

PODCAST #8 PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

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Hello. This is the eighth in a series of podcasts dealing with different elements of music composition. In the first seven of these podcasts we've discussed some ideas about how to construct an effective melody using tools such as a motif or sequence, how to develop material once you've created it, and how to create a bass line to go with the melody. We've used examples from music literature of a number of styles and periods as well as student works to illustrate the techniques in question and different approaches to using them.

Today we are going to concentrate on a single work which in many ways both illustrates and summarizes the various techniques we've discussed in the previous seven podcasts. And if you've heard any of these podcasts it will be a familiar piece as it's the work we've chosen as our theme. It's called "Sunday Night Blues" and it was composed in 2007 for trumpet, French horn and tuba by a sixth grader named Brooke. Let's take a look to see what the piece contains and how Brooke created it.

If you had seen the first sketch of "Sunday Night Blues" as I did you would never have guessed it would grow into the successful trio it became. To say it was an inauspicious beginning is an understatement. It contained only 3 bars of eighth notes in the trumpet part which sounded like this. (PLAY SNB1) Sounds pretty aimless, right? However, it was clear from both the title and the questions she asked that Brooke knew what she wanted. She just didn't know how to achieve it. One little tip about swing rhythm set her on her way. Here's her second melodic sketch. (PLAY SNB 2) There are several things to note about this sketch. The first is that the melody is now firmly in the key of C major, unlike the first version. The second is that with the use of swing rhythm the melody is much bluesier-sounding. The third is that the frequent use of the motif of a dotted quarter and eighth note combination beginning in the first bar gives the melody a distinct character. The fourth is that Brooke repeats the four-bar phrase but with a slight change at the end. This gives the melody variety and keeps us listening. She has also ended the first phrase on G, the fifth step of the scale, which is a great way to signal that the melody is half finished. She then finishes the second phrase on C. Let's listen again, keeping all these things in mind. (PLAY SNB 2 AGAIN)

All this would be tremendous progress to make for a first revision, but Brooke didn't stop there. She also gave us a modified repeat of the melody in the horn. She has kept the rhythm and most of the pitches intact, but has changed some pitches to better suit the horn's range, which is lower than the trumpet's, and also to give the piece some variety the second time around. In addition, she does something else really interesting when she repeats the horn's first four-bar phrase. She switches the order of the second and third bars, which not only gives us a different sound, it also sets up the ending really well. Let's listen to the horn's take on the trumpet melody. (PLAY SNB 2 HORN)

In response to the first revision we've just been listening to, Brooke was given a great suggestion about adding a walking bass line to accompany the melody. In her next revision she came up with a very effective one for the tuba. Let's listen to how well it fits with the trumpet and horn melodies and how it adds to the bluesy feel of the piece. (PLAY SNB 4 mod. by EN) There are a couple of significant points about the tuba line which bear special attention. The first is that it opens in classic walking bass form with a line of quarter notes which descend step by step. The second is that the pitches Brooke uses set up almost exclusively primary harmony, that is, the tonic, subdominant and dominant chords of C, F and G, respectively. This gives the harmony a rock solid feel and reinforces the strong sense of C as the keynote. Let's listen again for these points. (PLAY SNB 4 NOT mod. by EN) All right, so I snuck something in on you. Brooke actually adds something at the end of this revision, a new four-bar melodic phrase. She put it in the trombone part, because at the time she was

still thinking this would be a piece for brass quintet instead of a trio. By the next revision this four-bar idea had migrated to the trumpet and had been repeated to give us a full eight-bar B section with harmony in horn and tuba. Before I play it for you, let me point out a couple of things to listen for. The first is that Brooke has kept the dotted quarter and eighth note motif as well as the group of four eighth notes from the original melody, but here she's switched them so the dotted quarter and eighth come first. This gives the melody a very different feel. Because she also begins the second bar with four eighth notes we get a relatively long section which really has a swing feel. However, at the same time it sounds more meditative and lyrical, at least in part due to the fact that she uses secondary harmony, that is, D minor and E minor chords but in first inversion so that we still hear F and G in the tuba as in the A section. This is a subtle change which works beautifully. The B section is also the first time we hear all three instruments playing together. Let's listen to the B section in its entirety. (PLAY SNB B SECTION) How does Brooke finish off the piece? She gives us the opening A section again, but brings in the horn for the final three bars to give the piece a full sound at the end.

So how did this pearl grow from such a tiny grain of sand? That's one of the mysteries of composition. No one knows quite how the creator makes the decisions which turn something unpromising into a gem of a piece. And if you think I'm overstating Brooke's accomplishments in "Sunday Night Blues", let me summarize the ways in which she has succeeded in this piece. First, she has created a melody which conveys the title very clearly while fulfilling all the qualities I enumerated in my opening podcasts on melody: that is, she has emphasized the keynote, used mostly steps and small leaps, used rhythmic repetition and given the melody a good shape. Not only that, but she's modified the melody in her second A section for variety and used the original material to help develop the B section melody, thus creating a completely seamless and integrated melody from beginning to end. She has given the piece a clear form, AABA. She has written a very effective bass line of an appropriate type to fit the mood of the piece. Her harmony has reinforced the melody successfully and the rhythmic content of the accompaniment is simple but effective. And she's done all this in a piece which only lasts one minute and twenty seconds. What's not to like?

So now I'm going to leave you with the entire work as performed in concert by members of the Constitution Brass Quintet, but before that, let me say that on the next podcast I will discuss AABA form in greater depth and will illustrate using another single work which I've mentioned before on these podcasts. I hope you'll join me. Here's "Sunday Night Blues". (PLAY SNB FROM OPUS 15)