

Songs for Snare Drum

Contemplation

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Overview

In this paper, I shall explore the piece *Contemplation*, from my compositional collection. The aim is to show the various techniques used for both its composition and performance, and to explore the various conceptual bases on which it is built.

Introduction

Contemplation is the piece within this collection that has existed in some form for the longest time. When I first began studying snare drum composition in earnest, I spent a period with the work of Delécluse, specifically his *Douze Etudes*. Around this time, I began experimenting with my own compositions in the orchestral style, and produced a piece entitled *Zarabanda*, named for the Spanish dance written in a triple meter.

This early piece explored some fundamental orchestral themes such as thematic development, motivic reprise, polyrhythm, and a non-rudimental approach to vocabulary. *Zarabanda* was complete enough that I published extracts of it in *Virtuoso*,¹ fully intending to publish the piece in a subsequent collection. *Zarabanda* eventually transformed into *Contemplation* as it exists today, retaining much of its original character, but adapted and refined to include my current thinking in compositional methods and incorporating the accompanying ensemble. *Contemplation* is therefore orchestral at heart, albeit with rudimental figures added in later as my own compositional voice solidified.

In this context, I use the word ‘orchestral’ to distinguish the compositional and vocabularic approach from rudimental repertoire. In the latter, the compositional elements are based on the rudiments, such that phrases are built and decorated using established rudimental concepts in specific ways. In contrast, orchestral pieces are concerned more with rhythmic phrasing, and less with how they are played. To reflect this, early iterations of *Zarabanda* lacked any sticking, partially imitating Delécluse, and partially to emphasise the fact that the performer’s focus should be on the phrases and not the sticking. Though sticking has since been added, the phrases within *Contemplation* as they exist today are reminiscent of this approach.

Basic Structure

Contemplation is fundamentally a piece written in ternary time. By this, I mean that its beat is represented by a dotted quarter note and its native subdivisions are groups of three 8th notes or six 16th notes. The piece varies between **9/8**, representing three groups of three per measure, and **12/8**, representing four groups of three. In all cases, the ternary nature of the pulse is maintained, comprising three 8th notes or six 16th notes per beat.

In terms of its phrasing, *Contemplation* makes ample use of reprise and refrain. These similar terms both refer to the act of repeating or calling back particular phrases in a way that attempts to develop cohesion across a long piece. If a certain figure within a latter section of the piece seems strange

¹ (Curtis, *The Snare Drum Virtuoso*, 2022)

The more rhythmic-centred approach of the orchestral style also allows for polyrhythmic exploration that is not based on the rudiments. The rudimental composers like Pratt produced polyrhythmic passages by combining rudiments in certain ways. For example, playing consecutive flamacues produces a polyrhythm within the meter of 4/4, if the first four notes are 16th notes and the fifth stroke is an 8th note.

Delécluse, on the other hand, produced his polyrhythms through the placement and displacement of rhythmic phrases, and allowed the performer to decide their own sticking when playing it.

94

R L L R L R L R R L R L R R L R L R R L

96

R L R R L R L R R L R L R R L R L

The above passage is inspired by Delécluse's approach; the bracketed phrase is nine 16th notes in length and plays six times consecutively. This produces a polyrhythmic passage within the 9/8 time signature, based entirely on the repetition of an odd-length phrase that is successively displaced against the beat.

Accompaniment

Like the other pieces in this collection, *Contemplation* was written with a three-part accompaniment comprising a low-, mid-, and high-pitched part, nominally labelled as bass drum, taiko, and woodblock respectively. When recording this piece, I used this setup with the exception of the taiko, for which we used a conga drum played with sticks.

For this piece, I used the accompanying parts in varying ways, alternating between emphasising the beat and disguising it. This is shown most concisely in the opening six measures of the piece. The bass drum begins strongly on the beat, emphasising the three groups of three 8th notes per bar. This is contrasted by the woodblock, both by its pitch and its rhythmic groupings. Through the first four bars, the woodblock plays in groups of three 16th notes, dividing the beat in a contrasting manner to the bass drum.

Snare Drum

Marching Bass Drum

Taiko Drum

Wood Block

3

R R L L R R R L

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

p

From the end of the fifth bar when the taiko enters, and through the following fifth and sixth measures, the function of the accompaniment changes. All three voices now contribute their own rhythm that is much more freely distributed against the beat.

5

f p

L R L R R L L

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

f mp

mf

Above, this passage much more closely resembles a classical ensemble with four interlinked yet somewhat independent voices, as opposed to the percussive, almost march-like style of the preceding four bars. This approach allows for the use of reprised and displaced rhythmic phrases, odd-length rhythm, and polyrhythmics on the accompanying voices in much the same way as they are employed on the snare drum.

This is apparent in the four-bas passage above, throughout which the bass drum on the second staff plays a repeating four-beat pattern against, bracketed, against the underlying three-beat meter of $9/8$. We likewise see a similar device on the woodblock on the bottom page which is playing a repeated two-beat pattern. This provides a pleasing level of rhythmic layering that adds depth to the snare drum's leading line.

Performance Considerations

As with *Reflection*, the main challenge of *Contemplation* is in its length and variety rather than its technical difficulty. That is not to say, of course, that it lacks any technical challenge, but rather than this challenge is typically in accuracy, precision, and articulation as opposed to speed, power, or endurance.

On a fundamental level, performers would benefit from having a firm grasp of buzz rolls, both sonically and metrically, as well as a keen understanding of how they differ from double strokes; as discussed previously, the difference between closed buzz rolls and open double strokes is a feature of this piece.

Performers will also benefit from a firm understanding of displacement and polyrhythmic playing, as well as the use of thematic or motivic development.

