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A Comparative Analysis of Three Concerti by John Harbison

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HNR 499: Honors Senior Project

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### Rationale

Music theorists typically research composers who are known for composing methodically or within strict parameters; as such, many conventions and analysis techniques are designed to deal with these kinds of composers. For many composers, such as John Harbison, traditional analysis techniques do not yield as much as they do for those who write in the style that these techniques were developed for, so non-traditional composers are not typically considered from a theoretical standpoint. However, various techniques can be synthesized to create an appropriate method for analysis. This project will allow for the construction of new analysis techniques as well as an opportunity for expanding the composers that the music theory community typically considers.

As a distinguished composer, John Harbison has published 211 works within the last 64 years, contributing to both instrumental and vocal repertoire.<sup>1</sup> In addition to composing, Harbison is Professor of Music at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Principal Guest Conductor at Emmanuel Church in Boston, MA, and a successful jazz pianist, where he “explores affinities between jazz change playing and figured bass realization.”<sup>2</sup> At Emmanuel Church, he has been the Acting Director of Emmanuel Music, an ensemble dedicated to playing all of Bach’s sacred cantatas between September and May each year. Known for blending contemporary practices with jazz and Baroque techniques, Harbison aims to “make each piece different from the others, to find clear, fresh large designs, [and] to reinvent traditions.”<sup>3</sup> However, composers develop stylistic preferences as they gain experience, adding an element of similarity to their pieces. The purpose of this project is

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<sup>1</sup> Music Sales Classical, “John Harbison: Works,” Music Sales, <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/works/John-Harbison>.

<sup>2</sup> Music Sales Classical, “John Harbison: Long Bio,” Music Sales, <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/long-bio/John-Harbison>

<sup>3</sup> John Harbison, *Flight Into Egypt*, (New York, NY: Associated Music Press, Inc., 1986).

to investigate the extent to which Harbison is able to differentiate his pieces from one another as well as identifying Harbison's stylistic preferences within his pieces.

To accomplish the goals of the project, three concertos from the same period will be analyzed: Oboe Concerto (1991), Cello Concerto (1993), and Flute Concerto (1994). All three of these pieces were commissioned by prominent orchestras, and two for specific players<sup>4</sup> (the San Francisco Symphony for William Bennett, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for Yo-Yo Ma, and the American Composers Orchestra respectively), making them ideal samples to compare. This paper will examine these concerti through three lenses—form, pitch structure, and compositional techniques—in order to accomplish the goals of the project: investigating how successful Harbison is at differentiating his pieces as well as identifying his stylistic preferences.

### Analysis

The presence of detailed program notes is shared among all three concerti, with an inverse relationship between the theoretical complexity and the level of abstract description within each piece. For instance, the note for “Flute Concerto” describes the soloist as “a traveler, half bird, half human”<sup>5</sup> while discussing the piece with descriptive and metaphoric language, indicating the programmatic nature of the concerto. On the contrary, the form and pacing of the piece are discussed in the notes for “Oboe Concerto,” indicative of the piece's dependency on its form. The notes for “Cello Concerto” also describe the piece in metaphorical language; however, the abstract narrative is always paired with concrete musical language. In addition, there is discussion of moving from the East to the West, which is often reflected in the solo cello.

Out of the three pieces, “Oboe Concerto” is the most theoretically complex, as much of its structure is derived from Baroque forms and processes. “Flute Concerto” follows the “journey [that]

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<sup>4</sup> Music Sales Classical, “John Harbison: Works.”

<sup>5</sup> John Harbison, *Flute Concerto*, (New York, NY: Associated Music Publishers, Inc., 1994).

does not seek goals”<sup>6</sup> promised in the program notes; it does not seem that following a strict form was a major consideration when constructing the piece, as there are no obvious structural goals. As described in the notes, “Cello Concerto” undergoes many quick transformations in both tempo and material, contributing to the prevalence of smaller forms within the movements. However, there are formal pillars that give the concerto a definitive structure.

