

A Conductor's Outline of Frank Erickson's *Toccata for Band* David Goza

One of the things that I admire about Frank Erickson's compositions generally is that they sound as though they were written by a really capable music theorist. The result is a body of works that tend to be convincing and gratifying in their key relationships, counterpoint, voice leading and structural integrity. These things are all true of his *Toccata for Band* (Bourne, 1957). Although the work was obviously written with younger players in mind, it is more than respectable in terms of thematic invention, formal innovation and surface appeal. Organized in rudimentary sonata form, the *Toccata* is a wonderful teaching piece, affording opportunities to demonstrate the psychological "weight" of various key centers *vis-à-vis* each other; those contrasting keys are expressed by thematic material that seems well-designed to elucidate more subtle acoustical contrasts.

The instrumentation of the *Toccata* includes undivided flute, oboe, bass clarinet, bassoon, baritone, tuba and string bass parts. The clarinets, cornets and trombones are divided in the traditional three ways. The saxophone choir consists of single alto, tenor and baritone saxophone parts, with alto clarinet suggested as a doubling of the alto saxophone. The horns are divided into two parts. The percussion *batterie* includes snare drum, bass drum, cymbals and timpani.

Exposition (mm. 1-90)

Theme I (mm. 1-72, *Allegro non troppo*, D Dorian progressing to C Dorian, mostly $\frac{2}{4}$ time)
Theme I is a complex assemblage of contrasting materials in several distantly-related key centers, one of which is visited only briefly. Its form may be outlined as A-B-A-B₁-C-A₁.

A (mm. 1-8, D Dorian with Picardy thirds, $\frac{2}{4}$ time, *forte*) These eight measures consist of two almost identical four-bar phrases, with the second phrase melodically adjusted in its final two bars so as to end an octave higher than the first. The range of the melody is a major ninth, from low subtonic to high tonic of the Dorian mode on D. This portion of Theme I includes three significant motives, which I have identified as *x*, *y* and *z*:



The accompaniment for this part of Theme I includes a Latin-style $\frac{8}{8}$ rhythm, with strong impulses on the 1st, 4th and 7th eighth notes. It is important that the *tenuto* quarter notes in measure 3 be played without accents.

B (mm. 9-29, C Mixolydian, $\frac{2}{4}$ time, *mezzo piano*) This portion of Theme I covers the range of a major thirteenth, from low subtonic to high dominant of the Mixolydian mode on C. In addition to the change of key, there is an abrupt shift in melodic contour, texture and mood, from the springing, athletic, *tutti* writing of the first eight measures to music of a more soloistic, sinuous, polyphonic, *legato* character. These contrasts notwithstanding, the kinship between the "A" and "B" sections is thoroughgoing, as will become apparent below.

The first four notes of this section are a rhythmically-redistributed presentation of motive z, which appears in a more obvious guise in measures 18 f. (there the motive appears in augmentation; note also its appearance *with its cadence note* in measures 27 ff.), and the melodic contour in measures 12 f. is a temporal augmentation of motive y.

There is a notable instance of “contour preservation” between this:



and this – with temporal values doubled:



It is thus obvious that, despite the notable contrasts in character between the “A” and “B” portions of Theme I, motivic unity is a central compositional concern. This is reflected in the fact that over the span of these 21 measures, the music gives the impression of being “organic” in a way that is not particularly apparent in the music that precedes and follows it.

Like the melody of the “A” section, this music begins on “and” of beat 1. This will also be true of the counterpoint that begins in measure 10, the short bridge passage at measure 51, and all phrases and subphrases of the second theme, which commences at measure 73 (as well as its counterpoints which begin in the following measure).

The phrasing of this portion of Theme I is more sophisticated than that of the “A” section, owing primarily to the fact that the quarter notes in measures 10 f. represent an augmentation of the eighth notes that could otherwise have done service and yielded a perfectly regular eight-measure phrase – this:



instead of this:



The expansion to quarter notes also affords an opportunity for true independence of the beautiful counterpoint in clarinets 2 & 3, beginning in measure 10.

