

Capstone

04-07-2012

Background:

I "began" writing this piece last summer when I came up with the original motive after experimenting on the cello in hopes of coming up with some cool "lick."

(the original motive began with an F)

driving $\text{♩} = 120$

Cello

p

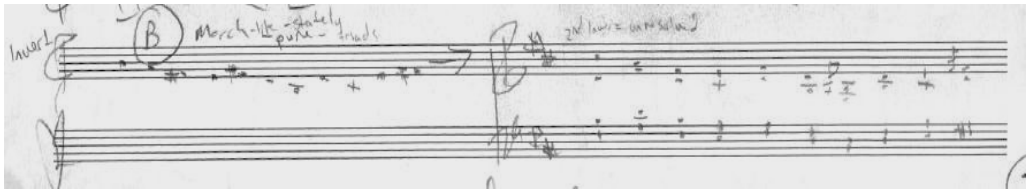
I was fascinated by Debussy's last work – "Violin Sonata in G minor." I wanted to do something similar but for cello. The first movement of his piece has a piano introduction that states a simple harmonic progression: G minor followed by C major (hereafter referred to as the "Debussy Progression" for the sake of identification).

VIOLON *Allegro vivo (55 = ♩)* *p dolce espress.*

PIANO *Allegro vivo* *pp dolce sostenuto*

This is the basic harmonic outline for Debussy's piece as it is for mine. As Debussy did, I also used an old form. I originally set out to create a piece in Sonata form but decided to make it a Rondo (ABACABA) because I wanted to repeat the motive in its original form many times (it is a cool lick after all!). I also wanted to use more of the knowledge I had learned from music theory in Dr. Minturn's 20th century Composition Techniques class. I conducted some early tests: subjecting the motive to inversion,

retrograde, etc. When I played the inversion for the first time, I thought it sounded like another theme (especially when slowed down) so I used it as a contrasting B section.



When composing, the first things that usually come to me are the beginning and the end. I then start thinking about form. From there, I try to use the material that I have already come up with to write the rest of the piece. These beginning materials were measures 1-27 and 155-161. Shortly after, I came up with 175-178. Most everything else is derived from this.

Play-by-Play:

From here, I would like to go step by step through the piece and walk through my thought process. The first 16 bars are spent driving home the motive and getting it in the ear. I alter the instrumentation and register so that it does not become too repetitive. Measures 17-19 establish this “stepping down” theme which will become important later. After stepping down to Ab minor in measure 20, I use the “Debussy progression” to confirm the key. Measure 22 continues this transition of sorts and continues to use the “Debussy progression.” The piano part in here is a technique I used and discovered a year ago in “A Few Moods (a piece with a similar aesthetic).” Moving on to measure 30, I swapped parts and gave the cello a chance to play something low (which didn’t last long!). The piano technique here is something similar to a sound that I had heard in a movie. It has a sort of cliché, innocent sound.

At B, we finally arrive at the B theme (“resolute, sustained”). Again, this is an inversion of the main motive. I wanted a sort of dignified sound that used simple harmonies. I was thinking about the voice leading in Copland’s Fanfare for the Common Man when writing this. The left hand piano technique that is used to bridge phrases was inspired by a piano technique in Brahms’s Horn Quintet in Eb. In the repeat of the B section at measure 50, I wanted to do something that would transition back to

the A section (jig with short notes), so I began incorporating more rhythmic activity. The melodic material in here is simple development of the B theme. I wanted to build a climax to end the section, so I began shortening the phrases from 4 bars to 1 at measure 58. This is aided with growing registrations and dynamics. The left hand of the piano in bar 62 (and pickups) begins like the main motive. I remember writing this vividly. Basically, I wanted a big fortepiano that would violently lead into the return of the A section. I could “hear” a low, running scale in the piano. When it came to selecting the notes, I deliberately asked myself, “How can I write this scale using material that I already have.”

This return to A is almost a literal repeat. I vary it slightly by swapping the left hand and the cello and having the cello play it pizzicato. It is also a bit shorter.

This leads to the C section. I was looking elsewhere in the piece for material to expand when I ran across a gesture I wrote for the ending (measures 175-178). I was originally considering deleting this bit because it had little connection to the rest of the piece (it is in 4/4 and is a piano technique that is not used anywhere else). Instead of deleting it, I decided that this would somehow create C section. I eventually did this using that sort of “stepping down” theme that just occurs in the measures preceding it. I wanted this section to be different in most ways, hence the key, time signature, melody, tempo, presence of rubato, among other things all make this section different. Therefore, the “stepping down” motion in 79-83 and in 84-87 is the only thing in common and consequently serves as a bridge.

The piano technique at 96 is similar to a technique used by Charles-Valentin Alkan (obscure Romantic pianist/composer) in the first movement of his Symphony for Solo Piano.



It came to my mind because of where it happens in his piece (with respect to form); it is a hopeful flourish using major sonority amongst a sad, contemplative character.

This becomes more violent and eventually comes to a halt in bar 101. I wanted to contrast this with something light and playful (this was just an intuitive inclination) that would be relatively close to the A theme. Therefore, the melody at 102 is a variant of the original motive. Interestingly, the quick piano parts in the right hand beginning are the first 4 notes of the motive (when the motive begins on F as opposed to D). It is also a piano technique that I heard Professor Richard Pellegrin use in the practice rooms when he does this sort of jazz “pattern” improvisation.

Another return to the A is like the others but shortened once again. It leads right into the return of the B section (“resolute, sustained”). This time, it is in the tonic key, G minor. I wrote much of this section away from the keyboard on a walk down the Katy trail. It is very much a development of everything from the A and B sections. I am especially proud of this section as I believe it ties in a lot of motives seamlessly: using the minor I major IV (“Debussy Progression”), transitioning into that simple, pure piano texture, etc.

The last A section never actually appears. Letter H is where it would be, but it is replaced with this precious little section that was actually one of the first things that I had written. Measure 161 is a very reminiscent of Messiaen’s Turangalila Symphony: a large crescendo, ritard, and polarization of registers – a device used many times right before a very dramatic section. After this, I do everything I can to delay G minor, tonic. This drama begins with a sort of deceptive move to VII, F major, an idea that I got from a musical that I was involved in at the time of writing this piece (called “The Spitfire Grill”). G minor is withheld through the next section as well at measure 168 (“Slow”). This is another technique from Messiaen’s Turangalila. At the end of the tenth and final movement, he subjects the theme to a very slow and rhythmically varied treatment. In my case, I use voicings from the B section to treat the A section (main motive). The cello sound provides some interest in this slow section as the sound morphs into a kind of “electric guitar” sound (screaming harmonics using sul ponticello). The last 7 bars is basically a driving finish that uses many of the themes from the entire piece.

Summary

I tried to become a better craftsman with this piece. I wanted to constantly be thinking about motivic development, form, and orchestration. A piece in its essence is really nothing more than a journey full of sweetness, sorrow, joy, sadness, and many other emotions. Personally, once I have an idea of where I want certain emotions to happen (a very intuitive process), I feel that I must use the motives and themes that I've already worked out to generate these emotions. Realistically, there are a vast number of possibilities for each gesture and emotion in any given piece, but what holds a piece together is the transformation of just a handful of motives; in other words, good craftsmanship achieves all of these emotions in a very economical way. Following are the original manuscript sketches along with a copy of the score itself.