### Form

All of the concerti are broken up into three movements, but none of them follows the traditional concerto form of a fast movement in double exposition form, followed by a slow movement, and then ending in a fast rondo. The concerti vary on the way in which the internal sections recapitulate as well as the form and placement of the cadenzas. In “Flute Concerto,” the cadenza makes up the majority of the first movement, while in “Cello Concerto,” it appears in the second. “Oboe Concerto” does not have a designated cadenza, but there are three quasi-cadenza sections in the third movement. Additionally, the length of each movement is not consistent across the concerti.

The first movement of “Flute Concerto” in particular demonstrates the lack of structural goals within the piece. There are no recurring sections, just a progression from one motivic idea to another, followed by an extensive cadenza. It seems as if the movement is structured based upon the description within the program notes: “at first the soloist is accompanied by two fellow-flute-travelers, than only one, then fades forth solo.” The first idea consists of the three flutes playing in rhythmic unison, followed by the soloist and one orchestral flute in canon, and finally the solo flute in the cadenza section.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The formal plan for each piece is as follows:

“Oboe Concerto”

- I. ABCABA
- II. ABACADA
- III. ABCBA, where C represents the quasi-cadenza sections

“Cello Concerto”

- I. ABA, with extensive transition in the B section
- II. ABCAD, where D is a cadenza with an orchestral interlude
- III. ABCBA, with the last A section as a coda

“Flute Concerto”

- I. ABC, where C represents the cadenza section
- II. ABCA
- III. ABABC, where C is a coda

In all three concerti, many of the subsections are differentiated not only by harmonic language and motif, but also by tempo.

As previously mentioned, “Oboe Concerto” is more form-driven than “Flute Concerto” or “Cello Concerto.” In all of the movements, there is a large presence of recurring material, particularly in the transitions between sections. As such, the sections are more transparent than they are in the other concerti. For instance, the A sections in the second movement of “Oboe Concerto” are essentially the same, providing pillars of repeated material in between new material. This idea recurs in the third movement where a four measure interlude connects iterations of the theme within the A section.

The cadenza sections in each movement present unique forms, in part because of the specificity of a cadenza to a concerto. “Flute Concerto” has an especially elaborate cadenza, parceled

into sections that contain the flute paired with different members of the orchestra. There are seven possible orchestration schemes: flute alone (F), flute and harp (F/H), flute and glockenspiel (F/G), flute and celesta (F/C), flute and strings (F/S), flute and vibraphone (F/V), orchestra without flute (NF). The structure of the cadenza can be most easily be described using these pairings, and is as follows: F, F/H, F/G, F/C, F/S, NF, F, (F/H, F/G, F/C, F/S), F/V, F, where the pairs in the parentheses enter in that order, but sustain until the F/V pair.

The cadenza in the second movement of “Cello Concerto” is structured like the Prelude of a Bach Cello Suite (sample shown in Figure 4). The unaccompanied cello line ascends with a quick harmonic rhythm, and after it is interrupted by an orchestral interlude, it enters a virtuosic homophonic section where the cello acts as both a chordal and a monophonic instrument. This section consists of the sweeping arpeggios typical of Preludes. Similar to the structure of the cadenza in “Cello Concerto,” the quasi-cadenza in “Oboe Concerto” consists of sections featuring the oboe separated by orchestral interludes, although there are three sections instead of two. Here, the activity of the orchestra grows with each solo section.

### Pitch Structures

There are common pitch structures across all three concerti, indicative of the composer’s preferred harmonic language. The influence of Baroque and jazz idioms on Harbison is prevalent throughout all of the pieces, as there is a strong presence of church modes as well as extended harmonies. Additionally, there are many instances of the hexatonic, octatonic, and whole-tone collections as well as fifth-series figures, particularly at pivotal movements within the formal construction. The use of these pitch collections demonstrate the influence that twentieth century harmonic language has on all three of the pieces.

