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 Ameri-can Concert Organ Music (New World Records, NW280). Dated 1976, it was no doubt intended as part of the vast trib-ute to the Bicentennial that many of us remember. Richard Morris was the or-ganist, 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 Centen-nial Exposition in Philadelphia, the fourmanual instrument has been in Buffalo since 1877. It underwent change when it was electrified in 1925, but is sub-stantially in conformity with its original design. Most recently, in 2001, it was re-

design. Most recently, in 2001, it was re-stored 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 instru-ment convincingly. But I was instantly captivated by the first piece. Taking up the whole of Side A was the *Grand So-nata 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

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 so-nata. 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 so-nata composed in America. It links the Buck piece, on a technical level, to the symphonies of Vierne, 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. 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

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 typ-ical gestures of Victorian parlor music, 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 respect-fully disagree with the liner notes in the Morris album: the movement is neither especially a "virtuoso" one nor, most def-initely, "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 move-ment hews closely to classical sonataallegro form. The opening theme mod-ulates 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 recapitu-lation 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 feel-ing 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 sensi-tiveness to that which is vocal, the results tweness 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 \dots [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 sen-tence; to this day, we are likely to be "un-conscious 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

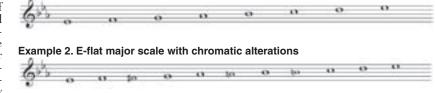
The third movement of the Grand Sonata, marked vivace non troppo, is a well-known scherzo and trio, which is reprinted (minus its trio) in the second volume of A Century of American Or-gan Music, edited by Barbara Owen. It is in the relative-minor key of C minor; the trio is in the parallel key of C 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 3. Two idiomatic uses of the chromatic alterations

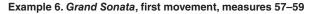


Example 4. Grand Sonata, first movement, measures 1-3











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 cycli-cal 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 stud-ied 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 sition was hardly new at that time; there had been Beethoven, for a start, with his *Pathétique* sonata and *Fifth Sym-phony*; 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 1869, and accented a ich in Hartford 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 motive composition was *au courant* and mode or impression made an impression. In his doctoral thesis, Butera points

to the *Grand Sonata* as combining for-mal procedures of German Romanti-cism 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

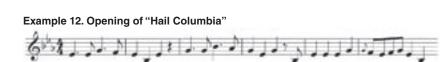


Example 10, Grand Sonata, fourth movement, measures 1-2



Example 11. Grand Sonata, fourth movement, measures 10-15





influences the entire work in a decidedly Germanic fashion.

It is thus most worthwhile to point

It is thus most worthwhile to point out the modest, but effective, use Buck made of this principle. He would contin-ue to do so: in 1880, he composed Scenes from Longfellow's "Golden Legend": A Symphonic Cantata, where the Leitmo-tiv 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 Novem-ber 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, 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 Men-delssohn organ sonatas.⁵ I do not ques-tion 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 *Crand 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 "par-lor music," or, in a word, *corny*.

But what do we have, at the end of the day? Do we have a monument to a deday? Do we have a monument to a de-parted esthetic—a period piece—a cu-rious 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 complet-ed a Ph.D. in music theory at Eastman, ed 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 unmen-tioned. The spirited syncopated mildly.

tioned. 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 mu-sic 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,

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, in-cluding both "conservative" and "pro-gressive" elements. Among the former, he points out the use of sonata-allegro form; the four-movement plan of fastslow-scherzo-fast; the employment of ternary forms; and a learned fugue to conclude. On the progressive side, he notes (*inter alia*) chromaticism in har-







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 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 convinc-ing and world transforming musical ing, 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 virtu-1. I wrote these words before reading virtu-ally the same ones in Dr. Butera's thesis, which I cite here: "The first movement is a virtual text-book example of classical sonata process" Jerome Butera, "Form and Style in Two Ameri-can 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.

1972), 284,

8. Butera, "Form and Style," 40–41.

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