hold back, letting out a few interspersed high-pitched riffs and shrieks in a “jazzy” style over the unrelenting orchestra. The saxophone then begins a string of bluesy, bop-like lines that develop the famous motive from the first movement of John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*. As before, the orchestra reiterates the saxophone’s strains in approval. The cadenza following this section is composed, but Boone encourages the saxophonist to compose or improvise an extension of the written cadenza using blues licks and musical ideas from the piece. The last minutes of the piece culminate the many themes of the piece in a whirling mass of sound while the saxophone plays largely pentatonic lines in an improvisatory style that can be linked by melodic construction, though not in tempo, to Coltrane’s playing in the final movement of *A Love Supreme*.

Vicissitudes for saxophone quartet and symphonic winds (revised version premiered in 1999) was named by the Mount Tabor High School Band of North Carolina who commissioned and premiered the first version of the work. Members of the ensemble, who had the opportunity to communicate with Boone throughout the compositional process, felt that the work’s handling of unexpected changes related to the

events they were experiencing in their lives as young adults. The concerto grosso, a long composition for Boone at over twenty-one minutes in duration, contrasts three distinct styles that recur throughout: a slow rock ballad reminiscent of a 1980s television show theme song, a quiet but tense section with a lyrical theme in minor played by the euphoniums and French horns, and a section labeled “jazzy” that is actually more funk-oriented with straight eighth notes and a driving beat. Each section of the piece can be categorized into one of these styles, and the transitions between them are immediate and arrive without warning, contributing to the title theme of the work. Themes within each section are brief and are reiterated several times, often sequenced into other keys in imitation of a common technique of jazz improvisers. No opportunities for improvisation exist, but during a “jazzy” section at measure 200, the four saxophone soloists “trade twos,” that is, each takes a turn playing a two measure solo in an improvisatory style while the wind ensemble provides a rhythm section accompaniment with background lines. Near the beginning of the work, the quartet and ensemble act rather independently, performing in alternating sections. As the piece progresses, the two groups interact more, each group drawing from themes presented by the other. Members of the quartet each get the opportunity to display virtuosity as well as a command of jazz style, including specific techniques such as glissandi, slap tonguing, scoops, false fingering or tone color trills, and falls.

Of all the works discussed so far, *Vicissitudes* can be most closely associated with popular music. The rock beats, tongue-in-cheek references to popular songs, highly repetitious themes, and unexpected key changes all derive from commonalities in popular styles. Because of this association the work may be more entertaining for general

audiences to experience, but is also most susceptible to judgment by serious concert musicians and critics. Reception of the piece can be likened to that of *Rhapsody in Blue* at its initial conception, a comparison which suggests the possibility that Boone may be helping forge a musical movement in which concert works incorporate rock and other popular idioms just as composers of the 1920s and 1930s first began to incorporate jazz.

While such a small sampling of a composer's output cannot possibly define his compositional style, common characteristics between the works discussed do indicate Boone's stylistic tendencies. Boone makes use of short, highly rhythmic themes to unify his compositions, which are generally relatively brief and not overstated with the possible exception of *Vicissitudes*. Regarding the programmatic nature of many of his works, Boone said the following [selection edited for typographical errors]:

Sometimes the program comes after the composition so it's hard to say [how the program shapes the composition]. I think *Election Year* works because of the title and thus program...the but the title *Squeeze* came after the piece, *Alley Dance* came after the piece, *Vicissitudes* came after the piece, *Psychotherapy* came after the piece (though I think when I did the 1st mvt this was on my mind)...so I think sometimes it's important to give the audience a program, but rarely do I have a concrete one in mind. Instead I usually think of the dramatic action.¹⁰

Creating dramatic action in music is clearly one of Boone's greatest talents. As a saxophonist himself, Boone knows all the tricks and effects the saxophone can produce and uses them to full effect in a remarkably expressive manner. He knows how to execute each of the demands he places on the saxophonist and is able to provide valuable instructional information to the performer that is rarely given by a composer.

Considering his background as a jazz saxophonist, it seems entirely appropriate for Boone to compose concert jazz works for saxophone. He induces jazz feel in his

¹⁰ Boone [e-mail], 2006

works mostly by means of rhythm and style, and his written indications regarding note length and accents is much more accurate and effective than most composers' attempts at notating jazz style. Boone is remarkably skilled at capturing the spirit of improvisation, the most distinguishable and most highly valued aspect of jazz, in composition. His playful personality is reflected by the program notes he always includes as well as by the astutely jovial spirit of his music. Perhaps the most thrilling aspect of Boone's music for saxophone is the prospect of more great works that have yet to be composed.

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