

Jazz Quintet for Strings

Alec Ferguson-Hull, Class of 2019

This summer I spent eight weeks composing a three-movement string quintet. The quintet consists of a standard string quartet (2 violins, viola, and cello) with double bass, and will be premiered this coming year by Bowdoin student musicians.

I spent two weeks preparing for this composition by listening to and analyzing string quartets composed by Béla Bartók, Dmitri Shostakovich, and John Adams in order to gain a deeper understanding of the string quartet medium. This helped me better understand the capabilities of the individual instruments I was composing for, as well as larger methods of creating varied textures and structural unity.

Both the aesthetics and greater meaning of my composition are both largely informed by my jazz background. The three movements serve as an exploration of jazz and its role in both 20th century and contemporary music. The first movement plays on the harmonic structures of the jazz standard *How High the Moon* and utilizes aleatoric (certain elements left to the players) structures to give the players musical freedom often found in jazz improvisation. The movement also uses the extended technique of “bowlslaps” (slapping the bow across the fretboard) to emulate the sound of a hi-hat while trading between both bossa nova and swing styles. The second movement is a funk fugue, incorporating blues changes within a traditional fugue structure to mix more modern textures with Baroque-era construction. The third movement primarily uses nonfunctional harmony with upper extension jazz voicings to explore some of the possible applications of jazz elements in experimental music. As whole, these three movements are centered around the larger concept of reinterpretation. This reinterpretation takes many forms, such as melody reinterpreting a static harmony, or a single note being maintained in one voice while the other voices reinterpret the harmony around that note.

Being on campus during the Bowdoin International Music Festival was a boon, as I had access to both fantastic concerts as well as master classes which I used to improve my composition skills. In addition, I was lucky enough to have a group of festival participants to read through my piece, which helped me immensely in becoming more familiar with the instruments that I was working with.

I am looking forward to working with Bowdoin musicians next year to perform and possibly record my entire composition, to take my piece off of the page and bring it alive.

Faculty Mentor: Vineet Shende

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