

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Performance notes : Dusapin, Scelsi, et al.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2db7936k>

Author

Babin, Thomas

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Performance Notes – Dusapin, Scelsi, et al.

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Thomas Babin

Committee in charge:

Professor Mark Dresser, Chair
Professor Anthony Davis
Professor Lei Liang

2015

The Thesis of Thomas Babin is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Abstract of the Thesis.....	v
In & Out.....	1
Figment III.....	4
Aqua Solo.....	6
Les Nuits.....	10
Epoulos.....	15

Recording available at the Mandeville Special Collections Library

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Performance Notes- Dusapin, Scelsi et al.

by

Thomas Babin

Master of Arts in Music
University of California, San Diego, 2015
Professor Mark Dresser, Chair

The following contains notes on the preparation on conceptualization of my Masters recital performed and recorded on March 14, 2015, and available in the Mandeville Special Collections Library.

In & Out – Pascal Dusapin

Composed in 1989, the title may be more in keeping with Dusapin's tradition of naming his solo pieces with words and phrases beginning with the letter "I", a singular pronoun, than an overt reference to the contents, although part one is noticeably more tonal than part two.

Despite the obvious differences between the two parts of the piece, the connecting thread is a clear I-IV-V root collection that appears in both with a tonal centre of C minor in "In" and one of E minor in "Out".

If one were to make assumptions based on the title of the piece, it could be argued that the "In" and the "Out" refer not to the separate movements, but the contrasting of these clear tonal structures with unrelated interjections throughout the individual pieces.

Part I – In

The rhythmic content and the striking use of a C pentatonic scale divided into lower and upper halves that we see throughout the first page gives a clear indication of a reference to any number of number of musical styles but in my opinion bears a close resemblance to Congolese "Kwassa Kwassa" style Soukous music, in particular the electric bass lines that typified the style.

It may seem like a non-sequitur of an assumption that the composer would be referencing a relatively obscure and geographically removed style of music, however given the mass exodus of musicians from Kinshasa to Paris in the late 1970s and subsequent establishment of Paris as the primary centre of Congolese music, this assumption seems more likely.

The entire piece is characterized by a wide jumping of call-and-response rhythmic phrases between an upper and lower voice and rather than viewing the piece as an alternation between calling and responding, I am viewing it as a single line with an intent to create a groove rather than a melody.

The piece unfolds from a stylistically referential I-V movement with interjections until arriving at a IV chord on bar 27 and continuing to the end with a clear IV-I movement.

This extraordinarily simple root movement and tonality in my opinion further accentuates the primacy of a sort of groove-based interpretation of the piece rather than a melodic one.

The primary challenge, then in performing this piece is the requisite single-mindedness of time placement – attempting to capture a sense of groove rather than melody, however unclear the distinction between the two may be.

Part II – Out

The arco portion of the work is markedly different in character however still carries the same rhythmic density, simple basic clear harmonic structure – in this case V mm. 1-7, I mm 8-16, V mm 17-20, IV mm 21-32, I 33-fine – and features a return to groove-based material in the later portions of the piece.

Of course, the textural and dynamic material of “In” is largely limited to varying the accentuation of pitch and this is contrasted by the relatively varied textural and dynamic material in the 2nd part.

The cascading and slowly varying melodic structures that appear in bars 33 -54 before a reduction process present a difficulty in coordination when performed at the speed at which the passage is intended to be played.

I have opted to leave small pauses between the figures during the first portion of the passage in order to avoid fatigue and allow myself time to build up to a consistency of rhythm towards the latter part.

Also of note in this piece, is the strong vibrato called for in the first half, and the instruction to use no vibrato at all during the second half.

Figment III – Elliot Carter

A late piece of Carter's, written in 2007 for bassist Don Palma, this work is fully notated and proscribed by the composer and aside from the challenge of accuracy to the score I felt uncomfortable imagining the piece as a linear work and began to view it as a polyphonic one, which at least on an intangible level ossified my overall approach to it.

The notation of the piece appears to imply a polyphonic nature (given the use of polyphony and polyrhythms as structural elements in Carter's ensemble compositions it may be even likely) and the decoding of the score seems more natural to me by taking this into account despite the fact that it is wholly notated and the effect should be achieved with a proper reading.

