

Dumbarton Oaks Concerto by Igor Stravinsky

Analysis by David Mitchell

Stravinsky wrote the *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto* from 1937 to 1938. It was commissioned by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Wood Bliss to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. Stravinsky wrote this piece when his daughter was dying of tuberculosis. Dumbarton Oaks is the name of the estate in Washington D.C. where Mr. and Mrs. Bliss lived. Stravinsky met them there in 1937 to talk about the commission and he was impressed by the gardens that surround the estate. I believe Stravinsky managed to capture the mood of the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks in this piece. The light-bouncy mood of the first and second movements reminds one of a garden walk. But at the end of the first and second movements there is a sad slower modularity section that is uncharacteristic of the light-bouncy nature of the piece in general. Could this be a reflection of the sad circumstances in Stravinsky's life at the time he wrote this piece? It would be difficult to go through something like that and not have it affect your music. This slower section modulates to the dominant of the next movement and these sections prepare the ear for the next key.

The first movement is in the key of Eb major. It is in the key of D major at rehearsal number seven. It returns to the key of Eb major at rehearsal number eleven. It modulates to the dominant of Bb major at rehearsal number twenty-eight to prepare for the second movement that is in the key of Bb major. The second movement is in the key of Bb major. And the third movement is in the key of Eb major. A Shenkerian analysis

would consider the entire piece a tonic prolongation of Eb major. The key of Bb would be considered a neighboring key to the tonic key of Eb Major.

The end of both the first and second movements are marked *attaca*. I think the effect of *attaca* is lost when you're listening to a recording of a performance. But it would probably be very effective in a live performance. Also the rehearsal numbers do not change at the beginning of each movement. The rehearsal numbers are numbered one through ninety. This is more evidence that Stravinsky thought of this piece as a whole unit with the movement numbers marking changes in mood.

This piece is a concerto in style of Bach's Brandenburg concertos. Each instrument has its time to be the soloist during this piece, but the group is in consort. There is no consistent soloist who is pitted against a larger group or a small group that is pitted against a larger group. The entire ensemble is working in concert and shares the theme equally. Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3* has a similar structure. And the rhythmic energy is similar between *Dumbarton Oaks* and Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No.3*, but Stravinsky does not borrow any thematic material from Bach's Concerto just the general structure and rhythmic energy.

Thematically, this piece is in the style of Bach. Stravinsky introduces a central thematic idea at the beginning of each movement and it is developed throughout the movement. The single theme or affection is repeated and developed throughout each movement. This gives each movement a unifying character. It also makes the slow section at the end of each movement even more unusual. The theme and rhythmic character of the third movement sounds like Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. He must have borrowed from himself. Stravinsky gives the third movement a unifying character

by using this repeated staccato eighth note figure from the *Rite of Spring*. It is introduced in measure one of the third movement and is used throughout the movement.

Rhythmically, this piece is very interesting. Stravinsky ties across the bar lines in the first and third movements to obscure the meter. He uses changing meter in the first and third movement. But the second movement is in 3/8. Stravinsky seems to be using changing meter in order to create a rhythmic acceleration. He is also subdividing the beat in some measures to create composite meters. In the third measure after rehearsal three, Stravinsky subdivides the next two measures into a 2+3+2+2 pattern. At five measures after rehearsal four, he subdivides the next two measures into a 2+2+3 pattern. It seems to be a retrograde of the previous rhythmic subdivision. At rehearsals twenty-one and twenty-four, he subdivides a 9/16 measures into a 2+2+2+3 grouping. In the second movement, Stravinsky does not subdivide the measures as often. In the third movement, he returns to subdividing the beat at two measures before rehearsal fifty-eight. These composite measures give the piece an intense rhythmic drive. At rehearsal eighty-four Stravinsky begins tying eight notes across bar lines. The strings are grouped in two and the wind instruments are grouped in three. So, rehearsal eighty-four is three against two. This is something we can borrow and use in our own compositions. When you move away from tonality it is one of the primary devices for increasing intensity.

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