

## Crescendo and decrescendo in Lukas Foss' Introductions and Goodbyes

an essay by Elizabeth Smith

"A cocktail party has become the most popular way for the modern hostess to entertain more guests than she can possibly have to dinner in the limited space of her house or apartment. [...] Let me here make a plea for two or more small parties, rather than trying to invite to a single one all to whom an invitation is due. [...] The guests at the small party will all be comfortable and able to enjoy conversation with each other, which is certainly not the case when they are standing pressed together and where there is no place to put down a glass, or even a burning cigarette for that matter." (From: Emily Post. *Etiquette, The Blue Book of Social Usage* (New York, Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1959), 135-136.)

Lukas Foss described the libretto for *Introductions and Good-Byes* as "musical, with a natural built-in *crescendo* and *diminuendo* (From one person on stage, there is a gradual increase to 10 persons, then a gradual decrease back to one)." The structure of the opera mimics the unfolding of a cocktail party—arrival, conversation, and departure. A greater sense of the opera's underlying social commentary can be seen through the lens of Scott Lash's *critical* approach to reflexivity. The opera exhibits characteristics of "agency, [that] set free from the constraints of social structure, then reflects on the 'rules' and 'resources' of such structure reflects on agency's social conditions of existence." Indeed, the opera is not really about a specific cocktail party, but rather it examines the general rules of formal etiquette within the elite social setting. Mr. McC's formal introduction of each character can be perceived as a nod to the "social structure" in which names and titles carry more weight than what the opera projects as empty conversation. In Lash's terms, these "rituals" are symbolic of the formation of a subculture—here an elitist group, which includes a doctor, a general, a count and ladies of seemingly high-society. (See further: Scott Lash, "Reflexivity and its Doubles: Structure, Aesthetics, Community" in *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 115 and 147).

### Prelude

The opera's prelude begins with a disjunct and pointillistic melody that spans a range of six octaves. Within the almost aleatoric passage, Foss creates unity as the first, last, and lowest pitches of the passage are all the pitch D. The expansive spacing within these opening measures musically describes the room in which the party will take place: a large, open space with a single servant moving about making final adjustments and preparations. The prelude's next thirty-two bars feature a xylophone solo. Here, Foss conveys the sound of someone making martinis with the xylophone timbre. The repetitive pitches, rhythmically irregular *glissandos*, and frequent octave displacements within this solo all mimic the sounds of clanking bottles and clinking glasses. The prelude concludes with a return to the opening material. Although not an actual repeat of the beginning measures, the length, set and interval content, and pitch centrality (on D) are all the same as the initial passage. This music once again focuses the audience on the party's setting as the servant leaves the room after completing the final preparations.

### Introductions

Foss divides the first section of introductions into three parts: first Miss Addington-Stitch and her friend Le comte de la Tour-Tournée arrive; Mr. and Mrs. Cotlensky arrive second; and finally Miss Panchanera and Dr. Lavender-Gas. Foss' compositional approach to this section—the music repeats with slight but significant alterations to the harmony, pitch-level, or texture—reflects the repetitions within casual conversation and small talk, socially appropriate for a cocktail party. Each of the first four guests is represented by one of the four chorus voices. Their responses of "How do you do" are chant-like drones that occur in individual, elided, and simultaneous iterations. The style of text setting suggests a formal and expected social etiquette for the party, an etiquette with which all the guests are familiar. Mr. McC, the initiator of these introductions, is the only singing character in the opera. His musical lines are both rhythmically and melodically independent from the accompaniment. However, the specific pitches of Mr. McC's melody frequently outline the same harmonies as accompaniment. These compositional elements support interpreting the host as one who is aware of everyone around him (fitting in harmonically), not actually involved in any conversation (independent rhythm and melody), and dedicated to assuring that all his guests meet each other (clear syllabic text).

Foss builds a climax at the end of this section, repeating fragments of the previous accompaniment pattern over a dominant pedal. A rising scalar line embedded within this extended dominant harmony contributes to the mounting tension. Following the climax at the end of the first section of introductions, the party becomes less formal (as indicated in the stage directions). While Mr. McC continues to introduce the guests with the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Wilderkunstein, the chorus is tacet for this section. The lack of response to the introductions of this section further communicates to the audience that the guests are beginning to interact with each other and have moved past the general introductory conversations.

Although the accompaniment to General Ortega y Guadalupe's arrival is composed of a previously established pattern, his arrival is marked by a number of significant differences. The General is the only guest to arrive alone. When Mr. McC first speaks the General's name, all other musical activity ceases. The chorus reenters with a more rhythmic response repeating the name rather than a simple "how do you do." Also, the lower-voice of the accompaniment pattern adds to the unique and stylistic sound of the music during General Ortega y Guadalupe's arrival. All these differences suggest that the General may be the guest of honor at this party.

## **Conversations**

Regarding the material between the final introduction and the first good-bye, Foss writes: "...I composed a texture made up of name-composites. My intention here was to create an effect of simultaneous conversations, a jumble, for which I used, true to style and project, only titles and names (example: general or-de-la-tour-y-guadding-tonstein)." In addition to the fragmented names that Foss described, the soprano text provides multiple iterations of a melismatic "ha." Each occurrence is set to the same two bars of music. It seems unlikely that a person would sustain laughter throughout a single conversation, thus the soprano line suggests that multiple conversations are taking place over a considerable span of time. Further, this passage is the first since the prelude to incorporate a meter other than 3/4. The alternation between 3/4 and 5/8 time offers a parallel to the "skewed" time represented dramatically in this passage.

