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The Art of the Steel Pan instrument in a Jazz combo

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE ART OF THE STEEL PAN INSTRUMENT IN A JAZZ COMBO: EXTENDED PROGRAM NOTES FOR THESIS RECITAL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

by

Leon Thomas

2012

To: Dean Brian Schriner
College of Architecture and the Arts

This thesis, written by Leon Thomas, and entitled The art of the Steel Pan instrument in a Jazz combo, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Michael Orta

Karen S. Fuller

Gary Campbell, Major Professor

Date of Defense: April 23, 2012

The thesis of Leon Thomas is approved.

Dean Brian Schriner
College of Architecture and the Arts

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2012

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE ART OF THE STEEL PAN INSTRUMENT IN A JAZZ BAND COMBO:

EXTENDED PROGRAM NOTES FOR THESIS RECITAL

by

Leon Thomas

Florida International University, 2012

Miami, Florida

Professor Gary Campbell, Major Professor

The Master's Recital recorded on the compact disc that accompanies this paper presents seven compositions. Five of them are my own, and two are my arrangements of compositions by musicians that I admire. The paper includes scores of the original compositions and arrangements, as well as program notes that offer historical background, summaries of the form, and observations on performance practice for each selection. My goal is to demonstrate to jazz devotees and to music lovers in general the capabilities of the steel pan instrument within a jazz combo setting. Each composition exploits the full range of challenges the percussionist faces in a jazz combo performance. I explore different stylistic approaches and musical concepts that enable a high level of improvised musical performance on an instrument that is relatively new to jazz.

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I. INTRODUCTION

I was there to see the legendary Len "*Boogsie*" Sharpe wow the audiences in London, England. I was also there to witness Ken "*Professor*" Philmore do the same to the people of New York City. Othello Molineaux took the Steel Pan instrument to greater lengths when he was featured on the Grammy-nominated album *Jaco Pastorius* by Jaco Pastorius himself. These are just some of the great strides the Steel Pan Instrument has taken since it was invented during the 1930's – 40's.

In the island of Trinidad, during the time of slavery, traditional drums were banned because slave masters feared that they were being used by their slaves as a form of communication to incite a revolution. This ordinance spurred the evolution of the steel pan from African drums, to Tamboo Bamboo bands, to today's steel pan orchestra. The pioneers of this beloved instrument could have never thought that it would be a feature at various jazz stages around the world.

This Graduate Recital demonstrates how a masterful interpretation of the jazz idiom is possible on an instrument that was never intended for this style of music. I accomplish chiefly by exploiting the swing pattern in particular and by incorporating the stick technique I have acquired from my drum set playing. I also place considerable emphasis on the steel pan's capability of blending with the traditional jazz instruments.

II. THAT WHICH IS MISSING

ABOUT THIS COMPOSER

Josh Shpak, jazz trumpeter. Josh Shpak has packed quite a lot into his young career. He was chosen as the only jazz trumpet player in the United States to win the 2012 National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts YOUNGARTS Award; selected as one of only four trumpet finalists from around the world to be flown in for a live audition for the Thelonious Monk Institute; performed with the 2011 Next Generation Jazz Orchestra at the 2011 Monterey Jazz Festival; and was chosen for the 2011 Grammy Jazz Ensemble. During his junior and senior years at Northgate High School in Walnut Creek, California, he auditioned and was selected for the 2010 Berklee Summer Jazz Workshop, the 2010 Vail Jazz Workshop, the 2010 Brubeck Summer Jazz Colony, the 2011 Grammy Jazz Ensemble, the 2011 Jazz Band of America, and the 2011 Next Generation Jazz Orchestra. With these groups, Josh toured and performed throughout the United States and Europe at jazz festivals such as the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland, the Nice Jazz Festival and Vienne Jazz Festival in France, and the Monterey Jazz Festival in California.

Upon graduating from high school in 2011, Josh received full-tuition scholarship offers from numerous colleges and universities; however, he chose the Berklee College of Music in Boston, which he currently attends. He continues to study with Clark Terry, Bobby Shew, Laurie Frink, Tiger Okoshi, Ingrid Jensen, Phil Wilson, Hal Crook, Christian Scott (and Dann Zinn and Mic Gillette on visits back to California). He also receives continual guidance from his life-long mentor, former Hollywood composer/arranger, Michael Miller.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

Josh was a finalist at the NFAA Young Arts program which was held in Miami during the first week on January, 2012. I had the opportunity to hear him perform this piece in person and fell in love with it right there and then. This tune has a soulful edge that caught my attention. The tune is written in the 6/8 time signature, which gives a bounce to it. I thought that this composition could give some meaningful balance to my repertoire.

PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

The piece is being performed as it's written. Vamping on two chords (A minor 9th to E minor 9th), the rhythm section (drums, bass and piano) sets up the opening line of the melody of the "A" section played on the steel pan. Following the "A" section, the "B" section, where the horns (tenor saxophone and trombone) come in, creates support for the melody line. The tenor saxophone takes the first solo over the "A & B" sections. The second solo follows the same format as the first, this time played on the steel pan. When the solos are complete, we repeat the melody (from the *dal segno*) and play to the coda; which takes us to a *ritardando* in the final measures.

