



CMP Teaching Plan

Prepared by Steven Jordheim

Piece: *Holy Roller* for alto saxophone and piano
(also arranged for saxophone and wind ensemble by Dr. John Boyd, Indiana State University)
Composer: Libby Larsen
Publisher: Oxford University Press

Holy Roller

n: a member of a religion that expresses ecstatic fervor

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ANALYSIS

“Holy Roller is inspired by classic revival preaching. To me, revival sermons are stunning musical masterpieces of rhythm, tempo, and extraordinary tension and release. The music flows directly from the language, cajoling, and incanting, at the same time magnetizing and mesmerizing the listener with its irresistible invocations. The music is the language, the language is the music and the result transports the spirit to other states of being. *Holy Roller* is a revival sermon captured in the sounds of the alto saxophone and piano.” – Libby Larsen

1. Background Information

Libby Larsen (b. 24 December 1950, Wilmington, Delaware), who lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is one of America’s most prolific living composers. She has composed works for orchestra, choir, opera, theatre, chamber ensembles, and solo instruments.

“The first woman to serve as a resident composer with a major orchestra, she has held residencies with the California Institute of the Arts, the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, the Philadelphia School of the Arts, the Cincinnati Conservatory, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Charlotte Symphony, and the Colorado Symphony. Larsen’s many commissions and recordings are a testament to her fruitful collaborations with a long list of world-renowned artists, including The King’s Singers, Benita Valente, and Frederica von Stade, among others. Her works are widely recorded on such labels as Angel/EMI, Nonesuch, Decca, and Koch International.” “In 1973, she co-founded (with Stephen Paulus) the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composers Forum, which has been an invaluable advocate for composers in a difficult, transitional time for American arts.” (quotes from Libby Larsen’s website)

While in Appleton for a performance of her opera, *Dreaming Blue*, Ms. Larsen spoke to me about her ongoing fascination with American vernacular and her attempts to capture various elements of it in her compositions. Her two works for saxophone represent this effort: *Bid Call* for cello and alto saxophone (2003) which captures the rhythms and virtuosity of an auctioneer’s speech; and *Holy Roller* for alto saxophone and piano (1997). *Holy Roller* is a

virtuosic and dynamic work for the two instruments, depicting various elements of revival meetings: preaching, gospel hymn singing, call and response, spontaneous exclamations, and a heightened emotionalism. In this work, the writing for the saxophone is inspired by the rhythms, musicality, and dramatic range of emotions found in classic revival preaching. Libby Larsen composed *Holy Roller* for saxophonist Paul Bro, who premiered it with pianist Martha Krasnican at the 1997 World Saxophone Congress in Valencia, Spain.

2. Elements of Music

a. Form

The form of *Holy Roller* is rhapsodic and unpredictable – as is revivalist preaching. The work begins with an extensive solo recitative for the saxophone in the manner of a bold invocation. The first two measures of the recitative present two motives which figure prominently in the piece: the descending minor third (ms. 1), and the ascending triplet-dotted half note figure (ms. 2). The tonal centers of the opening recitative are C and A.

In measure 17, the saxophone states the opening gesture of *Oh When the Saints Go Marching In*, (in A major) followed by a strong response from the piano. The saxophone then “whispers” the gesture, and the piano follows with a quiet, mysterious reply. At 21, the saxophone strongly asserts the descending minor third motive and follows with a dramatic outburst which diminishes to ms. 25, when the piano quotes a “ghost hymn”: *Shall We Gather At The River?* (G major).

In measures 25-53, the saxophone and piano explore a variety of musical styles and expressive characters: “ghost hymn,” “coaxing,” “ghost honky-tonk,” “very lightly,” “cajoling,” “ghost ragtime swing,” “dolce,” “ragtime,” “softshoe,” secco,” “legato,” “bell-like,” and “espressivo.” The melodic material in this section is frequently a quotation or variation on melodic elements of *Shall We Gather*, rapidly alternating between styles/characters and suggestions of tonal centers.

