

Notes on the Three Monk Tunes

for tap dancer and solo percussionist

by Larry Polansky

[Note to the editor: the following outline is for editorial use only, should there be cuts necessary, or should there be editorial changes, it is intended to facilitate such alterations via a simple guide to the structure of the article----Larry Polansky]

Outline: (FOR EDITORIAL USE ONLY-----DO NOT PRINT!!!!!!!)

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***** END OF OUTLINE--BODY OF ARTICLE BEGINS BELOW *****

I. Some history

In December 1980, I did a concert at Roulette, a "loft-space" in New York City run by composers Jim Staley and David Weinstein. Ann Rodiger, a close friend, collaborator, and fine choreographer and dancer in her own right, brought a friend with her to the concert -- Anita Feldman. Ann said that Anita was interested in collaborating with me, in, of all things, pieces for tap-dancer. On one level, Anita's interest in my own work confused me, because my experimentation had mainly concerned itself with form, intonation, and the integration of traditional American styles. But, for much the same reasons, the prospect excited me immediately. I was, at that time, rapidly coming to the conclusion that the

western tradition was more or less bankrupt in terms of its understanding and serious exploration of rhythm (with some notable, if recent exceptions). Working with a tap dancer seemed like an interesting way for me to begin my own rhythmic experimentations. Fascinated and flattered, I asked her how we could go about doing this. I had just moved to California to work at the Mills College Center for Contemporary Music, and I only had a few days left in N.Y. on that visit, and so it looked like we would have to work "long-distance" for the most part. She suggested I drop by her studio, where we could talk about what the piece might entail, and where she could also give me a kind of "capsule" demonstration of tap steps, techniques, and terminology.

After that afternoon "education" just a few things stuck in my mind. First, I was quite amazed at the levels of levels of rhythmic density and accuracy she could achieve with her feet. I asked her to show me some non-duple grupetti, and she was rather easily able to perform fives and sevens, much as a rudimental drummer can measure strokes to a roll. The names of the various steps also intrigued me -- terms like "a Buffalo" caught my imagination, even though I probably couldn't tell you now what any of them mean. Another thing that interested me, though I didn't mention this to Anita, was the remarkable paucity of timbres available, something which I liked. Most of my percussion pieces had only made use of instruments like muffled tenor and snare drums, tom-toms, and bass drums, and I had always been interested, when using percussion, in avoiding many of the more "interesting" timbres. Although Anita stressed frequently her interest in expanding the timbral language of tap (using sand and different surfaces to increase the ~~the~~ palate), I didn't have the heart to tell her that my own aesthetic

sense, at that point, would most likely lead me to ~~be~~ seek the dullest timbre imaginable -- tap shoes on a wood floor -- so as to allow the formal and rhythmic experiments to be perceived in what I thought was a "purer" context.

The last thing that intrigued me was that I saw and heard something in her performance/demonstration which I had only perceived in some of the finest musicians I had seen -- a wonderful integration of sound and movement, where the movement's main goal was in producing the sound, but in doing so, it took on a performance life of its own. One tremendous frustration I'd always had with concert music was its reliance on an essentially nineteenth century set of distinctions between performer and audience, and more importantly, performer and sound. I saw and heard in her sound/motions a possibility of evolving that situation, if only a little.

II. Writing the piece

When I got back to California, I began the work almost immediately. I had recently begun, along with my colleague David Rosenboom, an investigation into a formalization of the perceptual and compositional notions of "motivic primitives" -- how motivic ideas are transformed, what makes one motive "close" to another, and so on. We were (and still are) working on computer and theoretical applications of these ideas, and these became of prime importance in the piece for Anita. At the same time, almost all of my work has in some way used traditional american sources for its "inspiration". My reasons for this perhaps deserve another article, but among them are the desire to erase distinctions between art/folk/jazz/traditional/... musics, and a simple love and deep respect for the

musics I cut my teeth on. It seemed natural, especially since tap is one of our truly indigenous art forms, to also try and develop this idea in terms of the dance work.

Some more fundamental, almost technical problems needed to be solved. The first was how to notate the tap. My notational style has always been quite traditional, with the exception of several pieces that are almost completely "visual" scores, and I decided to write the tap part in an extremely straightforward way, as if it were simply two drums (high and low, for heel and toe taps). In the first movement, I also used clapping, finger snapping, and vocal grunts, but all of these sounds, including the tap, were condensed onto one staff. I made no notational distinction between right and left feet, but tried to keep those kinds of physical implications in mind in the composition of the rhythms.

These notational decisions related in a quite essential fashion to the problem I perceived in defining the nature of the collaboration. Respecting Anita's role as a choreographer, it was my intention to only convey movement information when it directly related to the sound. For example, in the second movement, which is extremely quiet and non-metrical, I asked her to move very little, perhaps even stand in one place. Eventually, she changed this considerably, much to my liking, but I think that my original conception of the movement allowed her to find a more developed choreographic form that was still consistent, in fact I would say resonant, with the sonic and structural ideas on the page.

