

ABSTRACT

Danube to the Stars: A Study in the Application of Compositional Techniques to Vernacular Media

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This project is a full-length album of my own composition. Every instrumental track and every vocal track was performed by me, with the exception of the spoken vocals. The texts were composed by two of my old high school friends. My goal in creating this album was to reconcile all of the separate musical worlds in which I work, applying the compositional techniques I have learned from studying concert music. The following paper consists of brief analyses of each of the tracks with embedded notation examples. The full orchestral score to “Space Diamond Deluxe” is provided as a supplement. Audio files for each of the tracks are provided as well.

Danube to the Stars: a Study in the Application of Compositional Techniques to
Vernacular Media

by

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A Thesis

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First, I would like to thank my composition instructor and thesis supervisor, Dr. Scott McAllister, for his continual feedback and support as well as his encouragement to take on this strange project. I never would have imagined that this is the kind of project I would be working on during my graduate studies, and without his help it's reasonable to say there's no way I could have finished this massive undertaking.

I would also like to thank the lyricists, Brooks Olsen and Brandon Jones, for giving me their permission to undertake this project of setting their texts.

Most importantly I would like to thank my family. Their continual support and encouragement have allowed me to explore so many musical realms throughout my lifetime and to develop a deep love for writing and playing music. Without their help I never could have completed a project like this

CHAPTER ONE

Overview

I have worked in many disparate musical realms for many years now— studying and composing concert music while playing gigs ranging from solo jazz piano to 8-string high-gain metal shows. This album is my attempt at a synthesis of everything I know in music, and I consider it to be my truest and most whole musical expression to date. I have tried to create a genre-defying yet unified work which incorporates elements from every musical world in which I participate. Many of the pieces on this album have strong motivic connections to one another; however, this is not a narrative or programmatic album, at least how I think of it. To me, each track exists in its own narrative and thematic universe. I think about this album like a collection of short stories. On the surface, the tracks are mostly unrelated, but taken as a whole, shared motivic and harmonic ideas can become apparent.

The texts for these pieces were written by two of my old friends from high school: Brandon Jones and Brooks Olsen. Both Brooks and Brandon have a knack for coming up with silly but memorable phrases (phrases which would become many of the titles of these pieces), so I contacted them last year and requested texts in a tongue-in-cheek, nonsensical style. Early on we established our goal to make this project an attempt to deliver lighthearted comedy in a serious musical vehicle, both celebrating and poking fun at the norms of concert music and all the other musical styles that find their way into this album.

Brooks and Brandon delivered all the completed texts before I started composing any music, with the exception of “Wasting Time” as well as some minor tweaks to the other pieces after they heard my settings. Setting completed texts allowed me to approach the project as a composer of concert music rather than a songwriter, and I believe that this allowed me to develop the music in a much deeper way than I would be able to if I were writing the texts myself, along with the music. Except for a few cases (namely, “Captain Cornhole” and “Wasting Time”), we did not discuss interpretations of the text before I began composing my settings; what is presented on this album is my honest response to these texts and my attempt to transfer the narrative structures of the poems into musical structures.

Most of the poetry Brooks and Brandon wrote for the project is written in a somewhat strophic structure, which implies a song-like form (i.e., verse, chorus, etc.). However, in my settings of the texts I have tried to distort the song-form implied by the texts, expanding some of the expected sections into much larger developmental sections, repeating certain sections at unexpected times, and even skipping over sections altogether. In this way, the forms of these compositions subvert the musical expectations implied by the poems.

In this paper, I will discuss the formal and motivic design of each piece on the album as well as any particularly interesting harmonic or orchestrational devices that they employ. The overwhelming majority of this album does not exist in notation, and to transcribe all of it would be a monumental task – around 70 minutes total, and each piece usually have 5 to 10 parts, often many more. So in lieu of providing complete scores for

each of the pieces on the album, I have chosen key moments which illustrate the compositional design of these pieces.

CHAPTER TWO

Captain Cornhole

Text: Brandon Jones

“Captain Cornhole” is intended as a sort of satirical piece about a fictional, world-renowned professional Cornhole (also referred to as baggo, corn toss, and many other names) player after whom the piece is titled. When writing this piece, we imagined a world in which cornhole is as popular as something like football is in the real world. Brandon’s texts describe a cornhole game in a highly dramatic and almost quasi-religious way.