In the first movement of “Oboe Concerto,” a melodic figure in strict E Phrygian is presented with an accompanying pedal point on E. As the figure is harmonized in later iterations,

itches outside of E Phrygian are introduced; these pitches construct extended chords with the melodic figure as the highest note in the chord, highlighting the composer's tendency to combine pitch material characteristic to various styles in addition to using church modes. This same mode also plays an integral part in the structure of the first movement of "Cello Concerto." Here, an E Phrygian melodic idea in the cello and the woodwinds is separated by a series of descending fifths on the pitch class sets (pcs) F sharp and C sharp. This creates a juxtaposition in which the material moves "between two harmonic modes of attraction."

In "Flute Concerto," the modes are not used as obviously as they are in the other two pieces; however, E Phrygian is used to create the "hymn against a faint background choir of many forest and meadow birds" in the second movement. More prevalent throughout "Flute Concerto" are extended harmonies, often in the form of ninths and thirteenth. These harmonies directly reflect the influence that jazz has on the composer in basing the harmonic progressions throughout not only "Flute Concerto," but also "Cello Concerto" and "Oboe Concerto" on typical jazz progressions. There are many cases of dominant progressions, such the transition into the coda in the third movement of "Flute Concerto," where there is a series of dominant seventh chords in the orchestra.

In addition to the progression of seventh chords, this passage in "Flute Concerto" highlights the use of specific pitch collections, particularly in instances important to the structure. In the previously mentioned transitional material between the end of the third movement and the coda that refers back to the beginning of the first movement, all of the tetrachords used are subsets of the octatonic collection. This represents a pivotal moment in the overall structure of the piece: the end of the piece circling back to the beginning.





Figure 1: Octatonic tetrachords leading into coda in the third movement of "Flute Concerto."

The octatonic collection is also prominent as transition material in the third movement of "Oboe Concerto." There is a recurring octatonic four-bar phase in the orchestra that signals new material within the A section as well as transitioning between the A and B sections.



Figure 2: Octatonic transition material throughout the third movement of "Oboe Concerto."

In addition to the octatonic collection, the whole-tone and the hexatonic are also integral to the structure of the third movement of "Oboe Concerto." There is a hexatonic termination gesture that acts as a transition on a much smaller scale, as it signals the end of an iteration of repeating material throughout the A section. Coupled with these smaller hexatonic gestures, there exists larger whole-tone gestures that deviate from the repeating material of the A section entirely. In "Flute Concerto," the combination of the two whole-tone collections play an important transitional role going into the cadenza section in the first movement. Here, there are a series of whole-tone tetrachordal subsets, over which the solo flute leads into the cadenza. (shown in Figure 7).

The fifths series appears most apparently in the first movement of "Cello Concerto," where there the A theme is constructed of overlapping pentatonic collections separated by a minor second,

but ascending or descending fourths and fifths are prominent as well. For instance, there are recurring C sharps and F sharps interspersed throughout the pentatonic collection in which these pitches do not belong.



Figure 3: Combination of two pentatonic collections (one beginning on C and one beginning on C sharp) in the first movement of "Cello Concerto." As the theme progresses, the C collection dominates, but C sharp and F sharp remain.

This serves to emphasize these specific pitches and the intervals between them as well as foreshadow their importance later in the pieces, where they serve as pillars within the B material in the first movement and appear prominently in the A material of the third movement.

In fact, the concept of emphasizing a specific interval structures provides cohesion throughout all three concerti. For instance, 13ths and 9ths are prominent in the recapitulation of the A section in the third movement of "Flute Concerto," where these extended harmonies alternate in order to create a transition between two ideas. The tritone is pervasive throughout the third movement of "Oboe Concerto," whereas major and minor thirds form the majority of the motivic material in the second movement. Fifths are central to the construction of "Cello Concerto,"

perhaps due to the programmatic goal of representing the East. This contrasts to the typical Baroque melodic structures throughout the cadenza section (well-balanced melodies with obvious and stylistically appropriate harmonic implications).