From ms. 54-65, the piano and saxophone engage in a “ferocious” call and response. The melodic movement in the piano is based on parallel chords which comprise a tritone and a perfect 4th, and the saxophone plays melodic gestures based on the motives in measures 1 and 2 as well as a fragment of *Shall We Gather*. After a dramatic end to the call and response, and a fermata, the saxophone plays a brief cadenza based on trills, the motive from *Shall We Gather*, and a minor third in tremolo.

In measures 84-117, the piano plays phrases of *God Be With You Till We Meet Again*, in Db major, alternating with expressive responses from the saxophone (based on *Shall We Gather*) and often providing dissonant counterpoint to the piano. The call and response increases in emotional intensity to four “thundering” unaccompanied statements by the saxophone (ms. 118 – ms.123), leading into a dramatic, fragmented, and accelerating transition into the concluding “Fire and Brimstone” section which begins in measure 138. The piano establishes a syncopated “groove” in the left hand (pitch center of D) which provides great drive and energy throughout much of this concluding section of the piece. Melodic motives from *Shall We Gather* are frequently heard in the piano’s right hand and the saxophone, as are the motive from

ms. 2 and a quotation of the melody of *Oh When The Saints*. Occasional breaks in the ostinato and changes in meter provide contrast and unpredictability, leading into the final recitative in the saxophone (featuring restatement of the “thundering” gestures from measures 118-123). After a brief pause, the piano re-enters with the “Fire and Brimstone” ostinato (again centered on D) with the saxophone playing impassioned, lyrical lines above it, drawn from a motive from *Shall We Gather*. After a brief return to the harmonic and rhythmic gestures reminiscent of measures 123-134, the piece ends with a dramatic, 3-octave descending line in the saxophone, punctuated by the piano.

b. Rhythm

The rhythmic content of *Holy Roller* consists primarily of three elements: speech-like rhythms in the recitatives, which imitate the dynamic style of rhetoric found in revival preaching; simple rhythmic patterns found in gospel hymn melodies, and ostinato.

c. Melody

The melodic writing imitates the dramatic use of the voice in revival preaching, singing of hymns, and exclamations from the congregation.

d. Harmony

Libby Larsen’s harmonic language makes use of strongly suggested tonal centers, especially in the opening recitative, the quotation of the hymns, and the “Fire and Brimstone” section (see the section above on Form).

e. Timbre

Both soloists must exploit the timbral possibilities of their instruments in order to represent all of the participants in a revival meeting: preacher, congregation, choir, and pianist.

f. Texture

Larsen utilizes monophonic texture to great effect in *Holy Roller*, especially in the extended recitatives and the call and response between the piano and saxophone. Homophonic texture is used in the exploration of styles in measures 25-53. The texture of the “Fire and Brimstone” section is largely polyphonic.

g. Expression/Dynamics

Holy Roller exploits the dynamic and expressive qualities of both the saxophone and piano. The saxophonist must be able to play from the softest pianissimo to the loudest fortissimo throughout the entire range of the instrument. The saxophone part requires a vast range of articulation, dynamic nuance, and timbral variation in order to represent the dynamic and emotional qualities of revivalist preaching. The expressive contrasts are often unpredictable and extreme.

3. Additional Considerations

The writing for both instruments is virtuosic in every respect. Both players must comprehend at all times their particular “roles” in the texture of the music and play with great expressiveness and conviction.

4. The Essence Statement

Holy Roller brings to life the atmosphere, sounds, and heightened emotionalism of a revival meeting. The audience will recognize all of the “players” and be caught up in the immediacy and spontaneity of this dramatic work.

5. Introducing the Piece

The goal of this introduction is to acquaint the performers with the sounds and experience of a Pentecostal/revival meeting.

- a. The performers will watch videos of Pentecostal/revival services and identify the various participants, describing their roles and modes of interaction.
- b. The performers will research each of the hymns quoted in the piece and familiarize themselves with both the music and the texts.
- c. The performers will read about the history of the revival movement in the first decades of the 20th century in America, learning about the theological and societal foundations of the movement.
- d. The performers will listen to a recording of *Holy Roller*, analyze the piece, and identify their “characters,” “moods,” and “intentions” throughout.
- e. The performers will research and listen to recordings of the early 20th century popular music styles represented in the piece.

