

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)

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.

43
R R L L R L R L R L R R L L R R L L

45
R R L L R L L R R L L R L R L R L R L R R L L R R L

mf

An example of this use of rhythm is found in the passage above, especially bars 43 and 45. We can describe this passage as *a-b-a'-b*, such that *a* and *b* represent discrete musical phrases, and the apostrophe represents a variation: *a'* is a variation of *a*. The first *a-b* antecedent at bars 43 and 44 see *a* resolved by *b*. The consequent from bar 45 uses *a'*, comprising the same first and second beats of the bar, but a varied third and the addition of a fourth. This *a'* functions in the same way as *a*, leading into the phrase at *b*, but possessing variations and additions.

From a performance perspective, it is important to see bar 45 in essentially the same way as bar 43: the six 16th note of the first beat have become a septuplet, and an additional fourth beat introduces a new phrase that will be reprised later in bar 49. This describes the events on a micro scale, yet this passage makes much more sense on a macro level. The main rhythmic idea is not these variations, but the two-beat roll figure introduced at the beginning of bar 45 and continued in bars 44 and 46. The 16th note figure and its variations simply provide a brief detour from this main phrase before reintroducing it. Put simply, this passage works when taken as a whole; it will be heard differently from a broader perspective, which allows the individual phrases to be heard in their functional role.

49
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 L R L

50
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 L R L

f

One of the most technically demanding passages begins at the **segno**, shown above. A two-beat phrase plays, alternating its decoration between a doubled 16th note in the first beat and a buzzed stroke and frisé of four in the second. The position of the doubled 16th note then moves in the third beat, with the fourth beat repeating the second, once again producing an *a-b-a'-b* phrase throughout each measure.

This passage relies on the difference between an individual diddle (doubled) stroke and an individual buzz stroke, as well as on the use and application of frisé. However, even though we may consider this passage from the perspective of individual strokes, it is important to hear the overall phrase this produces. When performed correctly, the loping accent pattern produces a clear sense of swing, with the aforementioned devices simply decorating this. On a practical level, this means ensuring that the accents are clearly distinguished from the surrounding unaccented strokes, as it is the accents and their position within the subdivision that produces the swing.