### Compositional Techniques

As suggested in previous discussion, a major practice within the three pieces is stylistic allusion. Much of the harmonic language, such as extended harmonies and sections built upon major ninths, is derived from jazz idioms. In addition, much of the rhythmic language, particularly triplets and long strings of dotted pairs, can be attributed to jazz influence. As previously mentioned, there is a string of seventh chords leading into the coda in the third movement of “Flute Concerto.” In addition, there is an entire section of “Oboe Concerto” (C in the first movement) designed as a “blues interlude.” This section presents typical jazz harmonies (extended chords, harmonies built off of the mixolydian and blues scales) as well as techniques typical of jazz (i.e. pitch bending). There is a section similar to this in the third movement of “Cello Concerto” where the cello acts first as the string bass a rhythm section and then as the soloist.

In addition to jazz influence, Baroque idioms contribute to the construction of the pieces, particularly “Oboe Concerto” and “Cello Concerto.” In “Oboe Concerto,” the movements are named after Baroque forms; although they do not remain true to these formal structures, there are elements consistent between the form and the piece. For example, the A sections in the second movement (“Passacaglia”) are divided into three distinct voices. While two of these voices vary with each of the four iterations, the middle voice is the same each time, offering cohesion as an artifact of the ground bass within traditional passacaglia forms. Specifically in “Cello Concerto,” the cadenza is structured like the prelude of a suite. As already mentioned, there are steady lines comprised of notes of the same duration with a quick harmonic rhythm. Additionally, there are hints of polyphonic textures in the form of chordal gestures.

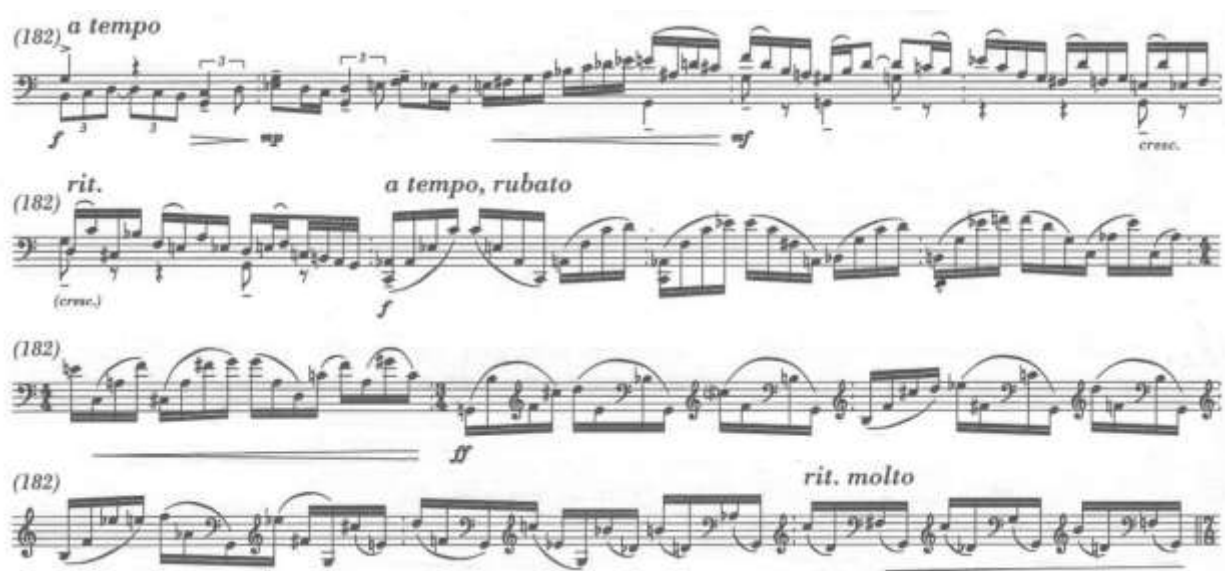


Figure 4: Bach Prelude-like material in the cadenza of "Cello Concerto."

