

## W. Francis McBeth's *Masque*: A brief commentary

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Francis McBeth's *Masque* was commissioned by the University of Central Arkansas (State College of Arkansas, at the time) for the opening of their new fine arts auditorium in 1968. The first performance, by the college's concert band, was conducted by Homer Brown. The work is published by Southern Music Company, and a note on the score fixes its length at seven minutes and fifteen seconds.

The title refers to a type of courtly entertainment much favored in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, involving acting, singing, ballet, acrobatics, and elaborate costumes and sets. The McBeth work aims to capture the spirit of those diversions without any specific reference.

*Masque* is both a much-loved and much-maligned work; the latter, because of the persistence of a single rhythm throughout its outer sections; the former, on account of arguably beautiful contrapuntal invention and formal elegance. In this short commentary I want to focus on the work's merits, arguing that its detractors have missed the composer's point – possibly because of a rash of bad performances in which the snare drum was allowed to dominate the stage and distract the ear from the music's substance.

A C minor composition that ends in C major, *Masque* is in rounded three-part form, with the middle section differentiated from the flanking sections by its slower tempo and the absence of the persistent rhythm mentioned above. That middle (developmental) section shares primary thematic material with the outer sections; in fact, the entire composition, except for a chorale-like subsidiary theme which is severely truncated in the reprise, is a more-or-less continuous development of a three-note motive sounded in the work's opening measure.

The overall form may be outlined as follows:

**1–91** “A” section, subdivided as follows:

**1–2** Introductory, setting forth the primary motive and introducing the motor rhythm

**3–21** Theme I, first statement, in C minor; ending on a sort of half cadence

**22–38** Theme I, second statement, in G minor; serving as a modulatory transition into:

**39–58** Theme II (Chorale-style), C Mixolydian

**57–69** Closing of Theme II, elided (note the measure numbering)

**70–91** Bridge to slower “B” section, beginning with a “crisis chord” and featuring a long *diminuendo cum rallentando*

**92–135** “B” section (mm. 117–35 are a long bridge back to “A,” culminating in another “crisis chord”)

**136–241** Reprise of “A,” subdivided as follows:

**136–77** Reprise of Theme I, two statements, reharmonized (C minor persists), reorchestrated, and slightly extended

**178–86** Theme II, F Mixolydian, considerably truncated

**187–94** Another crisis-transition with three impressive *forte-piano-crescendo* figures

**195–241** Extended coda, beginning in F minor and featuring an F minor setting of Theme I, a section in which F major and F minor are superimposed, a protracted linear progression and an ending in C major

This early McBeth work betrays a composer possessed of a fertile musical imagination, respectful of historical antecedents, and in full command of a potent compositional technique he had refined under the tutelage of Clifton Williams. That technique, grounded in Fux-style linear

counterpoint, is marshaled impressively in the building of a large-scale work based on a motive as brief (and as promising) as the one Beethoven used for his fifth symphony's opening movement (although in its shape it is surely more Sibelian than Beethovenian – cf. the opening of the Finnish master's Violin Concerto!). The two main themes of the work set each other off in high relief, and the slower “B” section occupies the position of the traditional development section (and it is thoroughly developmental in character). The coda – constituting, again as in Beethoven, a “second development” – contains the same sort of harmonic surprises we expect in Beethoven: most notably, an unexpected cadence on a D major chord, and a modally ambivalent approach to the final Picardy third.

Provided the listener – and, of course, the performance – is focused on these linear/contrapuntal/harmonic/formal aspects of the composition, the ostinato percussion rhythm is no problem: it becomes, in fact, a virtue, furnishing an unexpected and utterly compelling canvas upon which the composer's broader strokes are laid. To press this promising analogy just a little: only in certain abstract expressionist paintings is the canvas *ever* allowed to assume a position of primary importance – and (as the composer himself has declared unequivocally) Francis McBeth is no abstract expressionist! And that, I believe, is the key to an effective performance of a much-misunderstood work: the percussion must occupy the background not the foreground of this excellent music.

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