

Friday Composing from a Commission

Examples: *Accomac Roots*

It would be nice to get paid to create music. Not many of us have people beating down our doors to write checks for the tunes we create. But all of us have occasions for which a unique piece of music would be a special gift. Weddings, births, anniversaries, retirements, birthdays, funerals; all kinds of events call for music. Now you have a tool kit that prepares you to answer these creative calls.

The skill set is:

- Motive as the origin of melody
- Contour Waves as the origin of melody
- Words as the origin of melody
- Harmonic Movement as the origin of melody

Let's take on a commission and apply what we've learned.

The Commission

Goal

Professor Richard H. Smith teaches wood turning and genealogy at Common Ground on the Hill. During the academic year he serves as Chairman of the Chemistry Department at McDaniel College. Rick founded Accomac Roots. This is an organization created to serve as a resource for researching the genealogy of African American families on Chincoteague Island, Accomac County, Virginia. From 1810 to 1850, free blacks and slaves comprised 40 to 50% of the population of the county. And yet, comparatively very little has been written or compiled about those families.

The website for Accomac Roots is located at www.accomacroots.com. In an email exchange with Rick about music (he plays the hammer dulcimer), he wrote this:

Maybe dream up a little HD theme music for the Accomac Roots website sometime? They were hard working, basically poor folk who made amazing progress given their slave roots. Must have had dreams of this island being the ancestral home for their descendants - dreams that drifted away as they left the island and their land gradually passed into white hands.

Rick may only have been dreaming about a theme, but I took on his dream as an unpaid commission from a friend. Here are my notes about the design and creation of Accomac Roots and my analysis of how the tune works. My hope is that in reviewing these notes that you will have some structure to help you fulfill a commission. This is what went into creating the tune Accomack Roots.

Essential Components of the Tune

- Pentatonic scale to recall African melodies
- Hemiola to recall African polyrhythms
- Modulation to establish strong contrast between part A and part B. Part A should

be energetic and lyrical. Part B should be troubled, tense and dark but ending with a sense of transcending difficulty. “Overcome”.

- Complete rhythmic departure in part C. This part stands on its own. No musical relationship with parts A& B
- Somehow the tune has to state the trauma of slavery and yet not become overwrought by the horror. The prevailing feeling should be joy not fear or anger.
- The melody MUST celebrate the contributions that African American has made to music.

These are the ideas that begin the work. It sounds like it would require an entire symphony to include all of this. But, in fact, Accomac Roots does all of this in about two minutes.

Design

Part A: key of D major, bright, happy, danceable, heavily pentatonic, conventional, slight hint of a backbeat and slight suggestion of the dark tension to come in part B.

Part B:

- Modulate to the relative minor (Bm) to create dark mood.
- Dissonant harmonies to suggest conflict (Bm^{add maj7})
- Hemiola employs African polyrhythm – limit use – don’t over due
- Create mid-point tension by moving to C Chord (D Mixolydian)
- Move up by a tritone to F# to establish maximum tension.
- Use a harmonic minor scale as the turning point. The harmonic movement at the turning point is the VMaj of the V chord to support the harmonic minor scale.
- End part B on an open cadence (A7) with an ascending rhythmic, convoluted scale running from the exit of the

Part C: A rag in the key of A to capture the transition from late 19th century to the 20th century created by African American musicians.

Form: AABACC

Part A Root Movement

D D G G D Bm-D Em-G G-A A D
I I IV IV I iv-I ii-IV IV-V V I

Part B Root Movement

Bm G Bm C F#7 F#7 Bm G Em Em A7 A7 A7
vi IV vi VIIb III III# vi IV ii ii V7 V7 V7 (analyzed as in the key of D)
I VI I IIb V7 V7 I VI IV IV VIIb VIIb VIIb (analyzed as in the key of Bm)

Notes:

C natural defines the D-mixolydian scale.

F# is the V chord to B and B minor – supports a harmonic minor scale.

F# is the tritone interval from C – six half steps away, exactly in the middle of the chromatic scale.

The final four chords at the end of the B Part execute a modulation away from the Aeolian Mode (B minor) to the Ionia mode (D). Bm to G to its relative minor Em which is a 5th relationship to A which is the 5th to D.

Part C Root Movement

The C part modulates into the key of A. That movement is a 5th away from the beginning key of D. This structure completes the traditional form of a rondo: AABACC. Rags are often written in rondo form.

A signature of rags is that they often open on the V⁹ chord of the key. In this piece that is an E⁹ Chord. The chord is “broken” into a rhythmic arpeggio. There are two keys to the melodic structure of a ragtime piece. The first is that the arpeggio begins with the lowest tone of the chord set to be the minor 7th of the chord. So, the ragged arpeggio starts on the tone D. The second piece is that the arpeggio rises to the 9th tone and falls back to the root tone. So the arpeggio is D – G# - B – F# - E. That is a full E⁹ Chord. This melodic movement together with the syncopated timing gives the ragtime piece its distinctive voice.

The root movement in part C makes use of the traditional I-IV-V chords. The order is V⁹-I three times then a short chromatic scale into the IV chord followed by the V chord and finally back to the tonic chord. Simple, indeed. The intrigue of the rag comes from the V⁹ inversion and the rhythm.

Analyzed in the key of A the root movement is:

E⁹ E⁹ E⁹ A E⁹ E⁹ E⁹ A short diatonic scale E⁹ E⁹ E⁹ A E⁹ E⁹ E⁹ A short chromatic scale D A E
A

This pattern is repeated once and the piece concludes.

The Full Composition

Accomack roots opens with a fiddle tune melody. It moves into a 20th century expression of angst and worry in a minor key. The B part employs African-American idioms of the pentatonic scale and rhythm that legitimize the piece. Part B concludes with a rising rhythmic arpeggiation of the A chord to imply the transcendence over slavery and ends with an open cadence suggesting that the work is not yet finished. Part C acknowledges the seminal role African Americans have played in the formation of various styles of music the world has described as “American Music” for more than a century.

The lead sheet for Accomack Roots is in the appendix. Soon you’ll be able to hear it on the Accomack Roots website.