My setting of this text is primarily based on a repeated-note ostinato pattern on a low A. This recording uses 7 string guitars with the low B dropped to A (and the same in the 5-string bass) which gives the rhythmic ostinato a tremendous weight and depicts the unrelenting power Captain Cornhole (the character) is said to possess. The ostinato is one of the most irregular rhythms on the album, consisting of a pattern of 18 16th-notes.



Figure 1.1. Clave rhythm from “Captain Cornhole.”

The pattern is constructed from two half-measure blocks: one block of 2/4 followed by a block of 5/8.

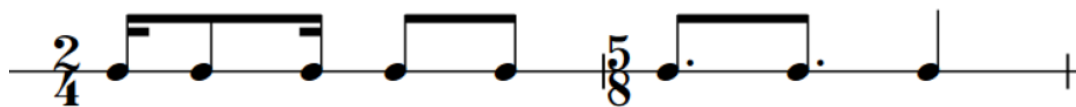


Figure 1.2. Clave rhythm from “Captain Cornhole,” divided into two submetric cells.

In the drum set part for this piece, there is often an accented snare drum hit at the beginning of the 5/8 portion, which creates a slow, uneven backbeat. Shown below is the basic drum set pattern for Captain Cornhole, with kick on the bottom line and snare on the third space.



Figure 1.3. Example drum pattern from “Captain Cornhole.”

Throughout “Captain Cornhole,” many different variations on this basic clave rhythm occur. In many cases, the right hand of the drum set part (on a crash cymbal, china cymbal, or open hi-hat) plays straight quarter-notes across the barline.

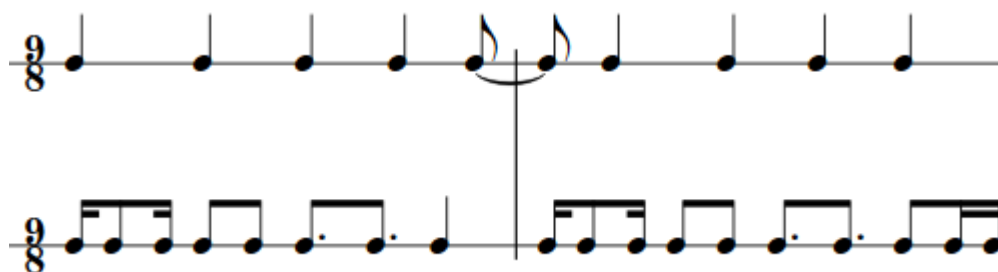


Figure 1.4. Clave rhythm from “Captain Cornhole” with quarter notes overlaid across the barline.

When this occurs, the odd-meter clave rhythm is pulled into a quarter-note groove, reframing the clave as a syncopated rhythm rather than a metric pattern.

Throughout this piece, the rhythmic ostinato shifts between these two modes, allowing for both a stable (with quarter notes) and an unstable (without quarter notes) version of the rhythmic pattern. Over the course of “Captain Cornhole” the two versions are used in alternation to vary the intensity of the track.

The piece begins with a long introduction over a low A pedal, intended to provide a soft but intense opening for the album. The introduction features solo piano foreshadowing the melodic material to come later in the track. Underneath this piano track are 3 accompaniment layers. The most simple is a single sawtooth oscillator from my Sequential Prophet 6, sustaining a low A as I sweep the lowpass filter slowly. Above this is an energetic arpeggiated pattern in the 18/16 clave generated with some of my Eurorack modular synth setup. The primary part of the accompaniment is a sample of the Star Spangled Banner being sung at a baseball game. I have run this sample through a granular processing unit which maintains a 10 second buffer as the sample plays into it. I used chaotic oscillators to move the playback position within the 10 second buffer forward and back in an unpredictable pattern, which distorts the sample into a vague cloud of sound. While it is still identifiable as a vocalist and a crowd cheering, it is almost impossible to tell what the vocalist is singing.

“Captain Cornhole” is one of the closest tracks on the album to a normal song-form. Each of the sections in the piece have strong ties to parts of the popular song form. The general form of the track can loosely be described as ABABACBA. *A* is a “verse-like” section over a pedal A, and *B* is a “chorus-like” section based in a mixture of D minor and D dorian. This track, then, mostly satisfies the expectation of a general oscillation between verse and chorus, strengthened by the V-i relationship between *A* and

B. However, this form is distorted in a few places. For instance, the second *B* (which would be in the place of the second chorus of a popular song) has a sudden dynamic shift to a washy, quiet texture in which the melodic material from *B* is fragmented and sequenced through an alternation between D-minor and Db-major.