A (mm. 30-37, D Dorian with Picardy thirds, $\frac{2}{4}$ time, *forte*, identical to mm. 1-8)

B₁ (mm. 38-50, C Mixolydian, $\frac{2}{4}$ time, *forte*) This section begins with a rewriting of the material in measures 9-17. Adjustments include a cymbal crash at the outset, a radical reorchestration of the material for a brilliant effect, a rethinking of rhythmic ideas in the first three measures, a rhythmic adjustment in the “motive y” material (mm. 41 & 43) and many parallel triads, often in root position. Measures 47-51 consist of apparently new material; in fact, they include an inversion of the material in measures 41 & 43 (m. 47), a

harmonized version of motive *y* (m. 48), and an intervallically-compressed, syncopated inversion of motive *x* (mm. 49 f. – the rhythm is now the *Bulgarian* version of $\frac{8}{8}$ time: 3 + 2 + 3). These four measures furnish a way (not quite a “modulation”) into a remote tonal area.

C (mm. 51-54, G \flat , Mixolydian/Lydian, $\frac{3}{4}$ time then $\frac{2}{4}$ time) In its initial presentation, this four-bar passage amounts to little more than a bridge; later in the composition, however, this music will assume a much more important, quasi-developmental role. The passage begins with an intervallically-compressed presentation of motive *x* in low brasses and reeds (whose line subtly forecasts the second theme), and the last two measures are an adjusted return of material from six measures earlier.

A₁ (mm. 55-72, C Dorian with Picardy third at m. 62, $\frac{2}{4}$ time, *forte*) This passage, which begins with an attention-grabbing wrenching of tonality from a key center a tritone away, is essentially a transition to the second theme. Here, the opening material is accompanied by a new underpinning in its first four measures (notated details must be faithfully rendered in performance: e.g. *only* the timpani player is allowed a *crescendo* in the first two measures). In measure 58, the combination of melodic half note and empty fifth in the syncopated accompanying voices is striking.

I suggest that the best way to understand the conclusion of this section is to recognize a phrase elision at measure 62, in which case the remainder of the section continues in a fairly regular and balanced fashion. The section ends with a prolonged half cadence, so the caesura before measure 73 – which resolves the dominant chord – must be a slight one.

It seems worth pointing out that the organization of Theme I in its entirety bears a superficial resemblance to rondo form.

Theme II (mm. 73-90, *Andante con moto*, C major, $\frac{4}{4}$ time) In high contrast to the more complex structure of Theme I, Theme II is a single parallel period with a half-cadence extension.

Antecedent Phrase (mm. 73-80, C major yielding to E \flat major, *mezzo forte*) The music of this first phrase falls repeatedly on the dominant chords of its two keys (m. 80 contains *two* dominant chords, one in each of the two key centers of these eight measures). The melodic contour in the fourth beat of measure 73 going to the downbeat of measure 74 is drawn from the “B” material in measures 10 f. Each of the antecedent phrase’s two-measure subphrases covers an octave, from low dominant to high dominant of the C major scale (it thus represents the plagal position of a mode). Remarkably enough, this beautiful theme is built up from a mere three pitch classes (G, C & D) and their analogues in E \flat major.

Consequent Phrase (mm. 81-90, C major with half-cadence extension, *mezzo forte* with *fortissimo* climax and *morendo* ending) Here the music remains in C major, breaks out of its stasis and achieves a quality of ecstasy, heightened by some attractive Lydian harmonic inflections in measures 85 f. The downbeat of measure 88 should be understood as a phrase elision. The dynamic inflections of measures 83-90 must be handled with utmost care and exactitude, and there must be *no* caesura at the end of measure 90. I also see no need to impose any broadening of tempo in measures 89 f., such as I have occasionally heard in performance.

It may be said generally of the two contrasting themes of the Exposition, that Erickson has adopted virtually the reverse of European classical procedure, where the primary theme is ordinarily the more nearly self-contained of the two and the second theme area is usually represented by a group of themes.

Development (mm. 91-122, *Allegro non troppo*, C Mixolydian, $\frac{2}{4}$ time, *piano* and *mezzo piano* with a *crescendo* through the second subsection) This section of music behaves like a formal development section, even though a more thoroughgoing development is being held in reserve for later in the composition. The return to the faster tempo represents also a return to the “B” material of measures 9 ff., and it is presented in two subsections:

Subsection 1 (mm. 91-114) This passage begins as a continuation of the music that preceded it: the dominant prolongation that began in measure 89 is still in force. Here, three 8-measure phrases – each of which is to be further understood as a pair of 4-bar phrases – cadence finally on the tonic, as in measure 29.