III. CRYIN'

ABOUT THIS COMPOSER

Len 'Boogsie' Sharpe, steel pan artist/arranger/composer. Len 'Boogsie' Sharpe is arguably the best Steel Pan musician in the world. I have had the opportunity to work with him on numerous occasions, and he has influenced my playing to the highest degree.

> Len 'Boogsie' Sharpe is original. He is to Pan what Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington are to jazz. – Max Roach. (Daily Challenge, 1995, 13)

Hailed as a genius by jazz greats Max Roach and Wynton Marsalis, Len 'Boogsie' Sharpe is viewed as a living legend. Winner of numerous competitions, awards and also an honorary doctorate from the University of Trinidad and Tobago, 'Boogsie', as he is also called, started playing steel pan at the age of four (4) as a member of the Crossfire and Symphonettes Steel Orchestras in the island of Trinidad. While growing up he also played with the legendary Invaders Steel Orchestra before settling down at another legendary steel orchestra, Starlift, under the direction of composer, arranger and former school teacher Ray Holman. His peers took notice of his natural talent for composing, arranging and improvising, eventually forming their own steel band: Phase II Pan Groove Steel Orchestra in 1972. Phase II Pan Groove, under the direction of Len Sharpe has become a formidable force in the steel pan world, winning the Trinidad and Tobago National Panorama Steel Pan competition five (5) times.

Without any form of musical training he still manages to create music of the highest quality and possesses improvisational skills unlike any other in the world. Len

has performed with the likes of Art Blakey, Gary Burton, Nathan Davis and Wynton Marsalis, to name a few.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

Minor and diminished chords have traditionally been associated with lament, so their pervasive use in this piece is in keeping with affective connotations of its title. The rhythm played on the floor tom evokes images of a funeral or even an execution. I have added horns (trombone and tenor saxophone) to contribute to the ambiance; they representing the moaning and crying of mourners.

PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

The drummer starts off with a slow march beat on the floor tom, with very strong accents on each downbeat. After eight measures, the other instruments enter. For the "A" section, I chose a three-part voicing created by the Steel Pan, Tenor Sax and Trombone in order to arouse a melancholy affect in the listener. The "B" section maintains the melancholy mood but cleverly changes from minor to the parallel major, only to be wrenched by into the minor mode back to the minor key to end the cry of the melody. The steel pan then takes the solos over the entire form while the horns play the melody softly in the background. When cued, the melody is reestablished in the "B" section, after which the piece ends as it began, with the solo floor tom inexorably intoning its funereal march rhythm.

IV. SOUL WINDOW

ABOUT THIS COMPOSER

Leon 'Foster' Thomas, jazz artist/composer/arranger. Having performed for audiences worldwide, Leon 'Foster' Thomas is a unique force in modern jazz. The New *York Amsterdam News* has described his playing as "riveting, his artistry as unrivaled and his stage personality as dominant." His virtuosic playing of the steel pan has enabled him to connect emotionally with the listener on every level. This World Steelband Music Festival Soloist and Duet Champion of 2002 and 2004 has worked with such artists as: Melton Mustafa, Nathan Davis, James Moody, Richard Smallwood, Hugh Masekela, Kevin Mahogany, David ("Dave") Siegel, Nicole Henry, Abraham Laboriel, Sammy Figueroa, Len ("Boogsie") Sharpe, Ken ("Professor") Philmore, Ray Holman, Dolly Parton, Cyril Neville, Slinger Francisco ("Mighty Sparrow"), 3 Canal, Etienne Charles, Winston Bailey ("Mighty Shadow"), David Rudder, Pelham Goddard, Richard Bailey and James Polk, to name a few.

A native of the island of Trinidad, Foster, as he is also called, was born in the southern city of San Fernando on August 25, 1981. He credits his parents, Hillouise Louise and Loderick Rollo Foster (both deceased), for his musical voice and the pan yards of Trinidad & Tobago for his initial musical training. Leon later attended Florida Memorial University where he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Jazz Studies. He is a prominent figure in the Miami music scene, performing and recording with jazz, Latin, rock, gospel and hip hop artists. In 2010, Leon released his first solo album, titled *What You Don't Know,* which perfectly illustrates his versatility and his prowess in various music genres.

Apart from his playing, Leon is also recognized as a composer, arranger, and drummer. In 2003, he composed the piece *Call of the Amerindians: Rule of the Cacique* for Steel Pan soloist Shiron Cooper (now deceased), which won her the top prize at the 26th Biennial Music Festival held in Trinidad and Tobago. As the arranger for Miami Pan Symphony Steel Orchestra, he has won the Bomb Competitions of both the 2005 and 2006 Miami Carnival, as well as Miami's 2009 Panorama Competition. In 2005 and 2007, Leon was the drummer for both winning bands of Trinidad and Tobago's National Panorama: Phase II Pan Groove and Courts Sound Specialists of Laventille, respectively. Leon continues to perform at various festivals and concerts as well as conducting clinics at various educational institutions on jazz, Caribbean music and the steel pan art form.