C is an independent, building section made up primarily of melodic material from *B* sequenced through two different harmonic sequences. The first sequence, which makes up the first half of *C*, builds upon the D-minor/Db-major relationship from the second *B*. Each block of this sequence begins with bVI moving to i (Fmaj7, A-7), followed by a chromatic-median shift to biii and another chromatic median shift to v (C-7, E-7). The next segment of the sequence begins with a common-tone modulation down a half step to a major sonority, using the third and seventh as common tones (E-7, Ebmaj7), the same modulation as the second *B*. The second half of *C* involves an abbreviated version of the same harmonic sequence from the first half. It shortens the sequence to two steps per cycle: bVI to i (Amaj7, C#-7) followed by the common tone modulation down a half-step (C#-7, Cmaj7), and repeat. *C* concludes with an E7alt. chord which leads to a brief pedal A (a very short hint of section A) leading to a recapitulation of *B* and then a coda A.

CHAPTER THREE

We All Killed Mister Cardigan

Text: Brandon Jones

“We All Killed Mister Cardigan” is set up in two large rotations of three blocks, bookended by identical introduction and coda sections. (I label this iABCAB*i*) It is one of the most tightly constructed pieces on the album, as it is based almost entirely on a single simple motif, introduced in the first seconds of the track.



Figure 2.1. Ur-motif as presented in the opening of “We All Killed Mister Cardigan.”

In section *i* this motif is used in a basic form and repeated incessantly, with some upward expansions into D half-diminished arpeggios. *i* primarily implies a tonality somewhere in the middle of D-minor and D-major. It culminates in rapid quartal figures displaced by whole-step then lands on a final D power chord.

A begins with a sudden shift up a half-step to Eb, where the whole-step motif from *i* is expanded with an added half-step in the middle. *A* consists of this repeating downward chromatic figure in a very free rhythm, composed in an improvisation. *A* shifts from Eb to Gb halfway through, using a series of rising whole-step pairs. After arriving on Gb, higher whole-step pairs are inserted in between statements of the

After *A* arrives on the low D, *B* begins with a sudden common tone modulation to a Db-major chord (the same common tone modulation from “Captain Cornhole”). As in “Captain Cornhole” *A* followed by *B* gives the impression of a verse followed by a chorus. However *B* is a tri-modular section (does not exactly fit the description a tri-modular block). It begins with a simple diatonic section primarily alternating between Dbmaj7 and F-7 (bVI, i) but immediately modulates via Ab/C to a D-minor sonority. This second module of *B* is a transitional passage relying on both the whole-step motif and the common-tone modulation from D-minor to Db-major. The melodic line involves a plain whole-step oscillation between F and G, repeating the title line of the piece. Underneath the melody, the harmony alternates between D-7 and Dbmaj7 as the bass

note rises by third through F and Ab, eventually landing on a Cb. Over the Cb, the Db-major sonority in the vocals become a triple suspension which resolves downward into a Cb-major sonority.



Figure 2.3. Harmonic alternation in *B* from “We All Killed Mister Cardigan.”

The Cb-major sonority resolves downward to Bb, and the third module begins. This third module exists somewhere in the middle of Bb-major and Bb-minor. “Bb-blues” may be an appropriate label. The third module is an improvised guitar solo over a rhythm section riff constructed from repetitions of the whole-step motif centering on Bb. Halfway through the solo, the riff suddenly shifts up a whole-step to C and the rhythm becomes more unstable as measures of 5/16 are appended to the ends of the phrases. The 5/16 measures become more common until they overtake the groove, transitioning into section *C*.

Section *C* is based on a groove in four beats, with 5 subdivisions per beat (continuing the 5/16 idea from the end of *B*). This groove gives the impression of a slower tempo, while maintaining the pulse of the other sections of the piece, which allows the section to appear slow on the surface but still maintain the quick movements of the other sections of the piece. It also allows for a smooth transition both in and out of the section. *C* primarily floats around Eb-lydian and C-dorian, with a repeated

descending melodic line, repeating the title line of the track. *C* modulates to Bb-minor via a sudden shift to Gbmaj7, followed by Ab and then Bb-7. The Bb-minor section contains a cyclical progression of Bb-7, Gbmaj7, Eb-7. Since these chords are all part of the Bb-minor mode, most of the music remains static as only the bass note changes. On the final repetition of this cycle, the progression is cut short after the Gbmaj7, and the Eb-7 is replaced with a sudden cut back to section *A*, which begins on Eb.

