

DANCING AND TWIRL-ING: CONTEMPORARY CLARINET FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LIBBY LARSEN AND MARKKU KLAMI

Lucy Abrams

1. Introduction

My doctoral research project is an artistic study and comparison of contemporary clarinet works by Finnish and American composers. In this lecture recital, I discuss as a case study two unaccompanied works for clarinet, *Dancing Solo* by Libby Larsen and *Twirl* by Markku Klami.

Finding commonalities between these two unrelated composers was not difficult. Both studied at universities that promoted German serialism, and both openly resisted working in that style, deciding to compose using the widest possible array of source materials. Both composers focus on playing with time in their works, elongating and condensing the audience's temporal perceptions. And both composers, as Denise Von Glahn wrote in her book on Libby Larsen, are "citizens of the cold," living in Minnesota (Larsen) and Finland (Klami). Alluding to how the environment affects a person's perception of time, Larsen remarked, "only northerners . . . understand 'the rhythm and flow of water' in all its moods and ways, moving and motionless." (Von Glahn 2017, 83)

Focusing specifically on musical influences and time, this lecture recital analyzes how these aspects manifest themselves in *Dancing Solo* and *Twirl*, specifically when it comes to motivic development and establishing pulse.

2. The figurative motif

Both pieces begin with what I refer to as a "figurative motif" of sextuplets, which in my opinion becomes the most important motivic source material for both entire pieces. Larsen's sextuplet is repeated identically three times, immediately signifying its importance to the listener. Klami's opening figurative motif is introduced and then developed three times in quick succession, with each iteration slightly longer and slightly louder than the previous one. And instead of holding a

sustained pitch and repeating identically to draw focus to the opening statement, as Larsen does, Klami prefers to use silence, drawing the listener in closer and isolating the figuration so it is the only musical sound. Both Larsen's and Klami's opening statements contain three figurations, ending on a long note and/or fermata, denoting a clear separation between these opening phrases and what follows. These opening motifs contribute to harmony, form, and style through each piece. But how each composer develops and uses the motif is very different.

3. Motivic Development and Form

Larsen uses repetition of the motif to structure each movement of *Dancing Solo*. In the first movement "With Shadows," the return of the motivic sextuplet indicates a formal recapitulation of the opening material. Larsen also transposes the part of the motif to form the melodic content of the B-section of the movement. In later movements, identical motivic repetition contributes to form and yields itself to the vernacular styles that Larsen employs in the second and fourth movements.

Instead of repetition, Klami uses the figuration motif melodically and harmonically as developmental source material. From the very opening, Klami begins developing the figurative sextuplet rather than repeating it. Despite the rapid development, the motif retains its intervallic relationships providing musical unity. Klami alters length, modulates, and recomposes these figurations, and yet somehow we can still hear them as related. He relies on the minor second, major second, and minor third intervals in most sections of the work, sometimes focusing on harmony and other times using them for melodic purposes.

4. Establishing pulse in "Eight to a bar" (Larsen)

Larsen's time signatures throughout the work are simple and regular, often with tempo markings clearly and specifically indicated. The vernacular style she is known for is established in the second movement, "Eight to a bar." The opening swing, which returns identically throughout the movement, provides melodic unity, structure, and a clear inherent pulse, which is emphasized by the pulsed whole notes that Larsen notates throughout the movement.

The motivic sextuplet from “In Shadows” also returns in the second movement recomposed as a quasi-cadenza, which occurs three times in between *swing* sections. Not only does the return of the sextuplet contribute to the formal structure, it also provides a contrast, stylistically and rhythmically, to the swing sections. Like the thrice repeated opening of “In Shadows,” the three “cadenzas” suspend time, interrupting the continuous swing. What Larsen demonstrates in the second movement is the wide variety of musical styles that influenced her, from the expressive tonal to the popular and folk. Whatever the style, she uses the same compositional techniques: repetition of a small amount of musical materials and utilization of a rhythmic pulse.

5. Using motifs for harmonic development in *Twirl*

Klami develops his figuration through the intervallic relationships and intensifies the harmonic impetus of these intervals through trills and multiphonics, particularly in the second half of *Twirl*. Rather than establish a stable and constant tempo, Klami suspends and pushes time using different stylistic markings: *Ritmico, giocoso* at m. 29, *misterioso* at m. 54, *intenso, poco rubato* at m. 104, and *con fuoco* at m. 135. Slow and free sections, which suspend time, tend to use the intervallic relationships of the motif through trills, multiphonics, and hairpin *crescendi* and *descrescendi*.

Playful and forceful sections isolate the intervals in short motivic fragments presented in rhythmic sixteenth- or thirty-second-note units. Instead of relying on a steady *swing* pulse (the second and fourth movements of *Dancing Solo*) that gets interrupted, Klami establishes and disturbs pulse through misplaced accents and mixed-meter time signatures. While both composers experiment with “time,” they do so in completely different ways.

6. Aspects of analysis in performance

From my perspective, recognizing the motifs of each work and how each composer uses them for stylistic, temporal, and harmonic means has contributed greatly to my artistic approach to performing these works. Unaccompanied works, in my opinion, are very challenging to “make

sense of,” especially for single-voice instruments like the clarinet. Understanding the importance of the figurative motif helped me to organize the musical structure as well as better understand the composer’s artistic intent

Establishing pulse in an unaccompanied piece can also be challenging, especially in more abstract works like *Twirl*. Both Larsen and Klami set pulse through short, repetitive two- or three- note cells and through very specific tempo markings. But whereas Larsen alternates with strict pulse and “free” time sections, Klami composes in much shorter, stylistically diverse sections that create contrast between slow and quick perceptions of time.

Larsen is known in her works for recycling a minimum amount of rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic material, and understanding how she did so in *Dancing Solo* helped me understand how she composes in her distinct polyglot style. The abstract nature of *Twirl* was challenging at first, and it was only when I realized how the various sections of the work were connected could I better understand how to pace and connect different passages together.

Sources

Hartig, Caroline. 1994. “Masterclass: Dancing Solo for Solo Clarinet (1994) by Libby Larsen.”
The Clarinet.

<http://www.carolinehartig.com/clientuploadsDANCING%20SOLO%20MASTER%20CLASS.pdf>. (accessed: 11 June 2018)

Klami, Markku. Personal Interview. 19 June 2018.

Sullivan, Todd E. 1997. “Dancing Solo: Music of Libby Larsen”. Liner Notes. Minnesota Contemporary Ensemble, Innova 512 recording.

Von Glahn, Denise. 2017. *Libby Larsen: Composing An American Life*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.