ABOUT THE PIECE

This piece is based on the concept of infinity. The melody is meant to suggest a limitless space accommodating a vast scope of extreme and emotional improvisation.

PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

The opening four bars, which repeat four times, start off with the horns and steel pan playing the melody based on D7sus pattern in 5/4 meter, while the cymbals add color. The rest of the rhythm section joins in on the third repeat. The groove and melody is established when the entire combo starts playing together during both the A and B sections. The first solo is taken by the piano over the A section, followed by the steel pan solo in the B section, which is in ¾ meter. After the solos, the melody is reestablished in 5/8 meter, leading to a drum solo in time to the end.

V. SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

ABOUT THE PIECE

I got this idea from my daughter's behavior while in her mother's womb. I created a bass line that was based on the rhythm of her kicking one night. The restless bass line prompted a very bouncy melody in the A and B sections which leads to a modal section (C) for improvising.

PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

The A section starts off with the bass, supported by the piano playing the restless melody line, while the drums play a jazz funk groove. The frontline instruments (steel pan, tenor saxophone, and trombone) then counter the restless bass line with a melody of their own; the rhythmically complex counterpoint that results is intended as a musical analogy to the agitation of a sleepless night. The trombone and bass then play a new melody in an open triplet form over the common time of the jazz funk groove, while the steel pan and tenor saxophone play an open melody based on the keys of Ab major and G major respectively. The piano and the frontline instruments then embody the tossing and turning of an individual trying to sleep with a combination of G pentatonic and G harmonic minor scale fragments, making way for the A section to be repeated, this time without the front line melody. The solo section (C section) is based on the modal concept, over improvisers will be able to express themselves, accompanied by the open swing style playing of the drummer. Following the solo section, the entire combo uses the B section as a vamp to the end.

VI. ANNECY

ABOUT THIS PIECE

Annecy is a ballad that I composed to express my feelings on becoming a father. The melody has a distinctive storyline, the evolution of my emotions towards my new daughter, for the listener to grasp the idea. Also, I wrote the melody with the Trinidadian accent in mind. Both the chords and melody create an imaginative atmosphere whereby causing the listener to submerge themselves into the music.

PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

This piece starts off with the tenor saxophone and trombone playing a unison introduction, creating the mood of the ballad. The rhythm section maintainsthat mood while playing the form of the song without the melody. The steel pan then takes charge of the melody, with the horns complement it with supportive lines. The solos are based on the form of the song, as the steel pan is used to express the emotions of the storyline of this piece. Towards the end of the solo section, the horns play a counter melody leading the band back to the melody of the piece then to the coda.

VII. ENCHANTMENT

ABOUT THIS PIECE

With an aggressive bass line and a simple yet, telling melody that rides on the Songo Latin rhythm, this piece entices the listener to get up and dance. It was premiered in June 2010 at the Rose Hall of the Lincoln Center, New York City.

PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

Enchantment starts off with a rhythm section vamp, followed by the melody on the short A section which is repeated, but the repetitions are separated by a riff based on the mixolydian scale played by the frontline instruments. hroughout the piece, the drum set plays the Songo Latin rhythm. The B section is very short, playing on the G minor/major concept. The solos are over the form of the piece starting with the tenor saxophone, followed by the trombone, then the steel pan. This shows off the balance and fusion of the instruments. After the solos, the A section is played once, transitioning to the C section (coda). The combo vamps on the C section, allowing the drums to solo; the coda ends on cue on a C-major 7th chord.

VIII. BRAND NEW MISCHIEF

ABOUT THIS PIECE

This piece was inspired by my daughter's mischievousness (pulling stuff down, running (crawling) around everywhere with that smile on her face). Accordingly, I created a playful melody with a swing feel. The drums plays a very important part in this tune; in fact they represent the child, being the center of attention.

PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

There was no steel pan on this piece during this performance. I played the drum set, allowing the horns to take the lead role. The bass starts the tune with a solo in rhythm of the song, creating the atmosphere for the song. The drums then bring in the rest of the band with a fill over four beats. The saxophone and the trombone plays the melody in the A section, creating a blues-like feel over an A minor pentatonic scale, while maintaining the intended playful concept. The B section is then played as a call and answer between the drums and the rest of the combo. The C section (solo section) is played in a swing style, where the Piano takes the first solo, followed by the trombone, then the tenor saxophone and then the bass. The bass solo leads the band from the swing section of C back to the B section where the call and answer between the drums and the rest of the combo takes place. This section is extended for the drums to solo. The drums then cues the band to return to the A section where the band plays the melody and vamp on the A section to the end of the piece.

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