

Nick Werner - The Zertinan Caverns

An unusual choice for an arrangement, the piece in its original form is largely concerned with orchestral tone colour and effects, being almost entirely devoid of motivic content. Ambiguous tonalities with a tinkling ostinato precede a more rhythmic section. A challenge, certainly.

Technique: 7

The format of piano quintet has been adopted and suits the direction of the work, at the same time allowing the arranger to showcase his talents for string part-writing. A variety of instrumental effects are used throughout, encompassing portamento slides up and down the fretboard and harmonics. These however are not overused - they serve a definite purpose and are used as such. The former glissando effect lends a disconcerting and uncertain feel which perfectly matches that of the original work. Innovative effects are not limited to the strings, however, as in the section from bars 51-56 wherein the 'cellist and pianist are instructed to tap on a nearby surface with "metal beaters". The arranger has thought carefully about the placement of such an effect, which obviously requires bar rests either side to provide an opportunity for the players to set down bows (in the case of the 'celli) and to pick up their beaters. At a particularly dramatic moment the pianist is instructed to use palm clusters, which are well notated and effective.

The arranger clearly knows the function of these unusual effects and indeed their very presence and utility suggests a confidence in style which is pleasing to hear. However, the work demands exceptionally skilled performers - there is a wealth of complex double-stopping, not to mention a very complicated passage from bars 43-47 which requires the violins and violoncello not only to triple-stop, but to do so on sharp and quick beats marked *accento e tenuto*, and in an irregular time signature - and all at a tempo described generously by the arranger as "very quick!" So despite the adventurous nature of the orchestration, perhaps certain sections could be described as 'overkill'.

Also, in spite of the arranger's bold and indeed daring string writing, there are sections which sadly do not lie within the realms of playability. Frequently the poor first violin will be asked to play and hold a spread three-note chord for multiple bars - something not within the compass of even the most skilled of players. One suspects in such circumstances that what at first seems very much a piano quintet is in fact designed for larger forces of strings than one to a part, hence the unplayable sections. However since the arranger has not stipulated in notation by separate stems separate parts within each stave, it must be assumed by anyone taking it at face value that the arranger is expecting more from his violinists than they can physically provide. Only thus is the otherwise effective string writing called into doubt.

Dynamic directions are just that - dynamic. Almost all of the dynamic compass of the instruments is used, often to dramatic effect. Tempo directions are useful, if slightly schizophrenic, and humorously tongue-in-cheek - "Laboriously" being a particular favourite (bar 17). If anything can be said about them it is that they are perhaps too

frequent, and do not allow the music to settle into a rhythm, although this is perhaps the intention.

Musicality: 8

Remarkably adventurous, the arranger has nurtured the uncertain tonalities of the original and developed them into a work packed with violently chromatic harmonies. Brimming with rhythmic vitality, it turns what was in the original form an understated and largely sedate work with a mildly unsettled flavour into a disturbing and vibrant Stravinsky-esque tone painting. This seems to be the natural progression - for it would not be seemly for the piece to be taken in the other direction, or given a more benign character. The arrangement retains the colour-sense of the original - no mean feat considering the large orchestral palette at Sakimoto's disposal.

The adoption of a neo-classical form has allowed the arranger the freedom to include such devices as sequences in clever ways (as in bars 57-63, with inversion between lower strings), and suits his talents.

Personal Tilt: 8

Unashamedly dissonant and very adventurous, the whole is carried off with aplomb and panache. It could be supported with a deeper knowledge of the way the instruments should be used and the limits thereof, however the sheer audacity of the tonal language endears the arranger to me greatly, and shows a great potential. It cannot under any circumstances be said of the arrangement that it is boring, or dull, or staid, for it is none of those things. It is exciting, vibrant, and innovative, and I commend it highly.

Total: 76.6%

Blake Waldrep - Penelo's Theme

A standout track on the OST due to its memorable melody, I am not surprised to find no fewer than half the arrangers entering the competition with arrangements of this theme. The nature of the orchestration assists an easy transcription, but I was eager to see how the arrangers used or developed the material.

