

Stuart Greenbaum: *Ice Man* (1994)

Ice Man is not strictly speaking a sonata, but it is a large programmatic work for solo piano in three movements. It can be further divided up into nine sections. These are based on the plight of James Scott, the Australian student who was trapped in the Himalayan snow for 43 days before being rescued. In the score notes, the composer explains:

"In selecting 9 fragments of text from the newspaper article, I was primarily looking for the philosophical strands: the acceptance of misfortune, the wait in hope, the possibility of death and the change of expectation. I am less interested in the geographical prison, the hunger, the cold and the eventual rescue than in the attitudes which these circumstances inspire in people. In this way the piece is not only about James Scott but about courage in general. James Scott's ordeal just happened to be a particularly memorable instance of human courage."

The 9 fragments represent a psychological journey. They have been set in the order in which they happened but their durations are not in proportion to normal 'calendar' time. Greenbaum comments;

"They say that when a person is dying their life flashes before their eyes. It seems to me that James Scott went through this process in slow motion. But there were also weeks that passed almost without incident (at least to his memory) and these extremes of 'fast' and 'slow' motion are at the core of my piece. This has not always translated into external speed of a section but in the sense of 'time passing' which they respectively convey".

This article will look in closer detail at the 2nd movement, which is in itself about 13 minutes in length, the total work lasting for over half an hour. Of the nine newspaper extracts, the 2nd movement deals with extracts 4, 5, and 6.

4: Picture of an Anorexic

*I was a lot thinner but I still had some energy.
I had held in my mind a picture of an anorexic
I had seen in a surgical textbook.
It was just a skeleton draped in skin.*

Structure: Duo-thematic (ABA)

There are two themes in this section, both of which are given considerable repetition. Theme **A** opens the section (see Ex. No.1).

Ex. No.1

1

8va

$\text{quarter} = 48$

p

Ped.

Features of Theme A:

- 7/4 metre
- melodic interval of the major 7th
- RH can be reduced to D major/Eb major
- LH sustains B natural, which doesn't belong to either chord

The score indicates that the sustain pedal is to be held down for the entire section, often resulting in a bi-tonal wash of differing harmonies. Theme **A** is repeated but gradually interrupted by a harmonically distant major 2nd which seems alien to an already ambiguous theme. In contrast to the gradual breakdown of Theme **A**, Theme **B** begins in embryonic state at bar 11 and isn't fully formed until bar 35 (see Ex. No.2).

Ex. No.2

35

p *f*

Features of Theme B:

- Upward moving arpeggio figure
- 7-note pitch series, but not diatonic!
- Bi-tonal: Eb minor, D major, Bb major
- Pedal is down - all three chords sound against each other

In effect, both of the themes are put under the microscope and viewed from their most tiny elements in contrast to their fully formed states. In addition to this, theme **B**, along with the major 2nd, are given an "echo effect" - being repeated but softer each time, as if heard from the other side of the mountain range in which James Scott was trapped.

Theme **A**, in contrast seems to be more rigid, though when it re-appears at bar 40, it undergoes transformation by octave displacement until it reaches a dramatic climax in its new form at bar 43 (see Ex. No.3).

Ex. No.3

8^{va}

43

f *mf* *mp*

8^{ed}

5: Dignity

*I vowed that I would never allow myself to get like that,
and that I would die with dignity.*

Structure: Minimalist chorale

Dignity is set as a prayer in response to the previous section. The 'chorale' aspect is obvious in the choice of harmonic cadence and conjunct motion in most lines but it is treated in a rather unusual way. The first six bars gradually build up the first chord and the next four then proceed in more regular fashion. This is typical of the section as a whole. The crotchet beat is held as an unwavering pulse throughout but the harmonic rhythm (or rate of progression) is at times normal but at other times abnormally slow. This occasionally extreme slowness reflects James Scott's time frame, which being trapped with nothing to do, could be said to have been in an altered state. The first six bars demonstrate how a five-note chord is gradually built up (see Ex. No.4).

Ex. No.4

1 ♩ = 56
p
And. And.

This additive process could be described as 'Minimalist'. From bar 28, the prayer ceases to be a passive or peaceful one and becomes more urgent and insistent. This leads to bar 33 with the return of Theme **B** from *Picture of an Anorexic* (refer back to Ex. No.2). The bi-tonal arpeggio figure is now rhythmically notated (instead of grace notes) and takes over, underlining the programmatic connection between the individual sections.

6: The Dream

That night I slept and had the most vivid dream of my life.

All my friends and family were there.

I got up and made a speech and I talked for ages.

The colours of the dream were intense.

It absorbed all my senses.

Structure: Arch Form

A Crescendo arpeggios

B Triplet motive

A Crescendo arpeggios

B Triplet motive

A Crescendo arpeggios

The Arch form for this section is clear, though there are a few instances where the dividing line between motives is blurred. The opening crescendo arpeggio pattern is in a clear G major (see Ex. No.5).

Ex. No.5

1 $\text{♩} = 66$

ppp *cresc.* *mf*

Features of crescendo arpeggio:

- Clear G major tonality
- LH-RH 'drumming' pattern on keyboard
- Two notes in LH alternate with three notes in RH
- Minimalist pattern defies conventional melodic phrasing

This initial G major creates an openly joyous contrast to the previous two sections. Programmatically, this underlines James Scott's dream which can be seen as a release (albeit fictional) from the prison of the snowed-in landscape. The harmonic colours of this arpeggio gradually darken, however, leading into the bi-tonal arpeggio (bar 14) that was first heard in *Picture of an Anorexic* (refer back to Ex. No.2). This bi-tonal arpeggio also appears as one huge extended arpeggio at the end of *The Dream* (bar 128)

signifying that the illusion of friends and family is fading and reality is subconsciously sinking back in.

The main theme of *The Dream* is the triplet motive, which is first fully established in the right hand at bar 31 (see Ex. no.6).

Ex. No.6

31

p

Features of triplet motive:

- First appears in G minor
- Narrow tessitura
- Motivically extends from 2 notes of scale to 3, then 4
- Triplet syncopation sometimes ambiguously sounds like main beat
- Left hand is added in 3 against 2 rhythm

The ambiguity of the 2 against 3 rhythm (hemiola) becomes the driving force of the piece along with numerous harmonic modulations alternating in major and minor modes. The fully formed triplet motive first occurs at bar 44 in a joyous E major (see Ex. No.7)

Ex. No.7

44

mf

Red.

The 2 against 3 rhythm is complete here and two different groupings struggle against each other in dialectical fashion until the pure form of the crescendo arpeggios return at bar 111. While *Ice Man* was conceived as a large performance piece, it is possible to play extracts from it. Section 6, *The Dream*, can work as an individual piece in its own right.

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Terms for further reference:

Arch Form

Augmented Triad

Bi-tonality

Hemiola

Octave Displacement

Open Spacing

Program music

Tessitura

Score:

The full score to *Ice Man* is published by Promethean Editions (PE005):

www.promethean-editions.com

CD sound recordings:

1st movement, 'The Moon': *First Light* (FAC-98-1).

2nd movement: *Greenbaum Hindson Peterson* (GHP9501)

3rd movement, 'Affinity': (AMEB Piano Series 14 disc)

All recordings and scores available through the Australian Music Centre:

www.amcoz.com.au

Stuart Greenbaum's website can be found at:

www.stuartgreenbaum.com