

WRITING FOR THE CLARINET QUARTET

The members of the Ebony Quartet are very versatile, commanding between them flute, bassoon, saxophones and of course all the different sizes of clarinet; when they asked me to write them a piece my initial reaction was to ask them to play as wide a variety of instruments as possible! However, it then struck me that it would be a more interesting proposition to write for four identical instruments and to aim to get as wide a variety of textures as possible from them – hence my piece: *Overtones*, for four B flat clarinets.

I don't play the clarinet but I had of course written for it before. It is a delightful instrument to write for and I was particularly attracted to it because it is two (if not more) instruments in one, the lower octave having a character all its own.

In many of my recent pieces I have tried to make the technical and physical characteristics of the instruments I am writing for into the musical starting point of the piece. For example the harmonies of my *Continuum* for brass band (3P Music Publications) are based on the overtone series, and my *Trio* for Violin, Cello and Piano uses a pitch and rhythm matrix derived from the violin and cello's open strings and their harmonies. Even a more lightweight piece, my *Colneford Suite* for Trombone and Piano (Boosey and Hawkes) started life as a chart showing which note the trombonist could play in each position, which itself suggested musical possibilities.

The starting point of *Overtones* was threefold:

(a) a pitch structure derived from the

clarinet's basic registers,

(b) textures, and overlaying of melodic ideas, rather than conventional harmony (clarinet 1 is not always on top!)

(c) the concept of a 'seamless' piece in which slow and fast sections overlap (I also did this in *Continuum*).

I will say something about each of these points in turn.

(a) *Pitch-structure*. In a way, the starting point here is the 'throat-tones' G to B flat. In order to make a feature of this part of the compass and to emphasise the division between the upper and lower registers, the throat-tones are always marked *pp*, *expressionless* to emphasize their fascinating quality. The four-semitone group is then transposed to different pitch levels to produce four 'modes' (**Ex. 1**) from which all the musical material is derived.

Ex. 1 (Note: all musical examples sound a tone lower.)

'chalumeau' mode

'clarino' mode

'centre' mode (always *pp*)

'high' mode

(The semibreves are the more important notes, the quavers are subsidiary)

It will be seen that the upper two modes are a twelfth above the lower two, and I often use the modes together in parallel twelfths to emphasise the clarinet's natural acoustic qualities (**Ex. 2**).

Ex. 2

Cl. 1+3

Cl. 2+4

ff

pp CL. 4

(b) *Texture*. One way of using the clarinets to create a texture is in this treatment of the throat-tones to create a 'white' sound in clarinets 1-3 which is here interrupted by clarinet 4 mostly in the chalumeau register (**Ex. 3**):

Ex. 3

cl. 1
 { pp: expressionless (scuzo vib.)
 cl. 2+3
 cl. 4
 { pp: express ion less
 cl. 2+3 (etc.)

Another textural device I use quite often is the 'colouring' of a melody with one clarinet echoing another. Here the second clarinet colours the first clarinet melody while clarinets 3 and 4 repeat material from the previous section, helping to overlap and integrate the two sections (**Ex. 4**):

Ex. 4

(♩ = d)
 cl. 1
 mp espress
 (grace-notes relaxed)
 cl. 2
 pp (echo of cl. 1)
 cl. 3+4
 pp

The notes of the four-semitone group played together can be a dramatic effect both loud and soft, and I use this at the climax of the piece: the notes of the 'high' mode followed by the 'centre' mode, then the lowest four notes and back to the 'centre' mode again. At the first performance one member of the audience thought her hearing aid had gone wrong in this section! (**Ex. 5**).

Ex. 5

(♩ = d)
 cl. 1+3
 molto vibrato
 { pp (expressionless)
 cl. 2+4
 pp

(c) *Formal Structure*. The basic pulse is fast (metronome 120 approx.) throughout and this makes it easy to overlap sections, as in Ex. 4 above. However there are 'slower' sections in which the feeling of the pulse is largely lost; for example the reflective central section (**Ex. 6**).

Ex. 6 (♩ = 1)

cl. 1
 p espress
 (relaxed and with rubato)
 cl. 2
 ppp (echo)
 cl. 3
 ppp (echo)

As far as the structure of the whole piece is concerned, I wished to avoid too obvious an ABA shape but I wanted there to be a feeling of recapitulation, so I decided upon the idea of ending with a gradual disintegration of the opening musical patterns. The piece begins in a toccata-like fashion, a simple pattern being thrown from clarinet to clarinet (**Ex. 7**):

Ex. 7 Fast ($\downarrow = c. 120$)

Cl. 3, Cl. 1, Cl. 2, Cl. 4, Cl. 2

sf marcato, *f*, *p*, *f*

Near the end, the toccata figure has metamorphosed into a tremolo on low E and G, and then eventually only a few traces of it remain in clarinets 3 and 4, while clarinets 1 and 2 climb up the overtone series from the low E (**Ex. 8**).

Ex. 8

Cl. 1, Cl. 2, Cl. 3, Cl. 4

ppp, *dim.*, *ppp*, *ppp*, *ff*, *pp*, *ppp*, *cresc (p)*, *f*, *pp*, *ff*, *ppp*, *ppp*

A few bars later, the piece ends, *pppp* (**Ex. 9**).

Ex. 9

Cl. 1+2, Cl. 3+4

pppp, *pppp*

In conclusion, I found the medium of four clarinets to be capable of great flexibility, and also of great subtlety and contrast: a real inspiration to the composer. The repertoire for four clarinets is fairly small and, with excellent performers such as the Ebony Quartet around, I hope many other composers can be persuaded to add to it!

Overtones was commissioned by the Ebony Quartet with funds from the Eastern Arts Association and was first performed by them at Frinton Music Club in October 1985 with Purcell Room performance following in January 1986.