

### **Pastiche, Juxtaposition, and Coherency in Ngwenyama's *Sonoran Storm***

To me, Nokuthula Ngwenyama's *Sonoran Storm* is a modern take on the rondo, with theme and variation elements incorporated. My rondo identification comes from the interspersal of episodes between statements of a main theme. The variations element comes from the relatedness between sections and elaborations made to the returning main theme. The piece's episodes and interpolations systematically explore the versatility of the viola as an instrument, in addition to taking the music in diverse directions, from baroque pastiche to modern extended techniques. Despite this diversity, Ngwenyama maintains coherency through the returns to the main subject, consistency of range (as necessitated by the instrument), and an underlying reliance on traditional bass lines, scalar frameworks, voice-leading, and guide tones. In this paper, I first examine how Ngwenyama transforms the main theme throughout the work. Then, I provide a reading of the episodes, mainly focussing on their referential qualities and the manner in which they are juxtaposed and connected.

*Example 1: transcription of Sonoran Storm's recurring main theme*



*Sonoran Storm's* main theme is based on a recurring I–IV–V progression in Eb major. Ngwenyama introduces this progression without the theme's melody at 0:15, after a brief  $\hat{1}$  and  $\hat{5}$  based introduction—which to my ear references a motive from Reich's *Different Trains*.<sup>1</sup> The progression is realized in double-stopped 8<sup>th</sup> notes. On the fourth 8<sup>th</sup> note of each measure, she creates an accent through both her bow articulation and a peaking of pitch via a move to a higher string. The result is a push rhythm that creates a syncopated feel. From this, the main theme emerges at 0:35. Example 1 sketches its basic form: this four-bar phrase repeats, with additional figures added at its end at various points. This melody is syncopated similarly, with push rhythms scattered throughout. The combination of the I–IV–V progression, melody and accompaniment, and looping give the sound a pop music feel, reminiscent of string performers in the popular or contemporary classical genres

<sup>1</sup> With this potential intertextuality in mind, I am tempted to read the following pulsing 8<sup>th</sup> notes as evoking the chugging of a train, although the title of the piece suggests otherwise.

such as Lindsey Stirling and the Vitamin Quartet or violinists who use effect pedals to build a rich texture of loops.

This main theme returns in many iterations. Many are exact or close repetitions of the opening statement, but some diverge more significantly. At 1:33, the theme is briefly made more virtuosic through triple-stopping, before returning to the more subdued original realization style at 1:56. This seems to reference violin virtuosi, particularly repertoire such as caprices. After introducing this virtuosic version of the theme, it becomes a returning feature of the piece. It is next heard at 3:21, this time with an even more explicitly virtuosic figure interjecting midway at 3:38, featuring 8<sup>th</sup> notes grouped into threes in a manner that seems at first to create a grouping dissonance and syncopation, reinforced by accents and double-stopping on the beginning of each grouping—another explicit reference to virtuoso string technique—but really is an instance of an inserted 12/8 measure where the 8<sup>th</sup> note value is kept constant rather than the quadruple meter's beats.

At 5:43, a very different, recomposed version of the main theme is heard. This time, there are no pulsing 8<sup>th</sup> notes. Instead, the rhythms are adjusted so that each note takes a quarter note value, with the exception of the opening pitches. The texture is chordal, the tempo is slower, and the realization is *cantabile*. Further, at 5:57, the music switches to a minor-inflected version of the same material, with a *piano* dynamic and initially a thinner texture, further emphasizing the departure from the theme's initial realization. While the virtuosic version of the main theme was mainly achieved through a slight change of texture and bow articulation, this is a more significant recomposition, and I thus consider it a *variation* on the main theme.

The iteration of the main theme that begins at 8:47 moves rapidly through several styles. It begins with a brief statement in C major (bVI), before moving back to the tonic key of Eb major at 8:53. Then, at 8:58, the tonality shifts again to Gb major. To my ear, these sudden shifts from C to Eb to Gb, each moving three steps to the flat side of the circle of fifths (or one "PR" transformation), evoke the modulations of Romanticism. Starting at 9:09, there is a brief interruption in the main theme material: the Bb that was the major third of the aforementioned (now-)tonic Gb major harmony is reinterpreted as the fifth of a (global) tonic Eb major harmony in a jarring shift that involves a false

relation between Gb and G natural—a “PL” neo-Riemannian transformation characteristic of the Romantic tonal palette. This common tone of Bb is retained for one more chord change, becoming the root of an extended and virtuosically rendered tonic-key  $V^7$  chord, again using a three-8<sup>th</sup> 12/8 grouping, smoothly leading back into the main theme and tonic key. Accompanying each of these rapid tonal shifts is a change of articulation and texture, each increasing in intensity or becoming more *maestoso*. While the tonalities and textures are juxtaposed, the smooth voice-leading and tonal logic that underlies and guides these harmonies ensure coherent passage through tumultuous waters (or *storms*).