One unifying feature of all three concerti is the frequent use of parallelism between the soloist and the orchestra. In general, this consists of several horizontally consonant lines in rhythmic unison that have been stacked. This creates an effect like that of polytonality, where each line is harmonically cohesive by itself, but the superposition of the lines is that of dissonance. In the first movement of "Flute Concerto," this idea is employed between the three flute lines. However, there is never exact parallelism, as there are few instances of the exact same vertical intervals between horizontal pitches in the superimposed gestures.



Figure 5: Parallel motion in the three flute lines in the first movement of "Flute Concerto."

This kind of parallelism persists throughout “Flute Concerto,” particularly in the orchestra. It also occurs frequently in “Cello Concerto,” such as in the first movement where the woodwinds play in parallel thirds with the solo cello and again in the second movement when the solo cello and the oboe move in and out of rhythmic unison. “Oboe Concerto” does not see as much use of this technique; however, there are instances, particularly in the form-driven third movement. However, this movement is much more focused on processes, such as motivic fragmentation and motivic expansion.

Throughout all three pieces, the idea of motivic fragmentation is prominent in both developmental and transitional contexts. Typically, the original statement of an idea is followed by the breaking down of the material, often by transpositionally varied fragmentation. This is most prominent in “Flute Concerto,” for example pieces of an initial orchestral figure in the cadenza in the first movement are presented as fragments after the original statement. In addition, there is a figure presented in the B section of the first movement of “Cello Concerto” that is fragmented throughout the movement, returning in various transpositions and rhythmic modulations. This idea of motivic fragmentation is a process; however, the cases present are not as well defined as the expansion processes present throughout the concerti.

Contrary to the fragmentation, the idea of expansion is also prominent throughout the piece. The most transparent instance of this idea is in the third movement of “Oboe Concerto,” where the entire A section is built off of systematically inserting symmetrical material between existing material. Further, this process employs an axis of symmetry, such that half of the material in each iteration is the retrograde inversion of the other half. There are no processes in “Flute Concerto” or in “Cello Concerto” that are as well-defined as this one; however, there are cases of the same idea of insertion. Much of the material in the B section of the first movement of “Flute Concerto” is built from the

idea of expansion though insertion. There are additional examples in the third movement of “Flute Concerto.”

The way in which these processes are accomplished, particularly how strictly to which the process is adhered, varies significantly with each instance of a process. Take, for instance, the two cases mentioned in the previous paragraph. The expansion process presented in the third movement of “Oboe Concerto” is strict; the expansive gesture begins with two figures that are the retrograde inversion of one another over an axis of symmetry. These figures are preserved as the outermost material as additional symmetrical material is inserted between them. The intervallic structure is always conserved as new material enters and this new material is always coupled over the axis of symmetry. In contrast, the insertion process is quite free in the given “Flute Concerto” example. There are common cells (a motivic gesture) in between iterations of similar material, but they are often transposed without preserving intervallic integrity. Additionally, cells can be added or subtracted between iterations, as long as passage grows in overall length.



Figure 6: Process of symmetrical expansion in the third movement of "Oboe Concerto." The material circled in blue is the original material, followed by the material circled in red. The two tetrachords pointed to in green is the new material.

Figure 7: Expansion process leading into the cadenza in the first movement of "Flute Concerto." The material circled in red is the original material, that in blue was added next, and that in green recurs throughout out the passage.

Often, these processes deal with similar pitch material. Because of this, pedal points lasting throughout sections are very common in all three concerti. For instance, there is a persistent pedal on F sharp throughout much of the third movement of "Oboe Concerto," while E is prominent in all A sections of the first movement. In the second movement of "Cello Concerto," much of the motivic material consistently returns to A, emphasizing that pitch class like a pedal point. The pedal points move more quickly in "Flute Concerto," forming a returning harmonic background on which to fragment melodic ideas.