MUSIC SELECTION RATIONALE

Holy Roller is a unique, highly representational piece of program music, evoking the essence of a particular aspect of American religious life. It is a demanding work for the performers, stretching them in musical, affective, and technical aspects of performance. When performed well, the piece provides an engaging, thought-provoking, and moving experience for the audience.

This piece requires that the player is an advanced student with a secure grasp of technical skills and musical sophistication. A successful performance of *Holy Roller* requires a dramatic, committed, and deeply emotional presentation of the music; this programmatic work will expand student’s ability to express a wide range of emotions and characters in his playing and explore the rhetorical aspects of recitative.

SKILL OUTCOMES

1. Student will improve his ability to play in the altissimo register at all dynamic levels and with accurate tuning.

Strategies

- a. long tones in the altissimo, from pp-ff-pp, and ff-pp-ff, with the tuning cd
- b. selection of altissimo fingerings; determination of adjustments in embouchure and oral cavity in each passage
- c. altissimo lines played down the octave to work on accurate tuning, then in the altissimo register while teacher or practice partner plays an octave below

Assessment

- a. Student will listen to recordings of his practice sessions and lessons, listening for improvement in control of dynamics and accuracy of intonation.

2. Student will acquire a wide variety of articulations for use in imitating the diction of human speech and singing.

Strategies

- a. c minor, a minor, G major, and g minor scales, played with all articulation styles represented in the piece, through the full range of the instrument
- b. demonstration/imitation of articulations in various passages
- c. adding appropriate text to music, speaking/singing it in tempo and with expression, then “speaking” and “singing” with the saxophone

Assessment

- a. Student will record his work with Strategy C (above), listen to the recording, and assess his ability to imitate with his saxophone the diction and inflections of speech/singing.

3. Student will develop a musical use of rubato.

Strategies

- a. recitative sections will be learned without rubato
- b. conducting and singing the recitatives with varying degrees of freedom, striving for an approximation of the rhythms of speech, then playing the recitatives on the saxophone

Assessment

- a. Have student follow the score while listening to recordings of his practice sessions and rehearsals, assessing his ability to use rubato in a musical and rhetorical manner.

KNOWLEDGE OUTCOMES

1. Student will demonstrate a clear understanding of the style, inflections, and emotional qualities of revival preaching, and knowledge of the revival movement in America in the early 20th century.

Strategies

- a. analysis of score, researching revival history, watching recorded Pentecostal services, listening to recordings of gospel choirs and early 20th century popular piano styles

Assessment

- a. writing program notes for the piece, highlighting the elements in the Knowledge Outcome
- b. verbally introducing the piece in Performance Class, and fielding questions on the piece from the other students

AFFECTIVE OUTCOMES

1. Student and accompanist will bring to life the atmosphere, characters, and sounds of a revival meeting.

Strategies

- a. practice call and response (sx. and piano) with different affects
- b. perform recitatives both with and without affect, and with a variety of affects
- c. alternating phrases with teacher, responding to each other’s affect
- d. Meisner acting techniques (“As If,” preparation exercises) with student and pianist

- e. Mental practice: imagining being a sound-track to a film on the subject of revival meetings, picturing the visual element while mentally hearing the piece or while listening to a recording of the piece

Assessment

- a. Student and pianist will perform the piece for performance class. The studio class performance will be videotaped and critiqued by student, pianist, and teacher in a subsequent coaching session. Feedback will be given by the students in the performance class, and their ideas will be tried in the class.

OTHER OUTCOMES

1. Student will memorize the work for both performances.

Strategies

- a. “flesh out” the analysis of the piece (the “road map”)
- b. strengthen the internal recording through conducting and singing, and listening to recordings
- c. reinforce muscle memory
- d. mental practice

Assessment

- a. Student will monitor his progress in playing from memory through assessing the accuracy and affect of his performances in his recorded lessons, rehearsals, and performances.

2. Student and his pianist will develop a compelling, professional stage presentation.

Strategies

- a. coachings will be held in the concert hall, movement on and off stage will be rehearsed
- b. coachings in the hall will be video-recorded

Assessment

- a. Student and his pianist will watch video-recordings of their rehearsals and identify areas of strength and weakness in stage presentation, paying close attention to the affective qualities of their presentation.