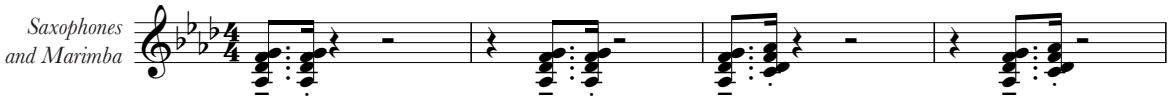
Discovering 'Elixir'

An analysis by Marc R. Dickey, Ph.D.

Example 1: dotted eighth-sixteenth note duplet — the "dooo-dot."

Wha… What was that? Michael Markowski's enervating composition "Elixir" begins with a motive of a single dotted eighth-sixteenth note duplet, followed by several beats of silence. And again. And then again (see Example 1). There is an insistence, persistence, about this dotted eighth-sixteenth note motive that becomes admirable, a rhythmic badge of courage and honor.

Dooo-dot.

Dooo-dot.

The motive appears in one permutation or another in each of the first thirty-five measures of the piece. The thirty-sixth measure escapes it only because the motive has become so pervasively powerful that it screams for a measure to let off some of the kinetic motion it has built up.

The piece begins with this very spare rhythmic content, and also a very thin orchestration of saxophone quartet, marimba, and shaker. Instrumentation in both the winds and percussion are added in bit by bit, like strands of saffron, soon revealing a Spanish flavor resulting from the rhythmic motive and its various accompaniments, especially in the percussion section.

Not incidentally, there is some special instrumentation that is absolutely essential to the piece. The soprano saxophone, in addition to the usual AATB saxophone section, is required. Markowski also calls for a surdo, a large bass drum of Brazilian origin. Surdos are available commercially; a quick internet search will reveal audio and video examples of surdos being played, and even instructions for how to build one yourself for highly motivated do-it-yourselfers. There are two bass clarinet parts; beyond that, the instrumentation is quite standard.

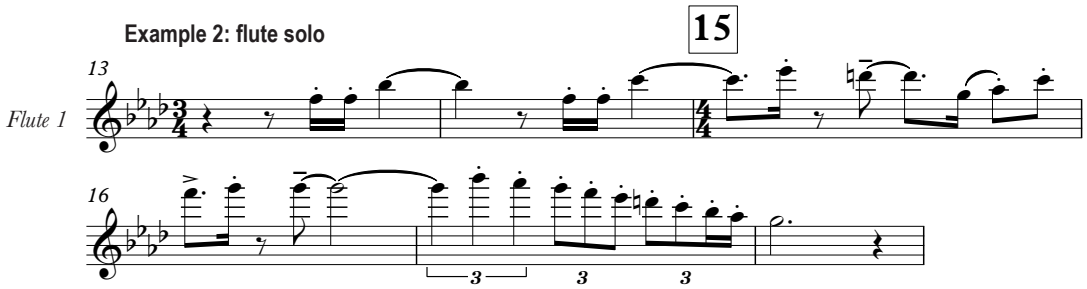
From the beginning of the piece, the dotted eighth-sixteenth motive inspires a variety of accompanimental devices, all of which lead right back to yet another dotted eighth-sixteenth. At m. 15, there is a bit of repose as a flute solo smoothes the hard-edged motive into cascading triplets that should sound effortless, and perhaps a bit lawless, having escaped the jagged dotted eighth-sixteenth feel (see Example 2).

"Instrumentation in both the winds and percussion are added in bit by bit, like strands of saffron, soon revealing a Spanish flavor..."

The original rhythmic motive returns in the winds at m. 19, and *Elixir* intensifies in volume thanks to a slightly brutish trombone line at m. 22, and a flute *ostinato* in m. 26 (initially introduced in m. 25 by a much thicker array of instruments) that sounds as if a flock of agitated birds is swooping in.

This all leads to the "B" section of the piece beginning at m. 28. This section, perhaps not surprisingly, is also based on the dotted eighth-sixteenth motive, but there is one monumental difference. This dotted eighth-sixteenth doesn't lead to silence: it leads to massive sustained block chords,

Example 2: flute solo



"There is an insistence, persistence, about this dotted eighth-sixteenth note motive that becomes admirable, a rhythmic badge of courage and honor."

with parallel harmonic shifts and dueling B♭ Major and B♭ minor tonalities (see Example 3). *Dooo-dot daaaahhhh. Dat Dooo-dot daaaahhhh.* So satisfying after all of that Morse code in the A section!