The final compositional technique common to all three pieces is that of characteristic orchestrations. In all three pieces, the virtuosic brass lines connection sections where there soloist is not playing, but there few instances where the brass play with the soloist. These lines typically contrast what was happening in the solo, often by dynamic and there are a lot of major 9ths between

parts, giving a characteristic sound to the brass interludes. There also tend to be horn calls signaling the return of the soloist after a large break. There are many atypical doubles with the soloist, such as the piccolo and the cello in the first movement of “Cello Concerto.” Here, the cello is at the extreme high end of its range, within the range of the piccolo.

### **Discussion**

In all three concerti, the blending of various styles was accomplished successfully, forming the basis of all three compositions. Not only did the presentation of the material—hymn-like melodic figures, jazz rhythmic figures—achieve this goal, but the idiomatic material was presented with not only idiomatic pitch material, but merged with pitch material from the contemporary palate. Jazz ideas often saw paring with octatonic pitch material, as is common in the jazz idiom, but also with some hexatonic ideas. The church modes were accompanied most often by whole-tone and fifth-series notions. Additionally, the pitch collections mentioned were not exclusive to one idiom, but persisted throughout all three pieces, strengthening the sense of cohesion.

In addition to blending with various styles within sections, the commonly contemporary pitch collections helped to facilitate the juxtaposition of these styles, so that they formed a cohesive whole. The collections became the common material between idioms, mainly serving as transitions, but also as allusions to other idioms within the piece. If this unity did not exist, the styles involved have the potential to contrast to the point of destroying the musicality and expression of the pieces. In addition, the three main idioms involved with this stylistic mixing—Baroque, contemporary, and jazz—demonstrate the experience and preferences of the composer, as he regularly works with all three in his professional life.

In addition to stylistic blending, the idea of using processes to build material provided unity across the three pieces, whether this unity is provided by expansion, fragmentation, or simply superimposed parallel motion. While the most persuasive expansion process is in the third



movement of “Oboe Concerto,” there are instances of this particular process throughout all three pieces, as previously discussed. The idea of fragmentation is less common than expansion; however, it still plays a fundamental role throughout all concerti. Parallelism is especially prominent in “Flute Concerto,” as the solo voice is often accompanied with parallel voices, although it is present throughout much of “Oboe Concerto” and “Cello Concerto” as well.

The reliance on these processes supports the claim that these idiomatic explorations form the basis of all three concertos. Process-based material, particularly motivic expansion and fragmentation, is characteristic of both the contemporary and the Baroque. Based upon the essential nature of these stylistic combinations in the three pieces, it is reasonable to posit that Harbison’s compositional style hinges on the merging of idiomatic material, particularly through common pitch material and motivic structuring. Additionally, there seems to be a strong sense of abstract conceptualization that accompanies each piece, as evidenced by the relationship between the pieces and the program notes. In all three cases, the reasoning behind the formal and motivic decisions is clearly outlined in the respective note; “Flute Concerto” in particular is tied to its program note, as the structure of the piece adheres more to its abstract description than conventional formal considerations.

### **Conclusion**

Although the pieces possess distinct characteristics and structure, the overall effect of each is very similar. There are common stylistic ideas between all three concerti that are distinct to the composer, and as such, are fundamental to the construction of the pieces. In particular, the combination of idioms—especially contemporary, Baroque, and jazz—provide an element of similarity across all three pieces, making them distinctly Harbison, but less distinct from one another. The specific orchestration employed—virtuosic brass interludes between soloist material

and atypical doublings—are also characteristic of the concerti. Finally, the reliance on theoretical processes, such as fragmentation and expansion, unify style across the pieces.

There was some success by the composer when differentiating these concerti, particularly in the realm of strict versus abstract form; however, the pieces held many of the same stylistic characteristics in common, making them difficult to differentiate from one another. The secondary goal of identifying stylistic preferences was much more successful, as it seems as if Harbison's compositional technique is intrinsically tied to his blending of influential styles. All three pieces held in common idiomatic material from the contemporary, Baroque, and jazz styles, lending to determining stylistic preferences, but causing the pieces to carry many of the same characteristics.

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