Technique: 7

A straightforward arrangement, brief and largely to the point, covering all the important aspects of the piece. The opening, however, does not inspire the utmost confidence - a player confronting the piece for the first time is presented with not even the slightest hint of dynamic or tempo direction, leaving them completely in the dark as how to approach this interpretation. Even a vague direction about how the piece is to be performed, eg "With a bounce" or even just "Moderato" would be preferable, but alas none is forthcoming.

Things do not improve immediately, as after a competent first two bars (including some

nice syncopation) the player is confronted with a vastly broken chord - a good idea, to provide textural variation in the accompaniment while nothing is going on above, but nevertheless is clumsy to play, and presents a situation where the pianist cannot play it smoothly but rather must leap and cross his fingers over, something perhaps possible in the right hand but certainly to be avoided in the left. The part leading following this section, moving from a Bb to the Db5 chord, is awkward - the bass part should ideally rise to the Db rather than fall only to resurge upward. This pattern is repeated four times in the arrangement, which does little to generate a sense of interest or momentum. Techniques such as staccato are well applied in the middle F minor section, and the techniques applied to a couple of preceding chords form a nice contrast to otherwise safe, on-the-beat chords in the left hand.

The often repeated crotchet movement can seem dull after a while of plodding through passages dominated by it, and here a little more rhythmic variation would be appreciated. But the whole is not rhythmically dry, and a passage towards the end shows a nice regular left-hand figure.

Musicality: 6

The harmonies are generally well thought through and sensible, though the parallel fifths in the bass clef that accompany the main tune sound awkward. There are some bizarre turns, for example in bars 23 and 24 where the bass and melody rise in parallel in an odd key - the crescendo here making certain we notice this.

However, generally the harmonies are faithful to the original and/or make sense within the context they have been used, despite the odd lapse - reference the modulation from an Ab chord to an E diminished in bars 28 and 29 which is decidedly odd not to mention a little harsh on the ears. Indeed bar 29 spares our ears nothing by inflicting a strong-beat false relation on us - a C seventh in first inversion, with a B natural in the melody!

Personal Tilt: 6

The main problem I have with the arrangement is a certain inconsistency in the level of thoroughness with which it has been approached. As I have mentioned before, dynamics are lacking, except on two occasions (mf and ff) where relatively little thought seems to have been applied to their placement. The whole implies a certain lack of adequate proof-reading (a quaver at the end of the first page ties to nothing, for example). Although this may seem pedantic, it is also nice to have the odd bar number to refer to.

However, the whole is at least cohesive, playable, and mostly accurate - whatever tempo is intended...

Total: 63.3%

Jason Mulligan - Penelo's Theme

A standout track on the OST due to its memorable melody, I am not surprised to find no fewer than half the arrangers entering the competition with arrangements of this theme. The nature of the orchestration assists an easy transcription, but I was eager to see how the arrangers used or developed the material.

Technique: 7

This is arranged for the motley line up of a modern wind-based chamber ensemble - clarinet, soprano, alto, and two (!) baritone saxophones, as well as piano, percussion, and a single violin. With a layout as eclectic as this, I was intrigued to see why these instruments had been chosen, and what effect this would have on this interpretation of the theme.

First it would seem meet to point out that the choice of two baritones rather than, say, a tenor and a baritone, seems to be a strange one. Since these instruments have been written for differently - the first baritone having much more athletic and dextrous parts than the bari, it would seem more appropriate to designate this line for a tenor sax. Also when the instruments double each other, it would serve to provide greater textural colour. On a more acoustical note, the presence of such a strong low-end can endanger the balance of such an ensemble.

The addition of a military-type snare drum to the mix is one that does help propel the music along and gives it a sense of marching and splendour which seems appropriate to this upbeat theme.

Dynamics are frequent and placed effectively and correctly (pedant's note: why has a fortissimo marking been applied to the empty bar 72 in the percussion?).

There are passages where one finds the writing for an instrument slightly implausible or unrealistic, with not as much thought being given as to how this will be played as one might hope. For example, the semiquaver passage in the Bb clarinet beginning in bar 31 runs continuously for no fewer than six bars, and even after this there is not a rest - the player must be allowed to breathe, and this can partially be achieved by the addition of phrasing marks - which are unfortunately generally lacking in this arrangement. It is of course also necessary to consider parts written for wind instruments to analyse when the player will need to breathe.

