

Harmonic and Rhythmic Structures in “Merlin,” Mvt. 2 “Time’s Away”

An introspective analysis from the performer’s perspective performance

By Juan Alamo

“**M**erlin” is a 12-minute composition for solo marimba in two movements composed by Andrew Thomas in 1985. The piece was commissioned by William Moersch and premiered on March 17, 1987 at the Merkin Concert Hall in New York. The work is broken into two movements, “Beyond the Faint Edge of the World” and “Time’s Way.” “Merlin” is one of the most important marimba pieces written for marimba in the past 30 years and a major contribution in the establishment of the marimba as a serious concert instrument. Thomas said, “I wrote ‘Merlin’ because of his (William Moersch’s) and my belief that the instrument is a serious concert instrument that deserves a wide-ranging repertoire that transcends the ‘novelty-solo’ reputation of the instrument.”¹

“Merlin” is a very innovative work within the classical marimba repertoire because of its unique harmonic and rhythmic structures. The piece presents an interesting challenge for the performer, both in its technical demands and its musical content. For that reason, a careful analysis of the harmonic and rhythmic structure of the piece will help the performer in the preparation of this masterpiece.

This article will address the harmonic and rhythmic structures of the second movement, “Time’s Way,” as well as the influence of a poem by Edwin A. Robinson in the piece. For the performer, “Merlin” presents several challenges that go beyond learning notes, solving technical problems, and choosing appropriate mallets. In “Merlin,” the performer must carefully analyze and study the harmonic and rhythmic structures used by Thomas in order to achieve a successful interpretation.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON’S POEM: “MERLIN”

According to Thomas, during the time he was composing “Merlin” he read the poem of the same name written in 1917 by Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935), which had some influence in his composition. “William Moersch commissioned the score, and my first title for the work was ‘Music for Marimba,’” Thomas said. “Moersch told me adamantly that he wanted to premiere a work with a title. I realized that I had been reading the poem during the composition, and that its spirit had infiltrated my music and my thoughts. I chose the two quotes for their appropriateness to the spirit of each movement. This was a ‘belly decision,’ not an intellectual one, and it was made instinctively, after the music was finished.”² The two quotes used by Thomas are “Beyond the Faint Edge of the World” for the first movement, and “Time’s Way” for the second movement. According to Thomas, the second movement, “Time’s Way,” is inspired from the following passage from Robinson’s poem:

“Times way with you and me
Is our way, in that we are out of Time?
And out of tune with Time.”³

RHYTHMIC STRUCTURE

While in the first movement, “Beyond the Faint Edge of the World,” the harmonic structure is the most important aspect, rhythmic structure is the most important aspect of the second movement, which is one of the most challenging works in the classical marimba repertoire. “I worked with Bill (Moersch) especially on the physical and mechanical aspects of the second

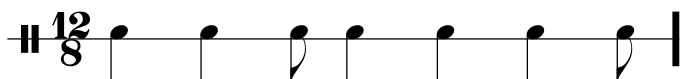
movement,” Thomas said. “Bill has amazingly long arms, and I was able to write the huge intervals at the end of ‘Merlin’ because of his splendid reach. This obviously affected the music!”⁴

The second movement, contrary to the first movement, is very fast, characterized by the use of rhythmic patterns, fast runs, and “melodic ideas” derived from the octatonic scale. One of the features of this piece is Thomas’s unique use of rhythmic groupings that create a special rhythmic effect, a sense of lacking a strong downbeat. Listening to the second movement of “Merlin,” there is a sense that the piece is written in multiple meters that continuously change every other measure. But, in fact, the second movement is written in 6/8 with a few 9/8 measures. What makes the music sound so chaotic and unstable in terms of beat stability is the way Thomas organizes the 6/8 measures.

RHYTHMIC BACKGROUND

To help gain an understanding of the rhythmic structure of this movement, a background of the compositional process of the second movement is necessary. According to Moersch, “Andrew tailored the second movement to my particular body-type: tall, with long arms; hence, the use of counterpoint in different registers. The rhythmic patterns are all variations he worked out on the 12/8 bell pattern used in ‘Dances for Five.’”⁵ (See Example 1.)