III. The work itself

The piece is called Three Monk Tunes, for tap dancer and percussionist. Each of the three movements is a "setting" of a song by Thelonius Monk --- "Bemsha Swing", "Round Midnight", and "I Mean You". The choice of Monk's music was in part motivated by the fact that he was, with Eric Dolphy, one of the more important influences in my early musical development, and in part by the wonderful, if possibly apocryphal, image of Monk rising from the piano and dancing around on stage like a possessed black Hassid when the music moved him. Each movement is dedicated to and in some way inspired by a particular artist and friend who has in some way influenced my life and work. The first movement, a highly formal set of pulsed motivic transformations, is dedicated to composer, performer and theorist David Rosenboom. The second, an almost unbelievably complex rhythmic procedure resulting in just a few quiet chords and movements, is dedicated to New York choreographer and dancer Ann Rodiger. The third, a joyful and quite simple set of unison rhythmic variations on a simple blues tune, replete with toy piano, whistling and singing, is dedicated to California composer and gamelan performer Jody Diamond.

Three compositional ideas unite all the movements. First, each explores the systematic "morphogenesis", or motivic transformation, of a given melodic/rhythmic motif. In this case, the motives are the almost "primitive", highly repetitive melodies that Monk himself used in the case of "Bemsha Swing" and "I Mean You", and the more complex melodic movement of "Round Midnight". Second, it was my intention to avoid "squaring off the rhythm", whenever possible, a deliberate homage to Monk. This resulted in the 17-beat phrase which is the first movement, the complex grupetti of the second, and the abrupt shifts of the the 17 short

sections of the third. Finally, I wanted to explore the concept of unison, and each movement interprets the notion of two performers "playing the same thing" in a different way.

The first movement, 12-minutes of non-stop movement for the dancer and percussionist, is played on tuned wood-blocks and marimba. It was, surprisingly, originally scored for bass clarinet and dancer, with the clarinetist playing key-clicks for the non-pitched sounds, but, for reasons of rhythmic clarity, ~~it~~ was rescored. The dancer and percussionist begin in unison with a 17-beat phrase which is a complex development of the first line of "Bemsha Swing" (see example 1). As the piece progresses, both parts are subjected to a formal process of simplification, beat by beat, with the percussion part gradually adding in pitches. Example 2 shows two "measures" of the piece, about one-third and two-thirds of the way through, respectively. The process is perhaps too complicated to go into here, but what is important is that though the same transformation is applied to both parts, it does not happen on the same beats (because I start the process out of phase). A complex and changing pattern is the result, just slightly different each measure. The most amazing thing to me about Anita's performance, was her ability to memorize this movement, consisting of some ^{17-beat} 60 measures, no two exactly the same.

The second movement uses a similar transformation process on each line of the tune "Round Midnight", but here the main result is to create various restructurings of the tempo, manifesting itself in a difficult to perform succession of gruppetto relationships. Example 3 is the entire score for this movement. The notational

method used for these rhythmic relationships was to retain the spatial integrity of the underlying quarter note tempo, and then to line up the resulting rhythms exactly above that. The performers are also given numerical indications, in hundredths of the quarter note pulse, as to where the given beats fall in relation to the underlying ictus. The percussionist, on vibraphone, simply plays the tune, voicing it the way I might were I playing it with a jazz ensemble, but the rhythms are determined by the a priori formal procedures. By frequently using the combination "heel-toe-toe" in the tap part, I hoped to create the feeling of a slow waltz suspended over a rather timeless ballade. This movement has become my favorite of the three, though the most subtle, and the only one that can not be performed without the other two.

The third movement was in part inspired by the astonishing big-band arrangement Monk made of this almost "minimalist" tune. I choose roto-toms as the main percussion instrument, and originally thought of amplifying the tap part through floor mikes. I wanted this movement to be the most entertaining in a traditional sense, and to showcase Anita in a way that would illustrate the combination of her prodigious conventional tap technique with her recent explorations. It is mostly a set of rhythmic unisons for roto-toms and tap, though the tune is stated by toy piano (sometimes I use mandolin as well), whistling and humming. I left a few sections where Anita might improvise, or compose her own tap part, and in general, her choreography in this movement is the broadest, making this section the most collaborative in my mind. I also began to experiment with more sophisticated contrapuntal notions here, even incorporating a small "fuging" section for four rhythmic voices (Example 4, section 13 out of 17). This small example gives some

indication of the rhythmic ideas I am experimenting with in a new piece for Anita, entitled "Milwaukee Blues", a setting of a Charlie Poole tune for two tap dancers (one on tape) and five saxes (four on tape).

