MICHAEL MARKOWSKI'S

BROOKLYN AIR

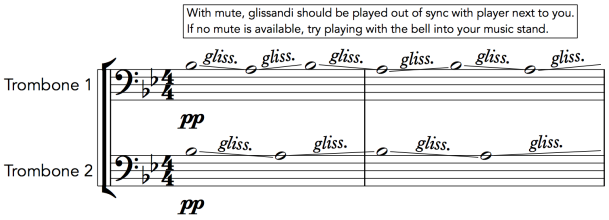
An Interpretive Analysis by Marc R. Dickey

If you take a walk in your own neighborhood from time-to-time you notice things. Some things stay the same: most of the buildings, the landscaping, and the people seem familiar. And things change too: new leaves on trees, fresh paint on someone's home, a new sound or smell from a manhole sewer cover.

"Brooklyn Air" begins its walk through the neighborhood with the sparest of materials, and slightly mysterious ones at that. The initial sound is of muted trombonists in half-step *glissandos* **[ex. 1]**, each player intentionally out of sync with the others. These eerie *glissandos* are accompanied by a slowly rotated ocean drum, and a brake drum scraped with a coin along its outer edge. Perhaps it is a little foggy. And subtle—these gestures are marked *p* and *pp*.

At m. 3, clarinets and bassoon enter through the fog, transitioning from a warm, comfortable Eb Major through a couple of suspensions to a darker, more somber g minor. The vibraphone and finger cymbals are heard, as a bell off in the distance, from a ship or a church? The two-measure motive repeats, with the addition of euphonium and tuba reinforcing the woodwinds **[ex. 2]**.

Ex. 1



At m. 7, one player each on flute, alto saxophone, and trumpet play a brief motive that begins with a perfect fourth as the foggy trombones end their meandering *glissandos* **[ex. 3]**. The motive is immediately expanded at m. 9 into a melody that

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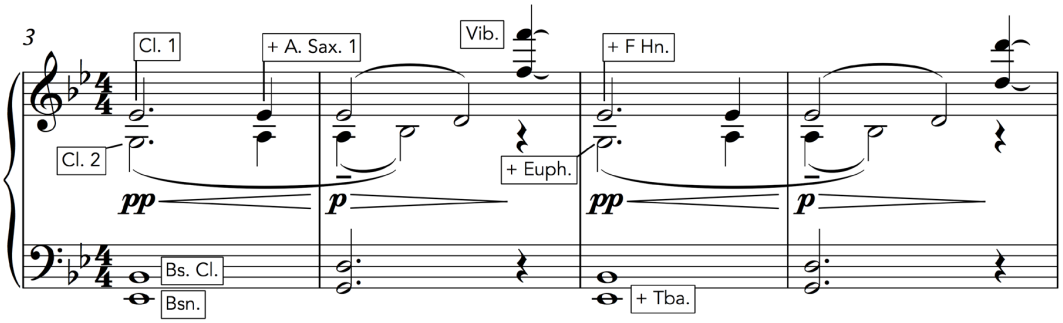

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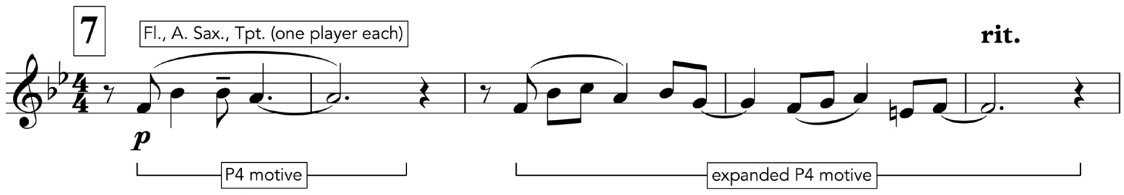


must not be rushed for a number of reasons: there is syncopation at the end of m. 9 and m. 10, and more extensively in m. 13, that needs time to fit and settle in; the accidentals in m. 10 create a harmony that lends a lovely nostalgic quality if not rushed; and m. 11 is marked with a *ritard* that needs enough time to lead into a gentle climactic point in m. 12. Also, in mm. 13 and 15, the eighth note countermelody in the clarinets, tenor saxophone (and horn, euphonium, and vibraphone in m. 13) needs time to unfurl itself against the syncopated melody. The short version of all this?: avoid rushing!

The real climax of this section is at m. 16. The more *legato*, with a slight, gradual increasing of intensity that your ensemble plays mm. 9-17, the more effective this big moment will be. Be sure that the accented notes are played within the context of the line that leads to them, and then encourage a very gradual *diminuendo* in intentionally static m. 17. Tension and release!