A is recapitulated with denser vocal harmonies and transitions to *B* through the same progression as in the first rotation. The first two modules of *B* are recapitulated exactly, landing on the same Db/Cb. However, instead of resolving into a third module, the second module is extended into an oscillation between Cb-major and Ab-minor. This progression is used as a transition direct to Eb-major via a minor plagal cadence. (Cb, Ab-minor, Eb-major functions as bVI, iv, I) After the modulation to Eb, *C* is recapitulated. The melodic and harmonic material in the recapitulation of *C* is identical to that of the first iteration of *C*, but the 5/16 groove is replaced with the groove from *A*, which maintains the 4 16th-note subdivision of the majority of the piece. The recapitulation of *C* concludes with the modulation to Bb-minor as before. However, rather than resolving on Bb-minor, the Ab-major chord is resolved by a tritone to D-minor, in a tremendously deceptive final cadence. This cadence mirrors the transition between the first and second modules of *B* (Ab/C, D-7). After the final cadence, *i* is recapitulated almost exactly. The ending of the section is expanded into a more rhythmically unstable version using groups of 5 and 7 16th notes before concluding on a final low D.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wasting Time

Text: Brandon Jones and Nicholas Townsend

“Wasting Time” is the only track on this album to which I contributed lyrics, and it is also the only track whose lyrics were written after the piece was composed. I originally composed it as an instrumental piece for a 3-horn jazz combo. Later, Brandon and I decided to write lyrics for it, attempting to define the phrase “Wasting Time.”

The form of this piece follows a typical three-part structure employed by many jazz ensemble arrangements: the melodic material of the piece (the “head,” in this case in an ABABC form), followed by an improvised solo section, then concluding with a recapitulation of the head. In this composition, the melodic material implies a verse-chorus structure, with *A* acting like a “verse,” *B* acting like a “prechorus,” and *C* acting like a “chorus.” This piece was originally written as a leadsheet intended for a small instrumental jazz group, and when I wrote the first version I intentionally borrowed from song-form. It is an expanded version of the verse-chorus form, but not an uncommon one. *A* is the most calm section, consisting of a simple oscillation between Bbmaj7 and Gbmaj7. The Gbmaj7 foreshadows a modulation to Bb-minor at the beginning of *B*, which consists of a stepwise building progression of Eb-7, F-7, Gbmaj7, and back. At the end of the first *B* there is a deceptive turn to G-7 (instead of Gbmaj7) which leads back to another iteration of *A* rather than proceeding to *C*.

The second iteration of *A* is identical rhythmically and harmonically, but with more powerful vocals and a fuller instrumentation. The second iteration of *B* is expanded, proceeding past the deceptive G-7 chord and eventually landing on an Ab-7 followed by a Db7alt., which leads to the Gbmaj7 that begins *C*.

The second rotation begins with a tenor saxophone solo over spacey, expanded version of *A*. In the second rotation, there is an additional section added between *A* and *B* (B^2). This section, in which the long guitar solo begins, expands on the deceptive G-7 from the original *B*, as it consists of an open-repeated progression alternating between G-7 and Eb-7. B^2 is followed by B^3 , a slightly modified version of the building progression from *B*. Rather than sliding between Eb-7, F-7, and Gbmaj7, this section begins on a Bbadd9/D and moves to Gbmaj7 via Eb-7. The larger intervals between the chords cause this section to appear as if it is “reaching up” higher than the original *B* progression. B^3 leads to *C* in the same way *B* originally did (via a ii-V in Gb-major). The long guitar solo concludes with a loud statement of *C*.

The third rotation excludes *A* and instead begins with a single clean guitar (double-tracked left and right) playing the progression from B^3 . This section suddenly snaps into a loud version of the same progression, with three lines of contrapuntal vocals on top. The three vocal lines have three separate lines of lyrics that weave in and out of the other voices’ lines, creating fragmented sentences that fade in and out of intelligibility. The vocal score for this section is provided below. Wasting time concludes with an exact recapitulation of *C*, completing the third cycle.

