

Approaching Bernstein's *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs*

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Bernstein was commissioned to write his *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* in 1949 for Woody Herman's band following the success of a previous commission - Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto* in 1945 (to be subject of a subsequent article) However, by the time Bernstein had completed the work the group had disbanded. The piece was eventually premiered by the clarinetist Benny Goodman, the work's dedicatee, in a television programme presented by Bernstein entitled 'What is Jazz?' in 1955 Malcolm MacDonald writes in the Preface to the second volume of the *Anthology of Bernstein's works*:

'The title proclaims the marriage of concert music and jazz, the Baroque form of the Prelude and Fugue being complemented by a series of riffs (in jazz parlance, a riff is a short, repeated melodic figure)'

This unusual blending of styles is problematic, as it has not allowed the piece to be easily accepted into either jazz or 'classical' repertoires, and it is important that the demands of these diverse styles are addressed when performing the piece, as this provides much of the tension and interest. In the Prelude for the brass, 'fast, exact' Stravinskian music breaks momentarily into 'slow rock' before the music is driven back to the complex rhythmic figuration of the opening. The saxes Fugue contrasts rhythmic and melodic themes, and drifts into a 'stride' pattern which is taken up by the piano in the final movement. Initially the stride figure is curiously reversed in relation to the main beat, but the addition of the string bass then the drums add both rhythmic and harmonic stability. It is in the last movement that themes from the Fugue are repeated as riffs and the 'slow rock' from the Prelude is contextualised.

Despite basically being scored for a big band and undoubtedly indebted to Bernstein's knowledge and experience of jazz, *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* has not become a staple of the jazz repertoire. One reason for this might be that the piece is fully notated and seems to require no improvisation. Jazz musicians are often expected to perform from memory, learning jazz standards so as to be able to perform and improvise upon them on demand on the bandstand without reference to notation. Whilst most jazz

musicians would recognise that studying improvised solos by famous performers is an important part of their education, to re-perform them in such a way that they may seem spontaneous would be regarded tantamount to plagiarism. It may seem that this is exactly what the musicians are being asked to do in the quasi-improvisational passages on piano and vibraphone in the last movement of the Bernstein. In this way, performing a fully notated composition is not compatible with the image of jazz in which music making must be seen to be more spontaneous.

Of course, it must be remembered, as with all music, that the notation is only the starting point, as the music itself doesn't exist until it is performed and heard. Arguably, the line between interpretation and improvisation is very thin, even in 'classical' music where certain ideas might be tried out (or improvised) in rehearsal and then may or may not become a more permanent part of the performance. In any event, notation is usually performed with reference to certain stylistic norms. Certain notation may indicate different things within specific genres, and it is necessary to view each work in context to fully interpret the notation. It would seem likely that in a piece written for a well-established jazz band and referencing typical musical aspects of this genre, that Bernstein too may have assumed stylistic knowledge and expected certain aspects of his notation to be interpreted in a fairly specific way. It is important to note that the way in which jazz has been consistently represented in recordings has often in fact diminished the importance of the existence of notation in this genre and has left a lasting legacy of performance practice, which means that even when reading notation certain things may be taken for granted which are not indicated in the score.

Small but significant indications on the score of *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* play an important part in its realisation in performance. Firstly, 'the composer has suggested that the solo clarinet be discreetly amplified in performance' and the piano part is also marked 'miked'. Whilst in classical music, amplification of soloists is often an anathema; in jazz and

popular music it is frequently a necessary part of the performance. Bernstein's care over orchestration in his overall output clearly indicates his proficiency in this area, and he obviously released that without amplification the Riffs movement would not be effective. Bernstein's use of his chosen forces is a particularly important part of the overall structure of the piece, and to incorporate the clarinet in the Fugue for the saxes, as in the performance at BASBWE last year, is to diminish the impact of its eventual entry at the start of the Riffs for Everyone. Bernstein indicates 'Traps: Hi-hat, Snare Drum, Bass Drum, &c'. The '&c' is telling; it proves, as suggested earlier, that Bernstein was expecting the player to use a full drum set as in a big band and to improvise accordingly. The indication 'string bass (solo)' is also important. This establishes, in addition to the actual musical material that Bernstein writes for the instrument, that it is a (jazz) string bass rather than a (classical) double bass that is required, and it's solo rather than sectional status means that it can fulfil a typical role within the rhythm section as in a big band. Bernstein does not specifically indicate that the bass should be amplified, but this would certainly be the convention within contemporary big bands and the audibility of the bass can contribute significantly to the effectiveness of the work in performance.

Ironically, when considering the notation of *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* more closely it becomes clear that it is not strictly correct to state that the piece requires no improvisation. A glance at the drum kit part reveals that this is notated in the conventions of big band jazz rather than orchestral music. Indeed, in big band music, such sparse use of notation is the norm and rhythm section players are therefore often required to improvise constantly, although drawing of course on established patterns and stylistic conventions, as with all improvising. It is clear that this part, which is vital to the piece, requires a player with some knowledge and experience of these techniques. Bernstein clearly expected that a drummer would know what to do in response to his directions 'slow rock' and 'with all possible sock'. The end of the

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piece also requires improvisation in its widest sense, with the direction "This repeat should be made at least three times, and as many times as seems psychologically right (that is, to an exhaustion point)." Although this is not jazz improvisation as might be conventionally defined, it is clear that such repetitive procedures may be observed within the context of improvised arrangements, for example by a small jazz combo