If you are not a horn player, you will wish you were: horns get to wail in several places throughout the score, always doubled in the alto saxophones. The first example of this is in m. 38. As rambunctious and joyously massive as this section sounds, some self control is called for; note that Markowski has marked it merely *forte*.

Measure 46 continues in a similar vein, but much lighter in texture, rhythmic complexity, and volume for five measures, and very suddenly we return to…

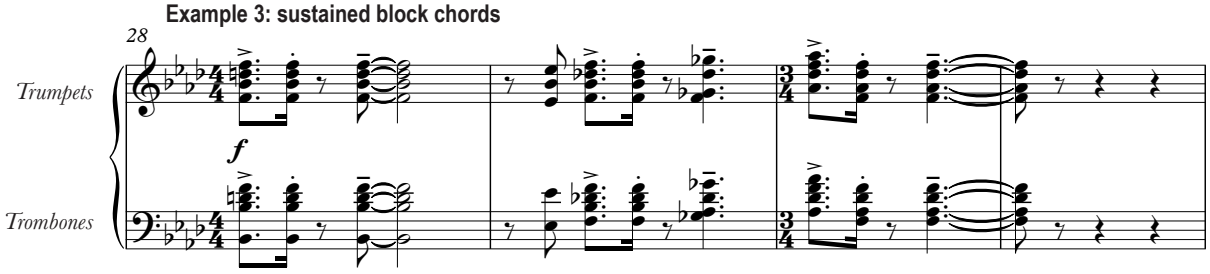
Dooo-dot.

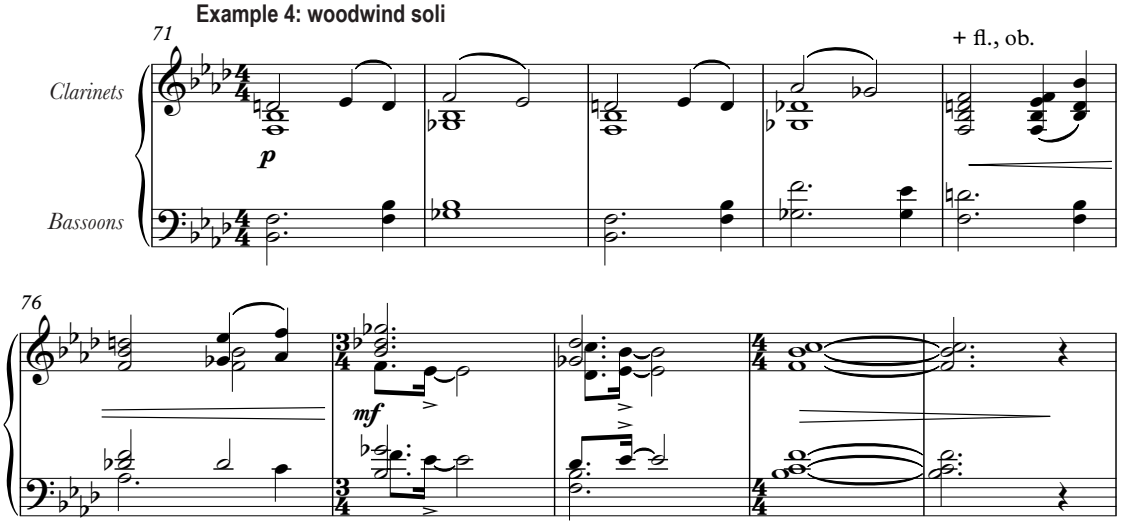
Dooo-dot.

After so much activity, the silence after each statement of the original motive in its return is even more unexpected than at the beginning. This is even more true because as Markowski returns to the essence of the "A" section, he avoids exact repetition; the meter changes are a bit different, and the motive comes and goes so as to throw the listener off even more than at first. The silences following the motive are not just unexpected; they are actually awkward and a bit uncomfortable. *What is happening?* To make up for it, Markowski's return of the "A" section is more compact, an economical 20 measures as opposed to the original 27. In the midst of it, the trombones rudely blare out a short *glissando* in m. 60. The music of measures 66-67 is in essence repeated in measures 68-69, but the second time it continues into a series of dotted eighth-sixteenths, each followed by a quarter rest, that leads to a new section of music.