Example 1: 12/8 Ewe abaja bell pattern



This 12/8 bell pattern is a rhythmic pattern used in the drumming music of Ewe, a community from southeastern Ghana, Togo, and Benin. A unique feature of their music is “The Unit of Time Rule or the Rule of Twos and Threes”; the phrases are built up of the numbers 2 or 3, or of a combination of 2 and 3, or of the multiples of this combination. This type of phrase grouping is used by Thomas throughout the entire second movement. Thomas said, “Actually, I used the bell pattern in another work, ‘Dances for Five,’ that I wrote for the New York Quintet, where Bill was a member. That entire work is based on drumming patterns from Ghana, which I find sophisticated and deeply involving. In ‘Merlin,’ I used the pattern of 3+3+2, and in order to keep the rhythm interesting, I used all the permutations of that pattern. If you look at the first measures of the second movement, you will see that subgroups of the pattern move into different positions at each repetition of the group. This is one reason why the piece is hard to memorize, because virtually nothing comes back the same way. It is also the reason that the rhythm stays alive.”⁶

One important feature of this movement is that Thomas

uses the sixteenth note as the basic pulsation of the measure instead of the eighth note. Looking at the score, one can notice that almost the entire movement is written in sixteenth notes. This allows Thomas to subdivide the 6/8 measure into unique, non-common groupings. By doing this, Thomas is able to create different permutations of the Ewe pattern, following the “Rule of Twos and Threes.” Example 2 shows some of the patterns that Thomas used in the second movement. Notice how he subdivides the measures in groups of 2 and 3.

Example 2

Rhythmic Pattern 1 (3-2-2-3-2)

The image shows two musical examples of rhythmic patterns in 6/8 time. The first, titled 'Rhythmic Pattern 1 (3-2-2-3-2)', is written in treble and bass clefs. The treble staff contains sixteenth notes grouped in 3, 2, 2, 3, and 2. The bass staff contains eighth notes with accents (>) under the first note of each group. The second example, titled 'Rhythmic Pattern 1 (3-2-3-2-2)', also shows two staves. The treble staff has sixteenth notes in 3, 2, 3, 2, 2 groups with accents. The bass staff has eighth notes with various accidentals (sharps and naturals) and accents.

HARMONIC STRUCTURE

An analysis of the second movement form could be identified as:

- Introduction mm. 1–28
- A section mm. 29–99
- B section mm. 100–118
- C section mm. 119–149
- A’ section mm. 149–200
- Coda mm. 201–212

In terms of harmony in this movement, even though there is not an established tonality, one can hear that this movement is centered on the “F” pitch. While the first movement is based on “G,” the second is based on “F,” maybe reflecting the destruction of Arthur’s court in Robinson’s poem. “I agree about the tonal centers,” Thomas said. “I suppose you could say that there is a sense of a falling tonal center between the first and second movements, and that this in some way reflects the feeling of collapse and falling apart that occurs in the poem.”⁷

As in the first movement, Thomas uses many pedal tones, over which he manipulates the Ewe bell pattern. In the introduction, one can see the use of a pedal on “F” (mm. 10–17 and mm. 25–28) which moves to the A section with the rhythmic pattern previously discussed. Thomas uses two different variations of the

pattern on this section. In m. 31 he uses (3+2+3+2+2), and in m. 34 he uses (2+3+2+3+2).

Measures 70–89 are some of the most interesting sections of the piece in terms of the harmonic motion that also works as a transition to the B section. These measures begin on “F” (notice the use of pedals in this section), then move down by half steps until “C” arrives in m. 98. Thomas also uses the octatonic scale at the end of this section (mm. 94–96) that leads into the B section, beginning with a new rhythmic motive at m. 99. Also through this section, Thomas used another two variations of the Ewe bell pattern. The first variation occurs at m.106 (2+2+3+2+3) and the other one at m.113 (2+3+2+2+3).

The C section shows Thomas’s mastery as a composer. During this section (mm.119–149), Thomas used all the thematic materials contained in this movement and also incorporated some of the thematic materials used in the first movement. For example, in the beginning of the C section (mm. 119), he used an idea that was previously employed in the B section, then he recalls the A section (m. 121) based on the Ewe bell pattern, followed by thematic material related to the B section based in another rhythmic variation of the Ewe bell pattern. In mm. 136, 140, and 148, Thomas used some of the chords he employed in the first movement (see Example 3).

Example 3

mm.136-137, 2nd movement
Same chord used in m.2 in the 1st mov.

