

ROBERT SPILLMAN: Concerto for Bass Trombone and Piano
An Analysis On The:
Historical, Theoretical, and Performance Aspects

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Historical Aspects

Robert Spillman, born in 1936, is a Professor Emeritus who was Chair of the piano faculty and Music Director of the Opera Program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He studied at the Eastman School of Music, receiving a Bachelor of Music degree, a Performance Certificate in piano, and a Master of Arts degree in music theory. Mr. Spillman studied composition with Louis Mennini while at the same time he was serving as the pianist for the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, having plenty of interaction with instrumentalists.

Professor Spillman spent numerous summers at the Chautauqua Institution as a student, accompanist and coach and was Co-Director of the Opera Center at the Aspen Music Festival for many years. Activities at the Aspen Festival included teaching piano, opera, and languages, performing frequently on chamber concerts, and conducting opera presentations. He has several compositions published through Edition Musicus. His textbook *The Art of Accompanying* was published by Schirmer Books in 1985, *Sightreading at the Keyboard* was published in 1990, and *Poetry Into Song* was published by Oxford University Press in 1995. Mr. Spillman has remained active throughout the

U.S. as accompanist for such artists as mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani and cellist Yehuda Hanani, among others and has performed as soloist with numerous orchestras.

In 1957 Mr. Spillman wrote the *Two Songs* for famous former tubist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and Eastman School of Music professor Roger Bobo and then decided to

write the *Concerto for Bass Trombone* the following year (Bobo CD 125). Robert Spillman's *Concerto for Bass Trombone* was written for Ed Anderson in 1959 when both Mr. Spillman and Mr. Anderson were at their last year as students at Eastman School of Music. Later after graduation Mr. Anderson became the bass trombonist of the Cleveland Orchestra. In February 1960, student David Richey, before becoming the bass trombonist of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, won the concerto competition at Eastman School of Music and performed the orchestra version of the *Concerto* for the first time with the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra conducted by composer, educator, and former director for forty years of the Eastman School of Music Howard Hanson (Lenti 1-3).

In 1915, Carl Greenleaf purchased the C.G. Conn Company from its founder Civil War soldier and cornet player Charles Gerard Conn. In 1875 it became the largest producer of trombones in the United States and earned a lasting reputation as "America's trombone house." Greenleaf soon began an aggressive research and development program, which resulted in a wealth of new trombones and other instruments. Among these instruments was the 8H, a .547 inch bore straight symphonic trombone available with an innovative optional F valve attachment. In the 1940s, responding to the more demanding role of low brass in contemporary symphonic literature, C.G. Conn Ltd. began refining the 8H. With the assistance of Eastman School of Music legendary trombone professor Dr. Emory Remington, Conn perfected this design and in 1954 introduced the Model 88H. This instrument incorporated the features such as 8-1/2 inches thin-wall rose brass bell, rose brass outer slides, and Remington's taper mouthpiece and receiver. The 88H rapidly gained popularity as a symphonic tenor trombone in ensembles favoring a heroic, robust lower brass section (UMI Catalog 1-2).

The Concerto for Bass Trombone is centered around the tonal centers of F, E, and C in order

to feature these innovative enhancements derived from the creation of the Conn 88h at the time (Spillman Interview). Robert Spillman's *Concerto for Bass Trombone* brought out the Conn 88's innovative sound.

Theoretical Aspects

Robert Spillman's *Concerto for Bass Trombone* is written in three movements, *Allegro-Andante*, *Vivace*, and *Andante Moderato*. The form of the piece is presented by combining a fast melodic idea divided in two melodic themes in the first movement, which ends with an anticipatory excerpt from the main theme of the third movement. The second movement is develops a fast theme played in an agitated waltz tempo combined with a syncopated secondary theme. Finally, the third movement is a slow and relaxed movement. It recapitulates and develops the closing theme that was presented at the end of the first movement. Although the piece is a tonal work that centers around the tonal centers of F, E, and C, in many aspects the piece is not written in the traditional sonata form.

The first movement, *Allegro-Andante*, combines two themes. The primary theme is presented by the soloist and pianist at the beginning of the piece. It is a uses fast figures that give a sense of energy. This first theme is established around the key of F minor. (Example 2.1)

Example 2.1 Robert Spillman, *Concerto for Bass Trombone*, mvt. 1, mm. 1-6 primary theme.

Allegro



In contrast to the primary theme, the secondary theme is a lyrical melodic idea that does not lose its dynamic, forward motion even though it is written with longer note values. The bridge, played by the piano, between both the primary and the secondary themes stays within the key of F minor until the sudden irruption, in a softer dynamic, of the secondary theme at measure 21 in the mode of F# Phrygian. (Example 2.2)

Example 2.2 Robert Spillman, *Concerto for Bass Trombone*, mvt.1, mm. 21-30 secondary theme.