Bernstein's work deliberately references and re-interprets typical features of instrumental jazz. The idea of writing sectionally with the groups pitted against one another, often found in classic big band charts, is taken to extremes, with movements scored for brass and percussion (Prelude - with string bass in unison with the melodic or rhythmic material), and saxes (Fugue). The slower section introduced in the Prelude, and recapitulated in the final movement, references typical triplet-based 'slow rock', as Bernstein writes on the drum part. The trumpet parts at this point feature prominent lip-trills and glissandi, with a typically high first trumpet line. The most overt jazz references are found in the final movement of the piece, with stride piano, slap and walking bass lines, and the aforementioned virtuosic quasi-improvised solos on piano and vibraphone

These overt references can bring to bear misguided notions about stereotypically free and spontaneous nature of jazz, which means there is a temptation to fundamentally change the notation that is supplied by the composer, rather than interpret it. This highlights the need for conductors to be sympathetic to the various influences on the music to achieve a reading of the work that is faithful to the composer's intention. Whilst the Bernstein is conventionally notated and hence appears to require minimal knowledge of jazz techniques, a certain amount of experience on the part of the performers is taken for granted, and this may cause problems when approaching the piece from a symphonic (band or orchestra) perspective. At the same time, the piece may seem overly prescriptive for jazz ensembles. Theoretically, the wind ensemble, with its links to cutting edge contemporary music and popular styles, should have sufficient flexibility to perform the work, but there is a need to address the conflicting demands of the piece by, on one hand, paying close attention to the score on the page, and on the other, producing a stylish and lively

interpretation which clearly requires some experience of jazz.

I would argue that just as wind players in symphonic bands should be encouraged to play chamber music in various combinations to improve their ensemble performance skills and explore new repertoire, so should players be given opportunities to play in jazz ensembles and try their hand at improvising. From my experience, wind band players may have skills in these areas already, and setting up a 'band-within-a-band' can enable these to be developed. In the case of Dr. Jazz and the Cheshire Cats, a big band established from within the North Cheshire Concert Band (a community band), rhythm section players (guitar, bass and drums) were found from hidden talents within the trumpet, percussion and clarinet sections respectively of the wind band. A friend of one of the band was recruited on piano and some saxophonists took the opportunity to play another member of the family. Whilst a big band is still a relatively large ensemble, improvisation skills can be introduced and then addressed at greater length within smaller groups. Several players chose to supplement this by undertaking courses such as those offered at Canford Summer School and Leeds College of Music Summer School. Whilst not a substitute for structured tuition and guidance with a live rhythm section, there are numerous resources now available to enable musicians to practise improvisation outside rehearsals, such as the Hal Leonard Essential Elements for Jazz Ensemble (which can be used by individuals and the whole ensemble), Jamey Aebersold play-along books and materials produced by the ABRSM for their jazz examinations.

I believe that there are several advantages to be gained from these experiences of jazz. Many of the basic principles of ensemble playing within the big band reinforce those of wind band, such as uniformity of articulation, phrasing, dynamics and intonation. However, performing big band repertoire can develop players in other ways. The rhythmic complexity of jazz can contribute to general rhythmic awareness and the frequently recurring syncopated patterns can aid the reading abilities of players. Jazz can also deliberately exploit the full tonal palette of instruments, for example players will gain experience of different muting effects in the brass and colours from sub-tone to honk on saxophones, which might then come as less of a surprise when they appear in

contemporary wind band music. Indeed, the big band exploits the saxophone section more than the conventional wind band, and encourages good ensemble from a section that often provides the all-important filling in the wind band.

Most importantly, big band playing encourages autonomy and responsibility from the players in a way that can be difficult to achieve with a large symphonic band. Not only are players encouraged to make 'compositional' decisions through improvisation but also, they should be encouraged to take responsibility for the rhythmic aspects (feel, drive, pulse) of the music without reliance on a conductor. Indeed, it is no coincidence that you often find wind band conductors and big band directors. Arguably, in big bands, part of the function of a conductor is taken over by the rhythm section, to whom the other players must pay special attention. Awareness of the rhythm section can be vital in the jazz-influenced symphonic wind literature and anyway this can only promote the desirable wider listening outside the immediate instrumental section that is required from wind band players.

Big band playing can open up possibilities for new performing opportunities, particularly for musicians in Community Wind Bands. At recent gigs, big band members have commented on the interaction between the band and audience, through dancing and applause, which is not generally experienced in more formal concerts. It would be great to see more open big bands in the National Concert Band Festival, and maybe eventually, a community big band class. The big band is itself flexible enough both for successful results to be achieved without a full line-up and also to be augmented (for example, by percussion, French horn, clarinet and flute). In addition, smaller groups can be drawn from the larger unit. There is a huge amount of quality repertoire, historic and modern, which should be heard and played, and this can provide variety within a wind band concert, as well as aiding the performance of works such as *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs*. Most recently, the North Cheshire Concert Band has performed Wollmann's *Concerto for Jazz Trumpet and Wind Band*, featuring trumpet soloist and rhythm section from the big band, and will be performing *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* and a more recent jazz-influenced work, Ticheli's *Blue Shades*, in a concert entitled 'Shades of Blue' at the Pyramid Arts Centre in Warrington next year.