The episodes consist of an even broader range of styles. At about 1:10, the music begins to move towards its first episode, marked by a change of harmonic material and genre associations. The top line of the chordal texture ascends to  $\hat{1}$ , then the music descends through a chain of  $\hat{7}-\hat{6}$  suspensions. This evokes the feeling of Baroque pastiche. However, the transition three centuries into the past is a subtle and incomplete one, as Ngweyama maintains the chugging 8<sup>th</sup> note surface rhythm. In each measure, her bow movements bring out a bass–chord–chord–bass–bass–chord–chord–bass pattern of alternation, creating the impression of polyphony, hocket, and a dotted quarter–8<sup>th</sup> note bass line, while not fully departing from the original texture. Upon the repetition of this passage, she ornaments her descent with diminutions. These factors contribute to the baroque feel, although overall, the music still feels modern, likely due to the chordal use of the viola. The section ends with a very stylized  $V^5_{4-3}$  cadence that could equally be read as specific to the Baroque era (a schema often preceded by a  $V^6_4$  which was defunct by the height of the Classical era) or as drawing on the sus chords of pop music.

To me, the episode beginning at 2:26 evokes a Telemann *Fantasia*, with its single-line realization of a bass, arpeggiated harmonies, and melodic fragments—another return to the eighteenth century. Moments later, at 2:36, the style changes again, this time more drastically. The musical language is suddenly dragged into the twentieth century with the chord progression C major–Db major–Gb major. These parallel major chords cannot be reconciled in any major or minor key due to the half-step and tritone distances between chordal roots, and thus this section sounds very modern,

sticking out from the more conventionally tonal material that preceded it. Yet, at 2:49, the  $V^5_{4-3}$  cadence returns, and by 2:56, the music sounds more like a pastiche of a Bach cello suite. This new episode lasts a mere 13 seconds before we are teleported in time again. At 3:09, Ngweyama introduces string squeaks into her timbral pallet, and we are again reminded that this is a modern work with several centuries of idioms and innovations to draw upon. While these changes of style between the eighteenth and twentieth/twenty-first centuries are rapid, with four changes in under a minute, Ngweyama, in my opinion, maintains coherence. She connects her sections with voice-leading, the final note of one style resolving neatly into the first of the next. This is seen in the chord resolutions and the stepwise movements of the bass and soprano lines. Thus, while the changes are extreme in terms of their referents, the smoothness of the transitions and the consistency of elements such as range and texture join them together with minimal jolting.

In my opinion, the most aurally distinct section begins at 5:18. Here, Ngweyama pauses on a dominant chord and ornaments it with extended timbral trills utilizing harmonics. Although this section sticks out in terms of timbre, because she employs this technique on a dominant chord at the end of a phrase, it links seamlessly into the following more traditional arpeggio passage beginning on a tonic chord. Thus, while the timbres and textures are unrelated, the traditional common practice syntax invoked allows these two different styles to be elided unobtrusively.

In this piece, Ngweyama weaves together a unified work of dissimilar materials, many of which reference musical idioms separated by centuries. While she alternates styles rapidly, to my ear, she maintains an overall coherency through her reliance on tonal logic such as stepwise lines and tonic-dominant relations to connect her materials along the horizontal plane. Although the work can be segmented according to its various contexts, its unfolding is uninterrupted and not divisible into discrete sections. For example, she often switches styles on a resolution to the tonic chord or limits a style interpolation to an extended dominant-function passage, thus smoothing over points of juxtaposition with cadential resolutions. Both of these options would mark a suitable place for a change of texture in common practice pieces (a cadential resolution into a new section of a form or an extended  $V^6_{4-5_3}$  cadenza, for instance). She thus capitalizes on that ingrained expectation, using it to

create unobtrusive juxtapositions. The result is a piece that shows off the full range of the viola in terms of techniques, textures, and ability to handle different repertoires.