Markowski creates a slight variation on the P4 motive from m. 9 to proceed from the little earthquake at m. 16, utilizing a raised fourth in the clarinets, alto saxophones, and horns in m. 18 **[ex. 4]**. And in m. 19 he creates a small aftershock: the softer echoed reiteration

Ex. 4

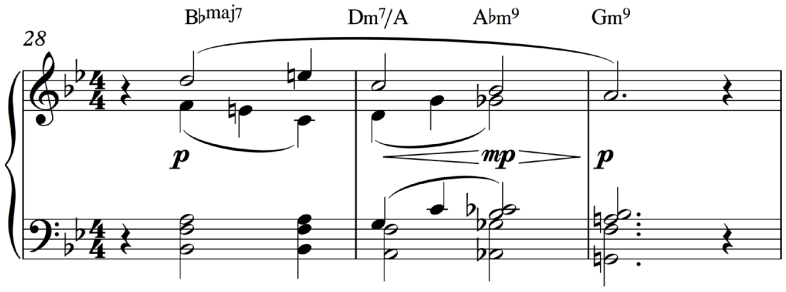
of the earlier climactic point portrays its own nostalgic quality. From there, Markowski reshapes the P4 motive once again in m. 20, and then the motive lapses into *stretto* at m. 21, in a section marked "A Little Faster" **[ex. 5]**.

The *stretto* transitions from eighth notes to quarter notes in contrary motion in m. 24, and then a chorale section that requires sustained breath support. Frankly, especially with younger players, the more you keep these measures moving along (as marked), the more successful they will be.

Ex. 5

“If you’ve ever walked around Brooklyn, these minor ninth chords may call to mind the beautiful Brooklyn brownstones. Or, if you’ve walked around wind band repertoire of the mid-20th century much, these chords will evoke shades of Robert Russell Bennett and Eric Osterling.”

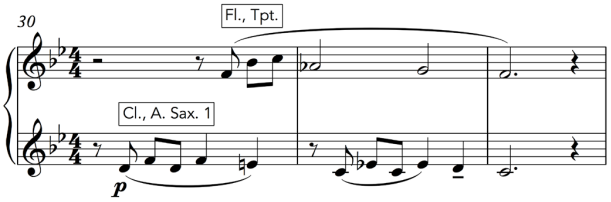
Ex. 6



As the chorale section slows in tempo, the nostalgic accidentals from m. 10 return in a more prominent way from the third beat of m. 29 to the downbeat of m. 30. If you’ve ever walked around Brooklyn, these minor ninth chords may call to mind the beautiful Brooklyn brownstones. Or, if you’ve walked around wind band repertoire of the mid-20th century much, these chords will evoke shades of Robert Russell Bennett and Eric Osterling. Keep in mind, these chords are not likely in the aural memory banks of your students’ ears. Here is a good place to isolate, hold, and balance these chords so your students can get their ears around them. Then practice leaning into m. 29, beat 3, and then away from it to the next downbeat **[ex. 6]**.

While admiring the Brooklyn brownstones, Markowski tips his hat to the birthplace of George Gershwin in his rather overt insertion of blue notes in the eighth notes in the clarinets and alto saxophone, and particularly in the flute and trumpet melody, in mm. 30-31 **[ex. 7]**. Since Markowski was overt here, you don’t need to be; just let these lines play themselves for all to enjoy!

Ex. 7



So far Markowski’s tempi (which should be largely adhered to) have fluctuated between 68 and 88 bpm. At m. 32, a two-measure *accelerando* (from 68 to 100 bpm) moves into a musical riddle, as it is both the fastest and the slowest section of the piece all at once. How can this be? Well, as metronome markings go, it is the fastest at 100 bpm, but this section is almost completely devoid of anything faster than a quarter note, so in terms of rhythmic durations it is the slowest. Melodically, the material is a lightly varied augmentation of the melody at m. 12.

As simple as the music from mm. 32-50 appears, there are a number of welcome challenges in this very sustained center section of *Brooklyn Air:*

OBSERVE

Be sure players observe the *crescendos* and *diminuendos*.

WATCH & LISTEN

As you conduct the *ritards* and *accelerandi* fluidly, encourage players to both watch your beat carefully, and also listen for the counterpoint of quarter notes moving against longer durations.

FEEL THE PULSE

Encourage each player to be certain to feel the pulse independently, and know where they are in the measures with long note durations.

ISOLATE HARMONY

Take a little time to isolate and hold a chord here and there to let your players get their ears acclimated to balance, as this section is harmonically adventurous.