Measures 146–148 are also a clear example of the octatonic scale used by Thomas, combining the two F-octatonic scales (see Example 4).

Example 4

As mentioned before, most of the thematic material in “Merlin” is based on the octatonic scale. In mm. 5–6, Thomas is using the G-octatonic scale. Other sections where Thomas used the octatonic scale are mm. 53–56, mm. 94–96, mm. 146–148, and in the Coda (mm. 201–207). All of these sections are based on the F-octatonic scale.

The piece ends with a chord that combines the two principal sonorities of this piece: F–B the 0–6 pitch-class set (predominant sonority of the second movement) and D–G (which is the principal sonority of the first movement; see Example 5). This phenomenon could probably be analogous to the sentence in the poem that says “Times way with you and me is our way, in that we are out of Time? And out of tune with Time.”⁸

Example 5

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

One of the biggest problems in terms of performance practice in this movement is its meter. When listening without a score, it is virtually impossible to recognize the 6/8 meter; the subdivisions of the rhythmic patterns do not represent a traditional 6/8 pulse. The musical writing in the second movement is also misleading for the performer because it does not reflect the actual sound of the patterns within the 6/8 meter. To better understand the feel and pulse desired by Thomas, the second movement could be re-written in a different meter. This will give the performer a better understanding of the musical ideas presented by the composer (see Example 6).

Example 6

As stated throughout this article, the rhythmic structure of the second movement has a very unique feature: many different rhythmic variations of the Ewe bell pattern are used in this piece. These rhythmic patterns must be carefully analyzed by the performer in order to obtain clarity in the execution of this piece. In this movement, the performer needs to be aware of the non-western rhythmic influences in the rhythmic structure of the piece to better understand and interpret the music.

For the performer, the second movement demands a great deal of physical motion because of the rapid and constant shifts of registers and sequencing of the rhythmic patterns. The second movement could sound “mechanical” because of its rhythmic nature. Therefore, the performer must have a deep understanding of the other musical elements employed by Thomas to give musical meaning achieved by simultaneous musical layers.

CONCLUSION

The structure of the second movement is characterized and unified by the virtuosic rhythmic structure and harmonic language that makes the piece a major work within the classical marimba literature. “Merlin” requires not only a virtuoso player, but also an intellectual and mature musician to be able to understand Thomas’s composition. If the performer carefully examines and understands the harmonic and rhythmic structures, he or she will be better prepared to achieve a strong interpretation. This type of analysis will also help the performer in the process of learning and memorizing the work.

Since the rhythmic structure is a major component in the second movement, the performer must first thoroughly understand the origin and foundation of the rhythmic patterns used by Thomas. By carefully studying the rhythmic influences in Thomas’s composition, the performer will gain an in-depth knowledge about the way the composer organized rhythmic material. Knowing the origins of the Ewe bell pattern will help the performer in the phrasing, articulation and style of the movement. Also, studying the different types of rhythmic groupings in this piece will be beneficial for the performer in achieving clarity and coherence—especially in a piece in which the actual meter indications do not necessarily reflect the actual rhythmic groupings.

In addition, understanding Robinson’s poem could be an advantage for the performer. Since the composer admitted that he might have been influenced by Robinson’s poem, it would be very helpful for the performer to get acquainted with the poem, which will ultimately affect the interpretation of the piece. The mood, style, and character of this piece can be better understood by being familiar with Robinson’s poem.

In summary, “Merlin” is one of the most difficult marimba solos to play, but having an in-depth analysis and research will give the performer valuable tools to use in the preparation and performance of this piece. This not only affects the performer’s

understanding of the piece, but it will make the performance more clear and appreciated by the audience.

MERLIN

By Andrew Thomas

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ENDNOTES

1. Conversation by email with Andrew Thomas. January 29, 2008
2. Ibid.
3. Robinson, Edwin Arlington. “Merlin” from *The Collected Poems Edward Arlington Robinson*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1917. pp. 280.
4. Conversation by email with Andrew Thomas. January 29, 2008.
5. Conversation by e-mail with William Moersch. January 26, 2008.
6. Conversation by email with Andrew Thomas. January 29, 2008.
7. Ibid
8. Robinson, Edwin Arlington. “Merlin” from *The Collected Poems Edward Arlington Robinson*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1917. pp. 280.

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