The very first gesture of the piece – two Bs on the D and the A string - and an occurrence of two similar unison double stops where one note is bowed and the other plucked seem to show a separate, largely pizzicato, voice containing all twelve tones moving alongside the relatively lyric arco one and interjecting periodically at measured yet apparently random intervals.

As a result I've tried to think of the articulation of this 2nd voice to be non-contextual, to be something apart from the rest of the work and unrelated to the surrounding material and this conceptualization does have a noticeable effect on approach if not output.

The relationship between the pizzicato and arco melodies in bars 10-12 as the pizzicato one moves from off – to on- beat makes sense and is suddenly easier to hear as a contrast to the lyric triplet-based one above, and I find that the appearance throughout the piece of the pizzicato interjections in shifting places within the beat becomes relatable when

considering them as a separate entity that moves alongside, rather than a timbral variation of a single line.

Aqua Solo – Jean-Francois Charles

Aqua Solo (2008) is an adaptation of Charles' piece, "Aqua" (2004) for double bass, clarinet, aquaphone and electronics, and is part of the canon of his "Arc-en-Ciel" cycle.

Part I – Prelude

Charles states that the intention of the piece is to "remind us that the double bass is a descendant of the viol", and as such the approach that I have taken is to treat this section an unmeasured prelude in the tradition

of its use as a test for tuning and timbre of gut-fretted instruments during the baroque period.

Of course, in principle my instrument is in tune and I have an idea of how it sounds so my direction in performing this movement will be a simulation of probing and testing – altering timbre, volume, and duration while progressing through the notated pitches.

The metered and more heavily notated portion of the movement which begins at bar 13 is in keeping with this ethos. Juxtapositions and interpolations of seemingly unrelated material – melodic fragments, brusque gestures and quarter tone intonation – appear and disappear sequentially and abruptly as if the performer has been handed an unfamiliar instrument and is ensuring its suitability.

Part II – Blues

Rather than a titular reference to other European works or a general, nebulous cultural reference, Charles refers to this movement as "a blues" and as such my approach is influenced by what I perceive to be stylistic signifiers that appear in the piece.

The first and most obvious is the interpretation of the “Bartok pizz.” slap and “thumb” slap that are indicated in the score as a Willie Dixon style articulations rather than unpitched effects. Of course, Dixon had a highly evolved technique that is beyond the scope of this work to fully emulate, and I use the extended outer knuckle of the thumb to strike the string like an electric bassist rather than the closed thumb against the palm like Dixon, however the intention is one of articulation rather than emulation.

A more general inspiration for the piece comes from the aggressive and insistent guitar sounds of such musicians as RL Burnside and Fred MacDowell. The so-called “Hill Country Blues” style that these artists were known for generally featured static harmony with open guitar tunings, often with lowered strings that slapped and buzzed against the fretboard, a resulting harsh tone when using the slide, and a general gestural approach to performance.

Beginning in bar 35, we see a series of glissandi that move toward the upper register of the instrument as if emulating the slide, and we see beginning in bar 44 a string crossing technique that both reflects the aggressive buzz of a metal slide on metal strings and a gestural approximation of pitch (without implying that performers such as Burnside and MacDowell were anything but accurate.)

The aggressive three bar thematic material that appears in its entirety beginning in bars 26, 29 and 44, and as fragmented sequential interjections throughout seem provocatively reflective of a pulsing guitar figure interrupted by either melodic fragments with a slide (bars 35-37,44-45,51-54, and on to the fine) or gestural rhythmic flourishes that appear often in this context as quintuplets (bars 32-33, 37,41-43).

Part III – Postlude

The postlude appears to continue texturally rather than contextually from Part II with preparations added to each of the strings to elicit what Charles refers to as the sound of a “gong”.

With no indicated tempo and the only performance instruction being to interpret the material in a “personal manner”, I am viewing this final section as a denouement of the previous material – the artifices and specifics have been stripped away and only the core elements of curious exploration from Part I and expectant gesture from Part II remain.

Les Nuits – Giacinto Scelsi

A diptych of contrasting abandon and restraint, these two pieces were likely composed at different times and collected by the composer, Part I in 1972, and Part II sometime later and dedicated to Joelle Leandre around the time that she met Scelsi in 1978 (although a 1972 date is indicated by the publisher.)

