

Dudley Buck's *Grand Sonata in E-flat*: The Architecture of an American Masterpiece

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While a junior or senior in high school, I found a newish LP in the local public library: *Fugues, Fantasia and Variations—Nineteenth-Century American Concert Organ Music* (New World Records, NW280). Dated 1976, it was no doubt intended as part of the vast tribute to the Bicentennial that many of us remember. Richard Morris was the organist, and he played the 1876 Hook & Hastings instrument in St. Joseph's Old Cathedral, Buffalo, New York.

Dubbed the Centennial Organ because it had stood in the eastern end of the huge Main Building of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the four-manual instrument has been in Buffalo since 1877. It underwent change when it was electrified in 1925, but is substantially in conformity with its original design. Most recently, in 2001, it was restored by Andover and rededicated by Thomas Murray.

The Hook was the perfect organ for the repertoire, and the performance brought out the character of the instrument convincingly. But I was instantly captivated by the first piece. Taking up the whole of Side A was the *Grand Sonata in E-flat*, opus 22, by Dudley Buck. I was already a devotee of Bach, and to my ears the opening strains of the Buck were improbably sweet, heavy with a Victorian lyricism, very like a forbidden fruit. I was hooked.

Since then, I have treasured my own copy of this LP, and often re-read Barbara Owen's comprehensive accompanying essay, which expanded the record jacket from single to double format. But my appreciation of the *Grand Sonata* has matured from a slightly guilty Victorian pleasure to serious musical appreciation. The work, in fact, bears hallmarks of advanced compositional techniques, and, indeed, points a way forward in American musical composition.

Cyclical structure

In 1982, Jerome Butera (editor of this journal) successfully defended a thesis at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago for his DMA degree. This thesis was devoted, in large part, to the *Grand Sonata*. He gives a clear, detailed account of the piece, situating it in nineteenth-century European practice. The thesis remains the most complete account of the work written to date.

But I am not aware of any study that points out the cyclical nature of this sonata. That is to say, each of its four movements begins with some reference to a particular shared musical idea. It is a simple idea, to be sure; but its presence adds luster to the first major organ sonata composed in America. It links the Buck piece, on a technical level, to the symphonies of Viërne, albeit on a more modest scale. At the same time, it places it on a more elevated architectonic plane than the early Widor symphonies.

The piece's stated key is E-flat major. Buck begins with a rising E-flat major scale (Example 1). Then he colors the scale with the lowered chromatic neighbors of scale degrees 3, 5, and 6 (Example 2).

These color-tones are commonplace in Romantic music, simply ornamenting the third of the tonic and subdominant harmonies, and hinting at the V/V. With these extra notes, we can form these typical gestures of Victorian parlor music, both of which are common in the *Grand Sonata* (Example 3).

Nor does this scale, of itself, form a motif that is exactly repeated through the piece. However, as we shall see, its presence is subtly pervasive. The rising chromatic scale is basic to every movement of the *Grand Sonata* and contributes to the listener's conviction that the piece hangs together, and thence to the work's enduring popularity.

First movement

The motif is heard at the very outset of the work, in the first movement, marked *allegro con brio*. Here, one must respectfully disagree with the liner notes in the Morris album: the movement is neither especially a "virtuoso" one nor, most definitely, "in free form." It is a textbook example of sonata-allegro form, and (in my opinion) at the high end of moderately difficult¹ (Example 4).

Note that the scalar material is in the tenor. This motif is echoed throughout the movement (Examples 5 and 6). Meanwhile, as mentioned, the movement hews closely to classical sonata-allegro form. The opening theme modulates to the dominant key of B-flat, whereupon we hear a second theme in a contrasting, lyrical style. (Here, we do not hear the cyclical material.) Energetic closing material rounds out the exposition. The development bandies the subsidiary ideas around in more or less remote keys, eventually leading us to the expected retransition and recapitulation in the tonic key. Note, as we end, the reappearance of motivic pitches in the pedal (Example 7).

Second movement

The second movement, an *andante espressivo* in the subdominant key of A-flat, prominently features the cyclical scalar material in both hands (Example 8). Cast in a spacious ABA song form, this movement not only calls to mind one of Beethoven's "hymnic adagios," but also the songs of Stephen Foster (who died in 1864) as well. It also reminds us of what made Buck so popular in his day.