BALANCE IDEAS

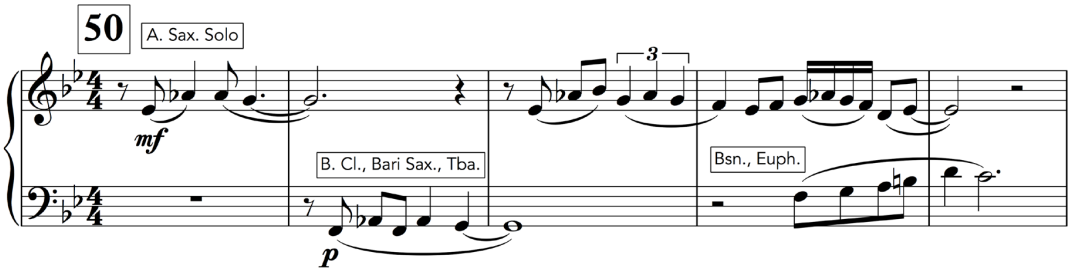
Be sure that moving parts are heard more prominently than static parts (especially in the melody in the horn and euphonium at m. 39; the flute, oboe, and clarinet at m. 44; and the second clarinet supported by the horn, bassoon, and euphonium in mm. 46-49).

Finally, the time spent rehearsing this center section of *Brooklyn Air* is an opportunity to remind your players that this is about air: air as a song, as in the air Brooklynites (and you and I) breathe, and air as the resource we as wind players use to shape and support sustained phrases.

Brooklyn Air is a wonderful opportunity to teach and reinforce *legato* style; it is a welcome addition to the chorale style pieces we treasure in the wind band literature. At the same time, there is a lot more going on here than simply another chorale style piece. Imbedded in *Brooklyn Air* are opportunities to teach syncopation within a *legato* context, suspensions and passing tones, countermelody, and listening for and balancing less familiar harmonies. There are many rewards to be found in spending some time in the *Brooklyn Air.*

A descending mark tree gesture moves us into a return of some familiar material at m. 50, as an alto saxophone solo references the P4 motive from m. 7 as a question, and the low reeds and brass borrow from m. 30 to answer back bluesally **[ex. 8]**. In m. 54, the upper woodwinds, trumpets and horns have an augmentation

Ex. 8



Ex. 9

of the P4 motive without the first note. These re-issuings of the P4 motive are signs that everything is about to meld together in a warm, comfortable, nostalgic homecoming of musical materials.

The beginning of the end, at m. 50 begins in c minor, and this key is more firmly established by the descending scale in the low reeds and brass in mm. 55-56. The band *crescendos* into a gorgeous Ab9 chord at m. 59, but take it easy on this one, it is marked just *mezzo forte*; there is more to come!

From here, succulent sustained chords are ornamented in mm. 60 and 62 with the P4 motive from m. 9, but here its role is countermelody, a moving inner part, rather than its original melodic role. By m. 63, the dynamic should be *piano*, and the *rallentando* in m. 64 and 65 is a fine opportunity to pull back and emote. With all of the entrances in m. 65, balance is more important than playing the published dynamic in making the *crescendo* to m. 66, which is again an Ab9 chord, but this time marked *forte*! From that tremendous downbeat, the descending quarter note suspensions return from mm. 12 and 34, and they feel so good now at the much slower tempo (68 bpm here vs. 100 previously). And here, in some additional motivic gamesmanship, Markowski transforms these descending quarter notes into melody, in the clarinets, alto saxophones, and horn, while the P4 motive appears as countermelody in mm. 67 and 69 **[ex. 9]**. Encourage your players to feel the division of beats—feel eighth notes—so that the syncopated melody and the P4 countermelody connect correctly.

All of this combining of previous materials leads to the return of the big moment that we first encountered way back in mm. 16-17. Be certain that this entire passage stays *forte*, all the way from m. 66 to the eighth note accented climax in m. 70. You'll want to help the percussionists understand the importance of their *crescendos*, and the insistent but not overbearing triangle roll. Once again…tension and release!

As *Brooklyn Air* breathes its last few breathes, the P4 motive returns in mm. 72 and 74. Two *Brooklyn Air* signatures appear: the blue note in m. 76, and the raised fourth in the passing tone in m. 77. Eb Major is established in m. 77, and with a couple of delicate hairpin *crescendos* and *diminuendos* and one last iteration of the P4 motive in the flutes, our stroll through Brooklyn comes to an end, settling in on an Eb13 chord. Muted trombones make a tasteful spectacle of themselves, with a *glissando* and *crescendo* from Bb to Cb, and then blend back into the final *piano* chord.

We have come full circle on our little hike. Welcome home!

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DR. MARC R. DICKEY is Director of the School of Music and oversees the instrumental music teacher program at California State University, Fullerton, where he has taught since 1988. He has conducted the CSU Fullerton Symphonic Winds for more than ten years. His research has been published in the Journal of Research in Music Education and the Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education. He has served as a member of a Music Subject Advisory Panel to the Commission of Teacher Credentialing of the State of California, and has adjudicated bands throughout the U.S. and Canada. He was one of the youngest conductors to be awarded the NBA's Citation of Excellence.