The warm, shimmering woodwind soli begin-ning at m. 71 is a serenely flowing section of music, the most passive moments in *Elixir* by far (see Example 4). The simple material in this "C" section is appropriated to the foreground from the backgrounds found in mm. 15, 18, 20, and 26-27. The dotted eighth-sixteenth returns ever so gently within the woodwind choir in mm. 77-78, and then more overtly in the brass pyramid in mm. 79-80. At m. 81, what was once a relatively benign flute solo returns, this time seemingly in 3D. The flute solo has become a trio of flute, soprano saxophone, and clarinet, accompanied by mysterious, even magical tremolos in the clarinets and marimba, and accompanied by dotted-eight sixteenths appearing on key downbeats, sounding as heartbeats urging us forward from the string bass, timpani, conga, and surdo.

The shimmering woodwind soli moves to the saxophones in m. 92, now accompanying a 1ST trombone and trumpet soli that is purely menacing. The theme of calm returns to the woodwinds in m. 96, now accompanied by a triangle—signaling an alarm, or just a harmless decoration? In m. 99, the horns, tenor saxophone, and euphonium take over the placid theme, as the heartbeat returns—ominous or comforting (see Example 5)? The music builds quickly toward a return of the triumphant B theme, the dotted-eighth sixteenths that propel firmly and confidently to sustained notes, with the notable return of the crazed flock of birds from m. 26. As the B theme returns in m. 111, we become certain that the horns and alto saxophones are the protagonists in *Elixir*, and the trombones the menacing agitators. Note that now Markowski gives the brass permission to do what they wanted to back at m. 28; the parts at m. 111 are marked *ff*, even *fff* for the horns. The return of the B section

Example 3: sustained block chords

Example 4: woodwind soli



contains much of the material from mm. 28-45, but heftier, reworked for greater intensity. But this B section doesn't end so politely as the first one that yielded to the tinkly transitory passage at m. 46; this B section grinds to a halt in fits and starts of huge, thick, ever lengthening *tutti* quarter note sonorities, as Markowski's *rallentando* leads us to the loudest silence of *Elixir*, a great grand pause in m. 131.

Get ready! At m. 132, Markowski marks his *Coda* twenty-eight beats per minute faster than the rest of the piece. Beginning with a sequence based on the B section motive, the screeching birds return for the last time in m. 136, and soon there is a tug-of-war between the relentless original *dooo-dot* motive and the perturbed birds. The squabble settles on a smeary, blurry saxophone and horn cluster in m. 143, with the added auditory chaos of saxophone tremoloing. In *Elixir's* final bars, the *dooo-dot* motive returns for two last massive swipes with a foreboding, antagonistic mix of B♭ minor in the lower winds versus B♭ Major in the upper ranges. This attempt by B♭ minor to have final sway is co-opted by a stark, brilliant B♭ Major whole note orchestrated through the entire ensemble, followed of course by one last *dooo-dot* in B♭ Major. The perseverance of the original motive is rewarded; goodness, courage, and honor prevail!

Throughout the work, percussionists must be particularly aware of when they should be playing soloistically as opposed to when they are accompanying the winds. The crotales, triangle, cowbell, and suspended cymbal that appear intermittently are extremely important to the piece, and should be assigned to competent, musical percussionists.

The parts to *Elixir* are challenging, but not overwhelming. And they are inarguably fun to play! *Elixir* is a colorful, inspiring work containing two Markowski hallmarks: maximal contrast using the sparest of compositional materials, and rhythmic ingredients that at first seem as if they don't belong on the same page, yet soon mingle like the ingredients of an exquisite paella.

Dooo-dot! ◆

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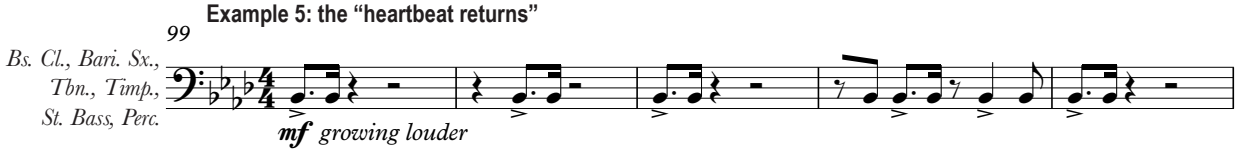
Example 5: the "heartbeat returns"