The secret of his success lies in his feeling for the voice, for he is a vocal writer par excellence. This is a gift. One may study the range of the voice and try to master its capacities, but without the intuitive sensitivity to that which is vocal, the results are but poor; the music may be good but it does not fit the voice. This intuition is his in the highest degree, and his songs are rich, varied, picturesque, and stirring . . . [H]e does this so simply that we are unconscious of the mechanism, but feel the beauty and fitness of the whole.²

I agree in particular with the last sentence; to this day, we are likely to be "unconscious of the mechanism"! But we are not likely to miss Buck's rich lyricism; and the theme of this movement is the very quintessence of nineteenth-century American song, at least of a certain popular variety.

Third movement

The third movement of the *Grand Sonata*, marked *vivace non troppo*, is a well-known scherzo and trio, which is reprinted (minus its trio) in the second volume of *A Century of American Organ Music*, edited by Barbara Owen. It is in the relative-minor key of C minor; the trio is in the parallel key of C major. Here, the cyclical theme is visible in the rising scale with sharp fourth (Example 9), and elsewhere.

Last movement

The final movement, aptly described as a "rollicking fugue" in the Morris liner notes, begins with a strong evocation of the cyclical theme. I have always very much enjoyed these measures, but never understood why Buck chose to begin the way he did. I suggest that the notion of the cyclical theme solves this problem neatly (Example 10).

And of course, the "rollicking" fugue subject repeats the very same pitches of that long-ago tenor line in the first movement (Example 11). This theme is an elaboration of the patriotic song "Hail Columbia" (Example 12).

And we do not end this wonderful fugue—and sonata—without a final farewell to the motif in the last measures

Example 1. Unadorned E-flat major scale



Example 2. E-flat major scale with chromatic alterations



Example 3. Two idiomatic uses of the chromatic alterations



Example 4. *Grand Sonata*, first movement, measures 1–3



Example 5. *Grand Sonata*, first movement, measures 16–18



Example 6. *Grand Sonata*, first movement, measures 57–59



Example 7. *Grand Sonata*, first movement, measures 150–156



(Example 13). Note that this grand Victorian coda uses both of the little musical gestures shown at Example 2.

As mentioned earlier, this basic cyclical motive is not especially exciting. A rising major scale, wherein 3, 5, and 6 are colored by their lower neighbors, is not an innovation by any means; certainly it is not as historically important as the *Tristan* chord! But I think the evidence in the musical text is convincing. Dudley Buck consciously built his *Grand Sonata* with reference to that motif.

European influences

In retrospect, it is hardly a surprise. Buck went to Europe in 1858; he studied in Leipzig, Dresden, and Paris; his teachers included Beethoven's protégé Ignaz Moscheles, as well as the then-current Thomaskantor, Ernst Richter, and others. This kind of motivic compo-

sition was hardly new at that time; there had been Beethoven, for a start, with his *Pathétique* sonata and *Fifth Symphony*; there had been Berlioz, Liszt, Reubke. (Speaking of *Tristan*, Wagner completed that opera in 1859, having laid aside his work on the *Ring* cycle in 1857.) Buck returned to the States in 1862, and accepted a job in Hartford. He composed the *Grand Sonata* in 1865. So, although he would not have been in Europe for the premieres of the *Ring* operas, there is no doubt that motivic composition was *au courant* and made an impression.

In his doctoral thesis, Butera points to the *Grand Sonata* as combining formal procedures of German Romanticism with "sentimental Victorian" parlor music.³ These turn out to be two sides of the same coin: the "parlor" idea of a chromatically inflected scale pervasively

Example 8. *Grand Sonata*, second movement, measures 5–8



Example 9. *Grand Sonata*, third movement, measures 4–8



Example 10. *Grand Sonata*, fourth movement, measures 1–2



Example 11. *Grand Sonata*, fourth movement, measures 10–15



Example 12. Opening of “Hail Columbia”



influences the entire work in a decidedly Germanic fashion.