Voice: The si - lence breaks me this
 Voice: Don't break the si - - - - lence
 Voice: Don't break the si - - - - lence

Voice: time Hid-ing so far a-way light was - ted I
 Voice: Hid-ing so far a - way from my light was - ted I
 Voice: Time slows Hid - ing so far a-way far a-way from all I

Voice: know I'm trapped in this hole in my head but what can I say... *fp*
 Voice: know I'm trapped in this hole in my head but what can I say... *fp*
 Voice: know I'm trapped in this hole in my head but what can I say... *fp*

Figure 3.1. Contrapuntal vocals from “Wasting Time.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Stygian Submissive

The title “The Stygian Submissive” is a play on “phrygian dominant.” When composing this piece, I wanted to write something in the phrygian dominant mode that avoids the cliches commonly associated with this sonority. I set up a two-part tune, again in the form of a leadsheet, which uses the phrygian dominant mode in the first part, but then transitions to a minor key a fourth higher. This allows the phrygian dominant sound to function as a V (E7) chord in A-minor. “The Stygian Submissive” follows the same three-part (head-solo-head) form as Wasting Time. The form of the melodic material is rather through-composed, however, beginning on the pedal E7, resolving to A-minor, then travelling through D-minor and E-minor before landing back on the E7. While the tune is functionally in A-minor, it centers around the V, hence the title “Stygian Submissive.”

The solo section in this track features a soli played by the saxophones, keyboards, and guitars, which expands the phrygian dominant mode into an octatonic scale on E. The soli line exploits the alternate major triads found in the octatonic scale, outlining G-major, Bb-major, and Db-major sonorities in addition to E-major. I have provided the lead line below.



Figure 4.1. Soli line from “The Stygian Submissive.”

Immediately following this more linear soli is a rhythmic soli, the closest thing to a metal “breakdown” on this album. The rhythmic soli outlines E7 and D-7 alternating, and features rhythmic displacement using groups of three 16th-notes transitioning to triplets in the middle two phrases and back for the final phrase. In the last two bars, the groups of three 16th-notes take over the groove for two measures of 18/16 (6 groups of 3) and 15/16 (5 groups of 3). The melodic line is provided below. The rhythm of this line is doubled by the kick drums and the hands of the drumset part anchor the rhythm into a backbeat groove.



Figure 4.2. Rhythmic soli from “The Stygian Submissive.”

After the solis, the head is recapitulated and transitions to a coda section in a slow, bluesy 6/8 groove, landing on a final double-low-E.

CHAPTER SIX

Space Diamond Deluxe

Text: Brooks Olsen

“Space Diamond Deluxe” has one of the clearest narratives of all the pieces on the album, chronicling a struggling diamond company’s plan to produce diamonds in space in order to avoid regulations and to charge higher prices for the sheer novelty of the diamonds originating from *space*. Over the course of the piece, the operation ends up a total failure (for unspecified reasons) and the narrator is unable to return to Earth. This piece features a full orchestral score (which will be appended to this paper). In the current version of the recording, NotePerformer sounds are used for playback.

The form of “Space Diamond Deluxe” is the most linear, through-composed piece on the album, with very little exact repetition of any of the material. The slow B-minor introduction pokes fun at a bombastic caricature of operatic styles, portraying an excited executive revealing his grand plan to save the company. This introduction is mostly unrelated to the remainder of the piece; it is simply intended to set the context for the narrative. After the B-minor introduction the full ensemble enters in B-major, and the piece begins to take on more of an organized form.

While very little material is repeated exactly in this piece, the larger key areas beginning with the full band entrance follow a rotational form that loosely implies a verse-chorus song structure. Like the majority of the pieces on this album, “Space Diamond Deluxe” uses the song-form implication to set up expectations before

subverting those expectations. After the full-ensemble entrance in B-major (*I*), a “verse-like” section (*A¹*) begins, with bass and vocals alone. This section follows a harmonic cycle of Bmaj7, Gmaj7 and E-7. *A¹* builds in instrumentation, leading to a brief transitional passage(*Tr¹*) consisting of an oscillation between G-major and A-major, which sets up an E-minor “chorus-like” section (*B¹*). *B¹* concludes with a recapitulation of *I*, which serves as a transition to another B-major section (*A²*). *A²* contains a highly expanded version of the melodic material from *A¹*.