After the development of the secondary theme, the piano starts a transition that will progressively modulate back to the key of F minor in measure 50. At this point, the trombone plays alone for eight measures, which leads to the last two measures of this transition, establishing the key of F Major again in the recapitulation of the primary theme. Finally, after this transition both the primary and secondary themes are re-developed including an additional recitative at the end of the secondary theme. This recitative develops an additional theme at the end of the first movement in the key of C minor that serves as an anticipation for what is going to be the main theme of the last movement. (Example 2.3) In conclusion, this first movement is written in a form ABABC.

Example 2.3 Robert Spillman, *Concerto for Bass Trombone*, mvt.1, mm. 143-157 transition.



The second movement, *Vivace*, is the fastest movement of the piece. As in the rest of the piece, it is written in tonal style and the predominant key of this second movement is E minor. It begins with a mysterious sounding and very long introduction that last thirty-one measures and leads to the primary theme of the movement in measure 32. The primary theme is a melodic line written in a fast 3/4 that is to be played as an agitated waltz tempo that combines accented continuous quarter notes with long dotted-half-note endings, sometimes varying between quarter and continuous fast eighth note phrases. It develops from measure 32 to measure 79. (Example 2.4)

Example 2.4 Robert Spillman, *Concerto for Bass Trombone*, mvt. 2, mm. 28-39.

After the pianist has played the transition, the secondary theme starts at measure 97 and develops to measure 161. The secondary theme remains in the key of E minor, but the sense of rhythm changes with a new syncopated melodic idea. This theme takes advantage of the

syncopation produced by the dotted quarter notes inside the 3/4 measures and the tied dotted quarters at the beginning of some of the phrases. (Example 2.5)

Example 2.5 Robert Spillman, *Concerto for Bass Trombone*, mvt. 2, mm 97-105.



After the long development of the secondary theme, there is a re-transition that uses a variation from the original introduction. This transition leads to the recapitulation of the primary theme without recapitulating to the secondary theme, giving this second movement the form ABA.

The third movement, *Andante*, is the slow and relaxing movement of the entire piece. This movement recapitulates and develops the theme C that was first played at the end of the first movement and maintains this same idea as the movement's only theme. (Example 2.6)

Example 2.6 Robert Spillman, *Concerto for Bass Trombone*, mvt. 3, mm 1-4.



Although the movement temporarily modulates to several keys, it is centered around the key of C Major. As said by the composer himself, he wanted to give an “emotionally satisfying” sense for the ending. After all the turbulence from the two previous movements, this key provides a peaceful sense to the audience at the end of the entire work (Spillman Interview).

Performance Aspects

Robert Spillman’s *Concerto for Bass Trombone* is a thrilling work, which requires the soloist to negotiate between a clean execution of very demanding fast passages, and very long melodic lines and phrases. Even though the fastest passages do not look extremely difficult rhythmically, they can be very deceiving from the technique aspect. They look easy, but if the performer becomes a little careless, the lack of cleanliness through the phrases could become very difficult for the audience to appreciate the melodic ideas and lose the sense of direction in the process. Referring to example 2.1 again, in measure one there is a simple half note tied to an eighth note follow by two sixteenth notes and ending with two eighth notes showing a very simple rhythm pattern. However, the mechanics of the instrument becomes complicated when it comes to the positions needed to play the notes. The first note, F, is in first position, followed by E-flat which is in third position and C which could be played in either sixth or first position using the valve. Then, the passage goes back to E-flat, ending on A-flat both in third position. The complication for the clearness of the passage comes when the slide has to move so fast from the E-flat on third to the C on sixth or first with the valve. From third to sixth position the distance is very wide, so the arm needs to move very fast in order to be on time between the two positions. However, if the C is played in first, the distance is shorter, but now the valve becomes part of the equation in which the trombonist needs to be able to synchronize the speed of the slide with the speed of the valve. Therefore, these fast passages are to be executed with a lyrical, melodic state of mind in

order to ease the performance, so as not to make the lines sound hectic or frantic. The long melodic lines, on the other hand, are sometimes dark and mysterious, but at the same time they include a mix of jazzy, beautiful and powerful ideas. These lines need to be played very expressively, yet with a forward sense of rhythmic direction so that the sense of tempo is not lost in the process. Although the long melodic theme, such as the secondary theme in the first movement, is written in 4/4, it is better to be felt as 2/2 so that the lyrical but dynamic motion remains in place and the piece does not lose its energy. As with many other melodic trombone pieces, attention to a continuous air stream in conjunction with a lighter use of the tongue is the most suitable concept idea in order to perform this piece properly. As in the first movement, the second movement has also two main themes, one fast and one lyrical. Just like the first movement, the primary theme of the movement could become frantic so the pulse needs to be thought in one, which does not allow the performer to lose the energy and at the same time keeps the slow melodic line sense in the air. Although the secondary theme is a long melodic passage, it needs to be thought as a 6/8 rhythm so that the lyrical but dynamic motion remains in place and the piece does not lose its energy. Once again, an extremely continuous air stream and lighter tongue are needed for a better approach of the syncopations.

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