

THE CONTOUR OF DEVELOPMENTAL MUSIC: ANALOG OF THE PLOT DIAGRAM

by

Nick Bellardini

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by

Nick Bellardini

Greenville, NC

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Approved by:

Dr. Mark Taggart

Fletcher School of Music, Theory/Composition

**Abstract:**

In my studies in music, I have always found the programmatic aspect to be powerful. Within my music, I always strive for a programmatic aspect, tying in motifs to stage stories or recall past events. Overall, the driving force of music provides, in many cases, an analog for a plot contour commonly found in stories. In this recital, two pieces stylistically do not lend themselves to plot contours, while the capstone Classical pieces both demonstrate a climax through development, using recurring themes. While music is not necessarily definitive in its programmatic capabilities, the final work is intentionally defined by its narrative. The wordless styles of music carry followable patterns that in essence describe characters. With repetition in music, these abstract “characters” go through syntactic developments akin to a story.

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## Introduction

Music is ultimately an art form that derives most of its effect from the audience's ability to retain and recall previously heard content. For many people, this is a reasonable skill to acquire—the non-musician can easily recall the verse of a song or point out the similarities between two songs. Most of this recognition occurs on the surface of music, which is often the melodic content. A characteristic of melodies is that, for the average person, they are typically both singable, and memorable to a certain extent; however, popular music tends to state these melodies, and develop them minimally over a repetition or bridge. One of the boundaries between popular music and art music is the amount of self-referential development is put into a work—oftentimes, art music will cater specifically to a climactic developmental section, in which the themes and melodies heard previously are recalled, altered slightly, and then extrapolated upon by common musical devices such as prolongation (holding the same chord for longer than expected), or diminution/augmentation (changing the character of a melody by doubling or halving the note values). The most common musical device for programmatic (narrative) development, is much more literal, and was pioneered in the Romantic era in the search for new mediums of expression in opera.

The leitmotiv is a musical unit (often a melody or phrase, but sometimes a simple motive) that is attributed to a character and used throughout a work to refer to the character. The works of Richard Wagner popularized this term and technique, as in his operas a selection of motives would interact, often making the majority of the melodic musical material. These motives could be ascribed to characters, an event, or an emotion—the significance of these motives is that within the music, they directly parallel the story being told. The effect of this is an abstract medium of storytelling that still has clear contours and events, but develop in ways that standard narrative stories cannot achieve through dialogue and narration alone. Providing another way to create comprehensible interactions, the leitmotiv has since developed to be a prevalent tool in film scoring, but also provides a general medium of storytelling as an analog of narrative styles.

***Reroute, Passerby, Trombone Sonatas, and a Brief Introduction to Programmatic Musical Devices***

The first three pieces of my program have little intended program. The first and third pieces mentioned above are Jazz-styled tunes, and as a result do not have room for programmatic development. These pieces were composed as a testament to my time with the Jazz program at ECU, playing in ensembles for 3 years. The jazz style is largely improvisatory but in a systematic way; however, this 'system' provides a composer no means to create a meaningful narrative over the course of a tune. Unless specifically arranged, most jazz performances are impromptu, setting a few basic guidelines before the tune begins, and the music itself is non-specific, communicative, and reactionary. The intent with more classical styles is when recording different takes, the piece will hopefully sound close to identical—performance consistency is treasured. In Jazz however, every performance (and recording) is unique, and the beauty of the art form lies in its flexibility and spontaneous cohesion. The trombone sonata is a piece that was commissioned directly by the performer 2 years ago, and upon rewriting the second movement, found that on its own, the developmental characteristics treasured in programmatic music are present. The melody sung by the trombone is slow, lyrical, and overall consonant—audiences have had no trouble identifying the melody and its development during the piece. Like many classical pieces, the second movement of the trombone sonata is in an ABA form, in which the B section (lead in by the piano after the repetition of the opening melody) develops the melody. As the melody is rather simple (and as a result of this, identifiable), I made a conscious effort to retain the rhythmic identity of the melody, and only alter pitches. Musical development prizes committal to resolving altered pitches and one of the most powerful methods of contrasts, modulations, arise as a result of these alterations. Modulations describe a process of anticipating a new key center through a resolution of the altered pitch—instead of a changing chord, the modulation presents a new landscape for the music, similar to how a plane takes to the sky between its time on the ground. Like the plane, common practice in music requires a return to the main key, or the runway, after taking off, or modulating. The language of the piece is largely chromatic, and these modulations are intended not to provide forward motion for the melody, but instead stagnate the music,

reflect on itself, and proceed after coming back to the original key area. These modulations are not in the typical Classical style, and change according to the intervals of a diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord; this type of intervallic relationship between the two key areas is a third, contrary to the common modulation to the fifth. Relationships of a third between the key centers (known as mediant modulations) tend to not have as many common tones—with 12 key signatures and thus 12 sets of transposed intervals, common tones tend to make modulations more subtle. Opting for the more dramatic mediant modulations sufficiently develops the melody, provides a modal contrast (the A sections are in a brighter, major mode, while the B section is darker, in a minor mode), and is more recognizable and simple for the audience, aiding the programmatic aspect. While this piece was not originally written with a program in mind, the differences in modality between the A and B sections designate a clear rising and falling action, like plot diagrams used when studying narratives. As a result of this, the character of the melody, and the ethereal nature of the piano, I tend to associate this piece with a narrative of an inner struggle, specifically a soldier who has regretted his past. The development depicts his struggle, rising in tension, but with the recapitulation, the effect of overcoming this lingering regret is presented in the final A, a slight variation of the opening material with a triumphant ending.