Part I – C'est Bien La Nuit

For this movement, I have opted to use the same scordatura as Part II for ease of transition but more importantly to accentuate what I believe to be the intention of the piece.

The entire work is principally built around two pitches that appear in 3 different octaves – F and A – with drastic and abrupt changes of timbre and range. By using the “Le Reveil Profond” scordatura of FAFG rather than the indicated one of FADG all 3 octaves of the primary pitches are available with relative ease and at sonically strong locations. If one were to use the indicated tuning, the elongated double stopped F octave that appears in bars 16-20, for example, would need to be executed with the upper note at the higher reaches of the A string and the lower at the octave harmonic on the F (E) string - a stretch far beyond the comfort zone of most performers.

Most performers compensate by either playing the lower F an octave below written – an open F (E) string – or by accepting the necessarily awkward stretch and the resulting adverse effects on sonority.

With the tuning scheme that I propose both pitches appear as written and with a strong, sonorous lower pitch.

The usefulness of the alternate tuning scheme appears to be confirmed elsewhere in the piece at moments where awkward movements may weaken an aesthetic of broad sonority – the above mentioned double-stop appears throughout – and there are no obvious disadvantages elsewhere.

In strict contextual terms, if one avoids the ringing of the lower F(E) string until the notated appearance of the low F in bar 63, a powerful axis and moment of focus appears between the core of alternating pitches prior, and the core of variations on a melody that finish the piece.

I had the opportunity to discuss this piece with Mme Leandre and she was supportive of this alternate tuning, emphasizing the importance of an overall approach of sustained aggression and in her frank manner proclaiming “It doesn’t matter how you tune – as long as it SOUNDS !”

Aside from the issue of the scordatura, my approach to the piece is very much affected by my interactions with Mme Leandre – emphasizing broad sonorities, abrupt changes in timbre and jarring interruptions of rapid sixteenth notes.

Part II – Le Reveil Profond

A stark contrast to the previous movement, “Le Reveil Profond” is an exercise in concentration and austerity.

Built solely from 3 pitches (and microtonal variations on those pitches) the piece slowly unfolds with these pitches moving to and from the foreground slowly and meditatively.

Some notation questions arise in bars 23 and 24 – the Gbb slides upwards to a Gb which is notated as an open string moving to an octave Gb double stop which would be

impossible with the scordatura as it is. A note “raise the string” appears in bar 24 and I believe that there is a missing “lower the string” notation in bar 23 which should occur where the quarter note rest in in the upper voice.

By lowering the G string at this point versus stopping the Gbb in the more obvious place on the A string and using the tuning key to glissando to a Gb, the issue of the two Gbs in bar 25 is solved .

Similar confusion appears in bar 41, again with a Gbb glissando although downwards to an F in this instance.

The Gbb is indicated as occurring on the A string however as the rest of the piece unfolds there are conflicting string indications and the appearance of harmonics that do not appear where notated.

The two available options would be to perform the reverse gesture of the previous retuning – moving the “G” string from Gb abruptly to Gbb and then slowly to F, or stopping the Gbb on the A string and sliding downwards to F.

Both options require a willful ignorance of some of the notations and the advantage of the first option appears on the following system when eighth notes begin to appear and the “C” natural harmonic that is indicated is always available on the sustained string as notated.

The disadvantage, however, is that there is negligible tonal variance between the two open strings (assuming that the retuning action was exact) so a sense of alteration between sustained and articulated strings is lost.

The second option and the one that I have chosen is to stop the Gbb and slide downwards so that one F is an open string, and one is a stopped note. The reoccurring “C” harmonic can only be expressed on the open F string and thus will be heard over the eighth notes at

bar 47, and over the sustained pitch at bar 53, however the clear advantage is that a timbral differentiation between the two strings is apparent.

Epulos – Elisabet Curbelo

Epulos was written for me by Elisabet Curbelo as part of the first year juries here at UCSD.

The piece explores non-traditional tonalities via the use of extreme scordatura and preparations.

A particular challenge with this piece is the effect of the ruler that is placed in the strings on string action and pitch, particularly when considering that large portions of the piece feature a sustained bow with melodic content on top that is expressed using only the left hand.

The alteration of general sonorities of the instrument as well proves to be a particular challenge due to the capricious nature of the preparations and an unfamiliar sense of the output from the instrument

This will be my third time performing the piece.