A² begins with the same harmonic cycle of Bmaj7, Gmaj7 and E-7; however, it quickly diverges with a sudden shift to Eb-7 followed by a chromatic-mediant progression through Cb-7 and landing on Ab-7. A repeated common-tone progression (which I have used in many other pieces from this album as well) between Ab-7 and Gmaj7 then occurs, leading to a Cmaj7 which resolves downward to a Bmaj7. The entire cycle is repeated; however, the Cmaj7 is omitted, and the common-tone oscillation is used as a transition to an E-minor section (*B²*). The melodic material in this section is not related to any other section of “Space Diamond Deluxe;” it instead, foreshadows a later track on the album: “Pop the Quasar.” The melody in *B²* is based on fragments of the Secondary Theme of “Pop the Quasar.” Brooks told me that when he was writing this section of the poem for “Space Diamond Deluxe,” he connected it to a portion of “Pop the Quasar.” My incorporation of melodic material from “Pop the Quasar” highlights the lyrical connection between the two.



Figure 5.1. Melody from B^2 of “Space Diamond Deluxe.”

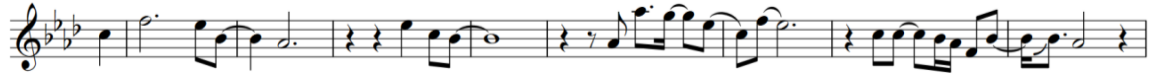


Figure 5.2. Secondary theme of “Pop the Quasar.”

After B^2 , a small ending section (Tr^2) using the same melodic material as Tr^1 concludes the track. Under the Tr^1 melody, the common-tone oscillation between Ab-7 and Gmaj7 returns. However, for this final statement, the harmonic progression repeats to portray the narrator’s helpless and eternal drift through space. Concluding this piece by recapitulating transitional material causes it to seem incomplete, which corresponds with the narrative of the text. The story is linear and chronicles a failed endeavor with no way to return. Likewise, my setting concludes with material that is clearly transitional, asking a musical question and then fading out with no answer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Premium Appraisals and the Sunken Urn

Text: Brandon Jones and Brooks Olsen

“Premium Appraisals and the Sunken Urn” aims to unite rhythmically contrasting sections using expanding and contracting beat divisions. Formally, this piece can be seen as a typical popular song with its bridge expanded into a large development section.

The opening section (*A*) sets up a clear 6/8 groove, with harmonies sliding around F#-minor and G-major. While the parts are often syncopated, this opening portion has a strong grounding in dotted-quarter-note pulses. What follows is a transitional passage (*Tr*), still in 6/8 but in groups of 3 beats across the barline. Each group of three beats is subdivided in a group of 4 8th-notes followed by a group of 5 8th-notes. The subdivision for this section is labeled in the diagram below.

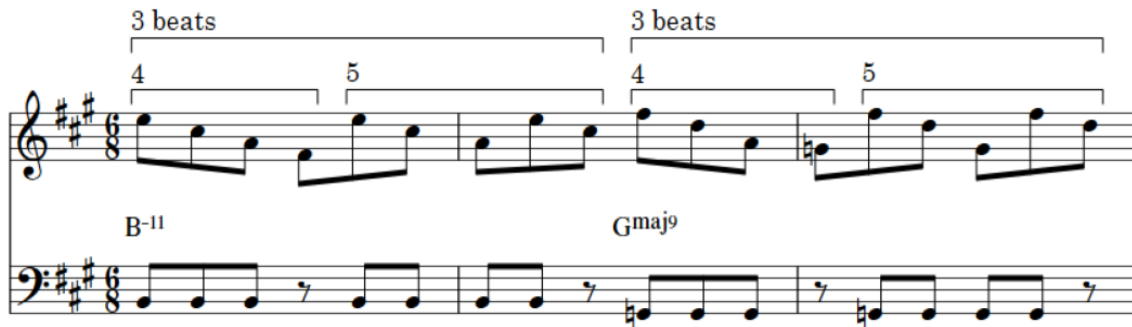


Figure 6.1. Metric pattern from *Tr* of “Premium Appraisals and the Sunken Urn.”