It is thus most worthwhile to point out the modest, but effective, use Buck made of this principle. He would continue to do so: in 1880, he composed *Scenes from Longfellow’s “Golden Legend”: A Symphonic Cantata*, where the *Leitmotiv* system is very much in evidence.⁴

In 1877, *Dwight’s Journal of Music* published a favorable review of Buck’s *Second Sonata*, opus 77, premiered by Clarence Eddy in Chicago in November 1877. It praised the work in part by drawing favorable parallels to the *Grand Sonata*, which the reviewer found “... somewhat too American in tone, uneven, and almost crude in places.” He also questions whether the classical sonata form is necessary, especially in light of Beethoven’s opus 111 and the six Mendelssohn organ sonatas.⁵ I do not question the youthful ebullience of the piece, its extroversion, cheeriness, and, in places, obvious lightness. However, such evaluations as “too American ... uneven, and almost crude” should not daunt us. Further study of this composer—this cosmopolitan, lyrically gifted, all-American classic—is very much in order.

Conclusion: looking forward

Whatever its faults, Buck’s *Grand Sonata* has staying power. Very popular in its day, it has enjoyed high visibility wherever there is interest in Victorian or 19th-century American organ music—this, despite the frequent reaction that the piece is “too American,” mere “parlor music,” or, in a word, *corny*.

But what do we have, at the end of the day? Do we have a monument to a departed esthetic—a period piece—a curious and lovely heirloom? Do we have something like an amiable and slightly eccentric uncle? I think not—definitely not. The *Grand Sonata* is altogether more important than that. I am indebted to an old friend and colleague for ex-

pressing this insight so clearly. Joshua Banks Mailman, who recently completed a Ph.D. in music theory at Eastman, listened to me play the opening bars of the piece over the phone during a wide-ranging conversation. His reaction was swift. “My gosh,” he said. “Did Scott Joplin ever hear that piece?”⁶

Ragtime. Of course! It is so far to the foreground that it has gone unmentioned. The spirited, syncopated, mildly chromatic opening fits the style admirably. It is important to remember that ragtime and jazz both have roots, in part, in the idioms of 19th-century parlor music and popular song—idioms also very much in evidence in the *Grand Sonata*. And, as for the chromatically inflected scale on which the piece is based, the blues scale is easily extracted from it.

Granted, there are features of ragtime, blues, and jazz that are not present: what Joplin calls the “weird and intoxicating effect”⁷ is absent, among many other things. The piece is an ancestor, nothing more; it represents one of the streams of influence of these later styles. It seems to me that we organists have tended to overlook this.

Butera’s thesis accurately points out many salient features of this work, including both “conservative” and “progressive” elements. Among the former, he points out the use of sonata-allegro form; the four-movement plan of fast-slow-scherzo-fast; the employment of ternary forms; and a learned fugue to conclude. On the progressive side, he notes (*inter alia*) chromaticism in har-

Example 13. *Grand Sonata*, fourth movement, measures 80–87



mony and melody; tertian key relationships; dramatic exploitation of virtuosity (à la Reubke or Liszt); freedom of fugal treatment (ditto); and so on.⁸

To this good list we can add the choice of a style that would prove the ancestor of some of America’s most distinctive music; music that—like the war that ended in the year the *Grand Sonata* was composed—would fight to unite the “varied carols” of America’s singing. The result was to be a convincing, and world-transforming, musical idiom. This is surely quite a feather in the cap of a twenty-six-year-old composer. I say we should let him be as American as he likes. ■

Notes

1. I wrote these words before reading virtually the same ones in Dr. Butera’s thesis, which I cite here: “The first movement is a virtual textbook example of classical sonata process . . .” Jerome Butera, “Form and Style in Two American Sonatas: *The Grand Sonata in E-Flat*, op. 22 of Dudley Buck, and *The Sonata in E-flat*, op.

65 of Horatio Parker” (DMA thesis, American Conservatory of Music, Chicago, 1982), 18.

2. Karleton Hackett, *The Great in Music: A Systematic Course of Study in the Music of Classical and Modern Composers*, ed. W. S. B. Mathews (Chicago: Music Magazine Publishing Company, 1900), 169.

3. Butera, thesis abstract, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database.

4. Cf. A. J. Goodrich, *Complete Musical Analysis* (New York: The John Church Company, 1889), 297 ff.

5. *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, Saturday, November 10, 1877, 126.

6. Phone conversation with Joshua Banks Mailman, May 2011.

7. Scott Joplin, “The School of Ragtime” (New York, 1908), in *Scott Joplin: Collected Piano Works* (New York Public Library, 1972), 284.

8. Butera, “Form and Style,” 40–41.

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