IV. Some performance notes

The Monk Tunes have been performed, in whole or part, about 25 times in the last few years. We've done them at Roulette and the Vital Arts Center in N.Y.C., at the Cal Arts Annual New Music Festival in Los Angeles, the New Performance Gallery and the SF Art Institute in San Francisco, and on the Berkeley Contemporary Chamber Players concert here in my home town. We have even performed them on the radio (!), where we brought in a small wooden plank and did the first movement on Charles Amirkhanian's KPFA (Berkeley) new music show. Anita has also done many workshops and classes based on the work. Two percussionists have been instrumental in the development of the piece, William Winant in California, and Gary Schall in New York. Both are extremely sensitive and highly capable young players who have been able to become more than simply accompanists, integrating their movements and stage persona with the overall theatrical aspect of the piece.

There have been some interesting problems in presenting the piece, mostly due to the "multi-media" nature of the work. Although the piece has been accepted and programmed easily in new music environments, the dance world seems to have had more difficulty understanding the nature of the collaboration. While it is a natural step for a musician to appreciate the dancer's role in realizing a notated score, and choreographing her movements in conjunction with that material,

dancers, many of whom cannot read music and have only rudimentary rhythmic training, seem to require quite a bit of explanation as to "who did what". Frankly, this always surprises me, for it seems that proper movement training should include a sophisticated musical understanding, as is the case in the Indian, Indonesian, and African art/theatre traditions, where the educations of a musician and a dancer have quite a bit in common. Fortunately for me, Anita is not only able to read music, but to read and memorize extremely complex music. I can't help feeling that this integration of our two artistic disciplines points to a new and exciting collaborative future -- one in which the traditional roles of music as accompaniment to dance, often rather superficially "interpretive" choreography, will change considerably.

To this date, Anita has been the only dancer/choreographer able to perform the work, though several others have tried. From my admittedly naive perspective, I think this has to do with her musical training, prodigious tap technique, and physical stamina. It always occurs to me while watching the piece that it's like watching an NBA playoff game, just in terms of the tremendous physical feat she performs over the thirty plus minutes of the work's duration.

Something significant has happened as well over the course of the work's performance history. When we premiered it, we were both dissatisfied with a kind of distinction we perceived between her body and her feet. The rhythms were accurate, and the choreography was quite beautiful, but there was a kind of synergy missing, that, over a few years, has finally happened, and indeed developed into something more than simply choreography and tap. The last few times I have

seen the work, I've been quite moved by the way Anita's entire body creates the feet rhythms, and the way that those same rhythms seem to naturally generate the movement. After so many performances, Anita has integrated the various parts of the work into a new and unique whole, one I think we both anticipated intuitively, but whose eventual manifestation neither of us could have foreseen.

V. Future experiments

My own plans for future pieces with Anita are quite exciting to me. I have given some thought to the compositional possibilities of the medium, and even if I never get around to most of them, I hope somebody will. The first, and most obvious, is the development of the timbral possibilities of tap, both acoustically and electronically. Like Chris Brown's well-known "percussion-piano" (a kind of prepared electric piano, where each key makes a different percussive timbre), the tap dancer might traverse a wide timbral palate by simply preparing the floor. Different shoes and shoe coverings (for example, in the second movement Anita often muffles her feet with socks over her shoes) present quite many more possibilities.

One of my main interests concerns the electronic processing of tap sounds. Using quite inexpensive PZM transducer contact mikes (believe it or not, you can buy these for 20 cents apiece, and they are terrific!), I have been able to use the tap sounds both as triggering information for computer and analog sound hardware, and have been able to electronically process the taps themselves. A major piece in ~~the series~~ ^{Progress} for Anita uses a computer controlled compositional and sound processing system to "read and remember" the sonic and rhythmic information of her feet, and play it back in several kinds of transformations. The rhythmic material in this

piece is based closely on the melodic shapes of the classical Hebrew cantillation (tropes) of a seventeen-verse section of the Torah. It's called Tap Dancing Through the Torah, and will make use of the electronic music and computer composition systems we have been designing at the Mills College Center for Contemporary Music in Oakland, California.

Finally, I have recently completed a new work for Anita, entitled "Milwaukee Blues", in which my intent was to explore a more substantial rhythmic counterpoint. This work uses two tap dancers (ideally, one on tape), and it is inspired in part by some of Anita's ensemble choreography. The work is a set of variations on an old string band tune for the two dancers and five saxophone players (two altos, three tenors), in which each variation explores a different rhythmic concept, though each variation is quite short. Example 4, from the introduction to the second variation, shows one of the concepts which has interested me, the use of what is called in gamelan inval or koteckon -- in which two superimposed, usually alternating rhythms, create a third, far more complex sonority.

List of Examples

Example 1: Measures 2,20, 42, and 58, from "Bemsha Swing", 1st movement of Three Monk Tunes by Larry Polansky

Example 2: "Round Midnight", second movement of Three Monk Tunes

Example 3: Section XIII, from "I Mean You", third movement of Three Monk Tunes

Example 4: excerpt from the introduction to Variation II of Milwaukee Blues, for two tap dancers and five saxophones, by Larry Polansky