The transitional passage blurs the note-groupings in order to allow for a smooth transition into *B*, which is in a solid 4/4 groove. *B* has a similar, smooth transition back into the 6/8 groove of *A*. At the end of each phrase of *B*, palm-muted hits superimpose

groups of 5 8th-notes over the 4/4 groove. At the end of *B*, the 5 8th-note groups take over the entire groove. The last group of *B* is a group of 6 8th-notes, completing the smooth transition back into the 6/8 groove of *A*.

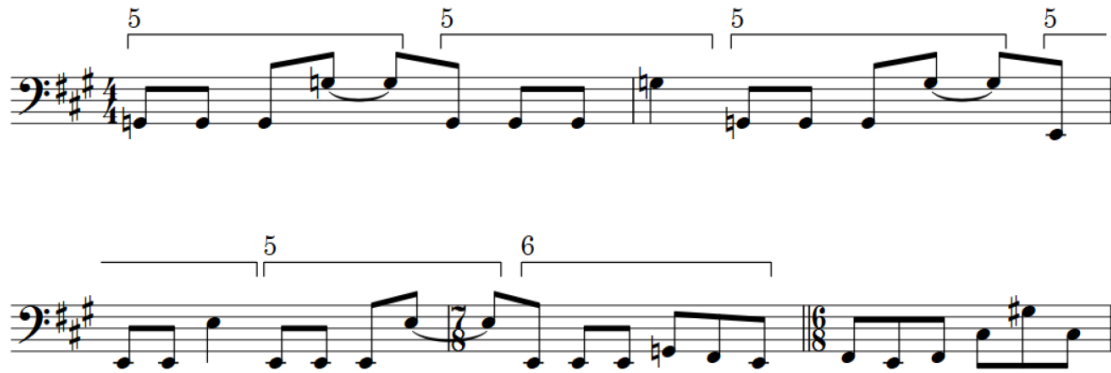


Figure 6.2. Metric pattern from the transition out of *B* in “Premium Appraisals and the Sunken Urn.”

After *B* comes a modified version of *A*, in which the second half of the melodic line is reharmonized over an E-minor tonality. The melody remains exactly the same (in F#-minor pentatonic), but when the harmonic backing shifts to E-minor, the F#-minor is recontextualized as E-dorian, since the C# in the scale can be heard as the natural-6th in E.



Figure 6.3. Reharmonization from modified *A* in “Premium Appraisals and the Sunken Urn.”

The reharmonized *A* is followed by a recapitulation of *Tr* and *B*. After *B*, instead of transitioning back to *A*, a development section begins. The first section of the development is a long preparatory section following the harmonic cycle F#-dorian, E-dorian, Eb7alt. This section features contrapuntal vocals decorating a melodic line which repeats 4 times. Each repetition the vocals become more dense and more instrumental parts are added, building to a sudden shift to the second part of the development.

The central section of the development is a keyboard solo over fragments of the riff from *A*. The fragments start and stop in an unpredictable way, playing in groups of 5 and 6 8th-notes. The keyboard solo builds in intensity and the rhythms become gradually more stable before settling in a slow 3/4 groove. The slow 3/4 serves as a transition back into 6/8, beginning the final block of the development.

The final block of the development functions as a retransition back into *A*. It is an unstable version of the 6/8 riff from *A*, using similarly unstable “restarts” as the central developmental block. This modified *A* leads to a more active version of *Tr* with two additional, contrapuntal keyboard lines panned full left and right. The score for this contrapuntal section is provided below.



Figure 6.4. Contrapuntal synthesizer lines in “Premium Appraisals and the Sunken Urn.”

After the development section, *A* is recapitulated with the second-half reharmonization and some added rhythmic embellishments, followed by *Tr*. *Tr* is

followed by a sudden drop in dynamic to a soft version of *B*, with acoustic guitar and a single vocal track. The full ensemble enters for another statement of *B*, followed by a guitar solo over the preparatory section of the development which fades to silence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Album Cancelled

“Album Cancelled” was mostly composed as an exercise in polychords. I found two harmonies that stuck in my ear (C#- over D-6 and G over Ab-6) which would become the primary harmonies of the piece. Below are the two harmonies as they are often voiced in the piano part.

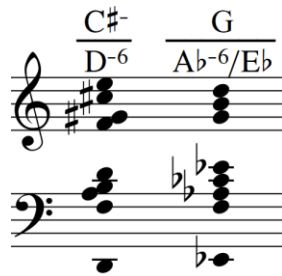


Figure 7.1. Primary polychords in “Album Cancelled.”