This passage's texture is the densest of all the opera. Each of the four chorus voices has a rhythmically and melodically distinct part with only the soprano voice being doubled in the upper-voice of the accompaniment. Despite its complexity, the music in this section does not develop, rather, Foss repeats each two-bar segment. Together, the music and text create an operatic moment in which the sounds mimic party conversations without suggesting any specific storylines.

## **Good-Byes**

Mr. McC begins to bid his guests farewell with the same pitches with which he welcomed them. Foss maintains a fuller texture following the section of conversation giving the chorus lines of "goodbye," "I had a most enjoyable time," various titles, and eventually names. The chorus parts become less distinct from one another, finally coming to rhythmic homophony. As Mr. and Mrs. Wilderkunstein depart, once again it is suggested that General Ortega y Guadalupe is the guest of honor. Here, Mr. McC asks if the Wilderkunsteins have met the General and begins again to introduce them, making it seem specifically important for them to have met the General.

The guests leave in three different groups. The first departure occurs without tonal closure as the accompaniment does not complete the cadence. Traditional tonal cadential patterns sound the second two groups' departures as well as Mr. McC's final good-bye. Following the last cadence no guests remain; however, the accompaniment still does not provide the tonic. This allows for the host (and soloist) Mr. McC to give a final good-bye leading not only to tonic, but also to the beginning of the epilogue. It is as if the host can breathe finally, after the burden of all etiquette has been put aside. No obligations, just empty glasses.

## **Epilogue**

The epilogue begins with a return of the music from the middle section of the prelude. This reflects the similarities in the activities of setting up for the party and cleaning up afterwards. The music is transposed, however, reflecting the actual change of pitch in the sounds of the clinking of glass. The bottles of liquor are now less full (transposition down in the accompaniment). The glasses may contain the remains of the final cocktails (transposition up in the xylophone). The quotation from the prelude concludes with the written out trill previously associated with the stirring of the martinis. Maintaining this association, Mr. McC has another martini (indicated in the stage directions), perhaps in celebration of a successful social event.

The final bars of the epilogue return to the prelude's opening pointillistic texture. The ultimate four bars of music correspond with bars 9-12 of the prelude. Pitches are mirrored as to inform the listener that the servant's party

preparations are now mirrored by the servant completing the cleaning and departing. Then, just as the commotion of the party has faded away, the music mimics and fades away, leaving Mr. McC, martini in hand, alone on stage as he was first seen at the opera's beginning.

## Conclusion

The overall form of the opera with its palindromic design can be described in terms of the chiasmus (essentially an ABB'A format). The musical and dramatic similarities of the prelude and epilogue, introductions and good-byes, and perhaps the conversations and brief silence (prior to the first good-bye) dissolve the oppositional nature of these sections, rendering them mirrored images (sonorities) of each other. The effect is to place focus on the ritualistic preparations for social interaction rather than on any actual social content. Indeed, in an ironic twist, the very nature of the center part of the opera as an "event" is called into question. When the host pours himself a martini in the final moments of the opera, the audience sympathizes with his relief at successfully orchestrating the formalized societal discourse—he is now (at least until the next social occasion) free of the restraints of high-society etiquette. Menotti's and Foss' textual and musical craftsmanship come together in a formal plan that creates a cohesive and dynamic operatic performance, with critical commentary on the underlying themes of social etiquette and elitism. The basis, of which, is little more than a list of names.

## A final comparison between the three chamber operas

Rorem's use of music enhances the drama of the libretto by articulating the emotional context of the characters' relationship. Throughout the opera, they outwardly react to each other. Their accompaniment expresses their literal and emotional surroundings, but it is the characters' words, the libretto, that dictates the music. This can be seen as a contrast to Barber's use of music in *A Hand of Bridge*. Barber's melodic lines and accompaniment serve to develop the characters introspectively. The music supplements the libretto rather than paralleling or paraphrasing it. The accompaniment may represent a deeper psychological level of the character or the interaction of the character with the outside world. In both cases, the accompaniment seems to affect the emotional state of the character.

Foss registers in the middle of the Rorem/Barber spectrum in terms of the relationship between music and drama. Like Rorem, Foss uses music to set the stage, to describe the party room, to amplify the sounds of the characters' actions. But Foss also uses music to build the relationships between the characters. In these cases, he supplements the libretto in a manner similar to Barber.

Every composer must work within the constraints of the libretto. The libretto may contribute greatly to the differences between operas. Both the Barber and Foss operas have libretti written by their colleague: composer Gian Carlo Menotti. The two libretti have a static quality: one room, a well-defined set of characters, and few movements. For dramatic strength both libretti almost require that music fill in parts of the story. This characteristic is not a fault in Menotti's writing, but rather an intentional product of his musical understanding. As a striking contrast, Frank O'Hara's libretto for Rorem's *Four Dialogues*, though written with then intention of being set to music, maintains the characteristics of a fully structured stage-drama. The explicit, Pop-Art-way of dealing with love, annoyance, and anger lends some distance (even alienation) and humor to the text, just as comical plays and Opera Buffa in the 18th century did. This aspect is absolutely absent in the two Menotti's libretti. Neither approach should be considered superior to the other. In fact, the contrast between the three operas may leave the listener content with a full understanding of the man and the woman in Rorem's *Four Dialogues*, uneasy with Mr. McC's cocktail party (was the event a success or a failure?) in Foss' *Introductions and Goodbyes*, and with a continuing sense of wonder toward the unfulfilled desires of the bridge players in Barber's elegant *A Hand of Bridge*.