

CONCERTO for Alto Saxophone and Wind Ensemble (2007)

Commissioned by a consortium of the Wind Ensembles of:

The Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University, Bloomington IN

Stephen Pratt, dir., Thomas Walsh, soloist

Emory University, Atlanta GA

Scott Stewart, dir. Thomas Walsh, soloist

The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Whitewater, WI

Glenn Hayes, dir., Matthew Sintchak, soloist

The Lionel Hampton School of Music, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID

Allan Gemberling, dir., Vanessa Seilert, soloist

Truman State University, Kirksville, MO

Daniel Petersen, dir., Randall A. Smith, soloist

Thomas Walsh, Commissioning Consortium Coordinator

Program notes

Many issues central to the essence of both American music and the wind ensemble play out in my concerto. The relationship of the jazz and classical traditions is one that is particularly relevant. As in jazz, the wind ensemble has a central role for its rhythm section—one that is likely to be experienced in marching and jazz improvisation. Furthermore, the history of the saxophone is intimately bound up with the development of jazz. It's the only instrument whose technique developed equally in jazz and European classical music, thus providing a further blurring of the boundaries.

The emotional arc of the concerto describes a progression through anger, loss, reflection, appreciation and celebration. Thus, the first movement, “Rage”, is short, agitated and pointillistic. The second movement, “La Luna D'Oro”, is inspired by an image seen while driving through rural Michigan to visit a very ill loved one. A moon was rising. Framed by a leafless tree, it was immensely large and golden. It struck me as a perfect symbol of the stricken person—mysterious, yet in its golden, not silver, hue, warm and loving. A Polish folk song, “Serdeczne Matko”, provides the motivic material, and is heard in its entirety for the first time after the climax. A cadenza links to the last movement, beginning with previously heard material, then gradually introducing the rhythmic motive of the first percussion entrance of the last movement.

“NOLA”, the title of the third movement, is the familiar acronym of New Orleans, LA, and as implied above, provides deep currents and unifying themes for my piece. American music was born in NOLA, as perhaps American culture itself was. The awesome collision of African (including Latin) and European musical languages was the crucible that produced our rhythmic and harmonic dialect. The entire movement has the characteristic New Orleans two-bar clave pattern underpinning it. There are two thematic areas, each defined by either the 3-2 or 2-3 clave pattern. The saxophonist is invited to improvise at the return of the first theme (3-2 clave), leading to the return of the second theme (2-3). Towards the end, the NOLA clave morphs into its sibling the Cuban mambo. In classic NOLA form, “Serdeczne Matko” returns in Second Line form, where a spiritual is played as a dirge on the way to the cemetery, and jazzed as a celebration on the way back.