Having said this, other areas where faster runs are employed (for example in the soprano saxophone at bar 44) are effective, and provide a pleasant ostinato to counterbalance the slower violin melody.

Musicality: 6

The arranger has with some success broken down the original melody into fragments

which he has then used as the basis for development, as is evident right from the outset. Harmonies generally remain faithful to the original, despite the occasional harmony overlapping in an instrument or two. Also the middle passage of the original in F minor (here at bar 45) is in this arrangement de-emphasised. The Db major/F minor progression which marks out this section in the original is skirted around rather than, as would seem more fitting for an arrangement such as this, wholly embraced - the absence of a bass-line instrument at this point is significant.

Despite the choice of a selection of transposing instruments, it is worth noting that these have all been correctly transposed to instrumental pitch for the score.

It is also good to see a structured approach, where each instrument seems to have its chance to shine and take a fragment of the theme.

Personal Tilt: 7

Despite an inconsistent approach to musical language and technique, the jovial feeling of the theme survives and permeates the arrangement, making this an excellent choice for this arranger. A slight sense of hesitance is detectable in the writing, and it might have been more appropriate to choose a more conventional group of instruments to write for. However, there are flashes of inspired part-writing, and this is a commendable effort.

Total: 66.6%

Will Buck - Penelo's Theme

A standout track on the OST due to its memorable melody, I am not surprised to find no fewer than half the arrangers entering the competition with arrangements of this theme. The nature of the orchestration assists an easy transcription, but I was eager to see how the arrangers used or developed the material.

Technique: 9

This piano arrangement takes the form of a set of fun, jazzy, and technically accomplished variations on the theme. The first exposition is largely faithful to the original, with rests used effectively to add a bouncy joy to proceedings. The direction *schierzando* is one that aptly suits the jovial air pervading this theme. However, the arranger has also shown by the direction *legato e secco* that he is conscious of the need for the frequent rests not to dominate, and the music still to have a sense of flow.

After this first exposition of the theme the arrangement becomes more free, with chromaticism creeping in to provide some jazzy progressions that suit the theme entirely. The sense of fun and scherzo is continued, with a lot of rhythmic and dynamic variation, including some fantastic use of syncopated entries (bar 12 notably) and variation in key signature which really helps propel the music along (bar 14) without detracting from it in any way.

The piece also shows development, starting in a low-key fashion before escalating into passages spanning a large part of the instruments compass. On this matter it can be said that some of the lower writing can sound a little murky, a good example being bars 44 and 45, where both hands are playing in the bass clef. One appreciates that this is to achieve some form of further textural variation, however this should not be attempted if it sacrifices the clarity of the writing.

The piano writing in general shows a wonderful technical fluidity, with hands generally well-balanced and leaps, while challenging, eminently possible.

Musicality: 9

A subtle treatment of the source material is evident from start to finish, and shows a great skill for piano writing. While some left hand manoeuvres constitute taxing stretches, they are well within the realms of possibility and make the whole more interesting by providing a challenge the which many piano arrangements seldom seem to. It brims with vitality and innovative writing. Playing instructions are frequent but not obtrusive and serve to guide the player rather than control him.

Only in a few cases is the original material hampered by the arranger's revision. In the F minor section from bars 19-27, the left-hand melody falls to a Bb as the chord reaches F minor in the bass - the use of the perfect fourth here weakens this important chord, leaving a slight sense of dissatisfaction with what was in the original a lovely contrast to the more jovial sections.

Despite this, in all other places the liberties the arranger has taken with the theme, by including new diversions and modulations, are for the better, and provide a welcome contrast.

Personal Tilt: 9

It is wonderful to find a piano arrangement that provides a challenging and satisfying way to play such a theme, and this arrangement does exactly that. A league above most of the professional Piano Collections arrangements I have played, it shows a great level of musical knowledge and ability to faithfully recreate the idiom of the original. It is refreshingly challenging, and both harmonically and rhythmically I would go as far as to say it is a good deal more interesting than the original itself. A triumph of intellectual thematic arrangement, and a joy to listen to and play - as much of it as I can play at sight!

Total: 90%