Subsection 2 (mm. 115-22) is clearly retransitional. The syncopated figure is spun off the cadence figure in measures 113 f. The *crescendo* through this section is a slight one, partly achieved through the addition of instruments, and must be regulated carefully in order to have its intended effect. Accents should be limited to one every two measures, as printed.

Recapitulation (mm. 123-204)

Theme I (mm. 123-43, D Dorian to C Mixolydian, $\frac{2}{4}$ time) This section begins as a truncated recapitulation of the primary theme: measures 123-47 are identical to measures 30-54.

Interjected development section (mm. 144-87) Although the music continues in measures 144-47 as at 55 ff., the “left turn” at measure 148, where the music suddenly swerves into E \flat major, forces us to reconsider its role (the music that begins at 148 is obviously a continuation). In retrospect, it is clear that we have embarked on an interjected development section of some length and weight. This includes a visiting of F \sharp Mixolydian in measures 151-53 (note the noble-sounding fanfare in these measures), additional metrical adjustments in 153 f., a return of the syncopated rhythm of measures 115 ff. in a new guise (mm. 159 ff.), much newly-composed elaboration of material encountered earlier, and a brilliant arrival on D Mixolydian at measure 171, where the music is finally permitted to celebrate full tilt as juxtaposed portions of several of the work’s themes march on apace.

A cymbal crash interrupts the rejoicing at measure 179, inaugurating a quartal-flavored unison, decelerating transitional passage with a beautifully-composed and very powerful climax at measure 184. The broad-paced music that ensues is itself a continuation of the transition begun five measures earlier, and initially alternates between two ways of harmonizing the tonic pitch of the piece. The tritone-related chords that complete this passage (mm. 186 f.) are particularly fine and affecting.

Two performance-related comments about this transition seem to be in order. One is that the *ritardando* indicated in measure 182 must begin *exactly* where printed, and must be handled in such a way that the new tempo at measure 184 sounds as though it emerged naturally out of that *ritardando*. The other concerns the *diminuendo* that begins in measure 186. I propose that the best way to handle this is for the first half note to be played *fff*, the second one *ff*, the third one *f*, and the fourth one *mf*, which leads naturally to the accompaniment’s *mp* at measure 188. If this *diminuendo* is distributed in this way, the structural result is compelling.

Theme II (mm. 188-204, *Andante con moto*, D major, $\frac{4}{4}$ time)

Antecedent Phrase (mm. 188-95) The recapitulation of this phrase is completely regular, with the key centers now on D major and F major, and with half-cadences as before.

Consequent Phrase (mm. 196-204) This portion of the second theme's recap is likewise structurally regular, but with non-structural enhancements – notably the imitative counterpoint between mid- and high-range voices in the first three measures and the fine line of descending eighth notes in measure 199. The secondary dominant harmonies in the second half of measure 199 are perhaps the harmonic focal point of the entire composition. A mid-bar phrase elision at measure 203 (hence the $\frac{2}{4}$ measure) inaugurates a brief and powerful codetta, with darker-hued chords (C major, F major) yielding finally to the D-major tonic.

The D-major appearance of Theme II can be used effectively in rehearsal as a way to heighten students' awareness of key contrasts. Simply ask them to play measures 73-76, and then to play measures 188-91. The chances are very good that every one of them will notice the "brightness" of the latter as compared to the former. Then make the point that sonata form consists not of a collection of tunes that a composer pours into a predetermined mold, but a tonal argument from a primary key area, through a number of secondary key areas, back to the tonic (in this case the tonic *major*, as with so much "classical" composition).

One can make a parallel point by exploring the relative "darkness" of the appearance of Theme IA in measures 55 ff. as compared to its initial presentation in D Dorian. I believe that this dimension of music-making is of paramount importance, and it is one that is all too easily lost sight of in the crush of contest preparation.

In a concert program of reasonable length, Frank Erickson's *Toccata for Band* makes a very handsome companion piece for his beautiful C-minor *Air*, written a year earlier.