This piece is composed in a simple AABA form with a very plain, mostly diatonic melody. My intention was to create a contrast between the dense harmonies and the simplistic melody. Only one rotation of the form occurs on the recording.

CHAPTER NINE

Pop the Quasar

Text: Brandon Jones and Brooks Olsen

“Pop the Quasar” is composed in a loose sonata-allegro form. The progression of key-areas does not follow sonata expectations; however, the relationship between the themes and the structure of the piece overall does fit the form. Most of the accompanimental material in this piece is generated from a single “ur-motif:” a simple riff in the F-minor-pentatonic scale which lands on a low F every repetition.



Figure 8.1. Ur-motif from “Pop the Quasar.”

The exposition of this piece plays into the song-form expectation, as the primary theme is stated between improvised “verses” recorded by the two lyricists for the album, which frames the primary theme as a chorus in contrast. This expectation is subverted when after the second “chorus” there is a sudden dynamic drop as Part 2 (with the secondary theme) begins. Though both themes are in F-minor, the stylistic differences between them are great enough to treat them as opposing themes.

Primary Theme



Secondary Theme



Figure 8.2. Primary and secondary themes from “Pop the Quasar.”

The preparation for the development begins with a truncated version of the ur-motif, with one 8th-note subtracted from the end of the bar to fit a less stable 7/8 meter. Over this 7/8 ur-motif, a distant statement of the primary theme is heard, modified to fit the chord progression F-7, Db7. After this preparatory section, a loosely symmetrical (*abcba*) portion of the development begins.

In the first block of this symmetrical section (*a*), the primary theme is heard over a groove in the metric pattern 12/8, 11/8, 12/8, 13/8. Block *a* concludes with a statement of the secondary theme over an unstable harmonic backing alternating between Bb-7 and Db/A, then eventually landing on a G-7. Block *b* begins with the same common tone modulation I have used in so many track on this album, with G-7 falling to Gbmaj7. Block *b* consists of a Gb-lydian pedal in a 4-over-3 groove, which, to me at least, gives the sensation of weightlessly floating upward. The melodic line in *b* is constructed out of fragments of the secondary theme. The ur-motif is heard in the original F-minor-pentatonic scale during *b*. Similarly to the reharmonization that occurs in “Premium Appraisals and the Sunken Urn,” the F-minor-pentatonic ur-motif maps into the extensions of Gb-lydian. Below is the ur-motif with the chord tones in Gb labeled.

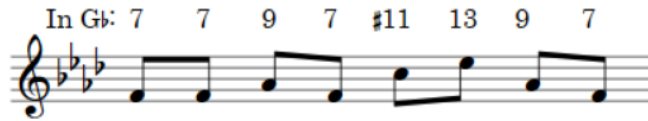


Figure 8.3. Reharmonization of Ur-motif in “Pop the Quasar.”

Block *c* of the symmetrical development begins with a sudden dynamic shift and a cyclical common-tone progression between Dmaj7 and Eb-7, with each 4-bar phrase ending on a Cbmaj7. The melodic material in this section is constructed from whole-step fragments of the primary theme. At the end of *c*, the secondary theme returns, again (as in *a*) over the unstable harmonies Bb-7 and Db/A, ending on a G-7, which falls to Gbmaj7 to begin another statement of *b*. This second statement of *b* leads back to a modified recapitulation of *a*, with an alto saxophone solo. The final statement of *a* concludes with the same unstable Bb-7 and Db/A leading to G-7. The G-7 again falls to Gbmaj7; however, rather than transitioning to the next block of the development, the Gbmaj7 marks the beginning of the recapitulation.

The secondary theme is recapitulated first, transposed to Bb-minor-pentatonic and contextualized in Gb-major. The washy, droning guitar parts over the melody were actually copied and pasted from block *b* of the development, which allows the music to maintain the weightless sensation I described earlier. After the secondary theme is recapitulated, the ensemble stops, leaving only spacious drones sustaining the Gb sonority. After a spoken portion recorded by Brooks, the Gb finally resolves downward for a final recapitulation of the primary theme. Throughout the recapitulation of the primary theme, the vocal harmonies expand upward until they reach a total of twelve voices on the last chord. While the last chord sustains, the ur-motif riff is strung out into groups of 5 notes, before finally rocketing upward and landing on a high Ab.