### **Narrative Intention Within *The Mother Suite***

The final piece of my project was an intentional, expansive suite for 11 instruments that means to tell a story. On the premiere of my recital, the piece was accompanied by images drawn by Maccoy Kerrigan, a friend who was wholly involved in the creation of the story this piece tells. The Mother Suite tells a story of a Mother, her daughter, and three orphans and their fates. Unlike the trombone sonata, the story proceeds as follows: a widowed Mother, left with her daughter, has taken in three orphans left on the street. Though less than affluent, the family grows close amidst growing wartime tensions. The village they lived in was soon bombed, flattening buildings, traumatizing the four children, and killing their Mother. Unable to cope nor see any sign of hope, the eldest blood daughter takes the younger orphans away from the rubble, into local woods. Driven mad by loss and misdirecting responsibility, the eldest

kills the youngest, infantile orphan in the woods before breaking down and collapsing. Processing only immediate danger, the two remaining orphans head away from their past and sister together.

Overall, this story is portrayed across 17 minutes of music, divided into 7 parts. The first three parts establish main motives that occur throughout the work, themes that are transformed, and the overall musical setting of the piece. The Mother Suite is largely tonal, with the exception of the sixth movement, representing the homicide. Tonal music includes common chords and common resolutions, and is most familiar type of harmony to the average person; with a desire to apply Jazz voicings to a Classical work, as well as Jazz harmonic choices, the result is a piece that contains ambiguous harmony more often than not, obscuring tension and direction as a movement develops. This choice of harmony was deliberate, as the melodic content and key centers within each movement are less fluid than the trombone sonata; to balance this, much of the programmatic development in this piece stems from the various leitmotifs written into the score. In both presentations of this work, the harmonic aspects were specifically highlighted as demonstrating Jazz principles of extension, creating richer chords.

First, there are melodies that represent characters—the main melody of the second movement refers to the Mother as a character, and first movement's melody paired with this is meant to be understood to represent the surviving orphans. The main melody of the third movement represents the youngest orphan who is killed—this is symbolically represented in the piece at the opening of movement 7 in which the movement 3 melody is transposed into a minor modality, contrasting the bright character when it was introduced. Movement 5's main melody represents the eldest daughter, who is shown to descend into madness as the movement progresses; the character is represented as breaking in the closing section of movement 5 as the different melodies occurring in the work appear simultaneously, interweaving at the piece's climax as the eldest struggles to find a proper avenue for her impending meltdown. The melody in movement 1 does not represent a character, but rather the setting of the village the characters are in. The motive last appears in movement 4 narratively, as a reminder of the city before the rumbling of the timpani (bombs) leads to cacophony (the motive briefly appears in movement 7 to an

even lesser extent, simply as a reminder of where the piece started.) Lastly, there is a slow intervallic motive that is near impossible to locate without the sheet music available. Highlighting the dissonant intervals of a tritone and minor second, the motive rises in the background of every movement except movement 6—in this movement, using post-tonal language, the set of intervals becomes the harmonic basis of the movement, guiding the pitch content, intervals, and most importantly, connecting all movements of the piece regardless of pitch language.

**Conclusion:**

Overall, the amount of nuance and symbolic representation that was attempted in *The Mother Suite* involved more conscious decisions than any other piece with regards to its construction and blueprints. The piece was written based on a narrative and the analogs of the plot diagram are intentionally demonstratable within its construction. While the stories may be abstract without proper introduction, music is capable of moving all people physically, and emotionally—the exposition reveals the setting, or language of the piece, while the development expounds on this, introducing conflict and tension that is oftentimes released at the end of a work with closure.



**Performers:**

Reroute (2021)

Joshua Rorrer – Alto Saxophone

Jacob Abolos – Bass

Tucker Sanders – Drums

Sonata for Trombone (2019-20)

Davis Miles – Trombone

Alisa Gilliam – Piano

Passerby (2021)

Joshua Rorrer – Tenor Saxophone

Jacob Abolos – Bass

Tucker Sanders – Drums

The Mother Suite (drafted 2015, rewritten 2020-21)

Sydney Neri – Flute

Joshua Rorrer – Soprano Saxophone

Cameron Stephenson – Bassoon

Damon Ambrose – French Horn

Amari Lewis – Euphonium

Camden Stohl – Violin

Madelene Stohl – Viola

Jake Thompson – Double Bass

David Lee – Timpani

Karla Lee – Castanets

Luis Pineda Jr. – Bells