

triadic chords are struck and buried across the range of the keyboard; they insist upon rather than invite attention. The Lennon quote is not without meaning. We hear the Adams of his Beatles-loving days, and in fact the composer has been quoted as acknowledging the inspiration of “a couple of Beatles songs” in conjunction with *Four Thousand Holes*.² But although the simple harmonies of the Fab Four might have inspired Adams, the self-conscious showiness of the pop group is present as well. One can imagine the pianist ricocheting off the piano bench in the best virtuoso style as he sinks all his weight into the keyboard and rebounds.

The comparison of *bells* to *Holes* is like that of ballet to modern dance. Where the former is about lift and weightlessness and transcendence, the latter is a study in the forces of gravity and control. This piece is about speaking and being heard, about making an impression on the sonic environment, but perhaps the materials are too limited to sustain such an elongated oration. Although there are many moments of rhythmic and sonic interest, the piece, for all its resonance, doesn't ring true for this listener. Adams's locus seems to have changed and perhaps he's not quite comfortable in this new place.

This is no criticism of the playing of pianist Stephen Drury, who brilliantly metes out his energies and attention over the course of the work. As with his recordings of works by John Cage, Charles Ives, Frederic Rzewski, and John Zorn, Drury proves himself worthy of inclusion among an elite corps of contemporary pianists who are technically and temperamentally up to the most demanding literature. Nor do I have anything less than accolades for the quality of the recorded sound. Recordists Jeremy Sarna and Patrick Keating, and Nathaniel Reichman who was in charge of the final edits, mixing and mastering, have done a stunning job of bringing both large and small sounds to life. My dilemma is with the eponymous piece: after six months of trying, I still haven't found my way into it. Whether this is a shortcoming of the composer or of the listener, I don't know. Perhaps we both have to get comfortable with John Luther Adams's move.

Denise Von Glahn



Journal of the Society for American Music (2013) Volume 7, Number 3, pp. 355–357.
© The Society for American Music 2013 doi:10.1017/S1752196313000333

Mobtown Modern Big Band, *The Re-(w)rite of Spring*. Arranged and directed by Darryl Brenzel. Innova 824, 2012.

The premiere performance and recording of Darryl Brenzel's re-imagining of the *Rite of Spring* was made on 12 May 2010, before an audience in Baltimore's Metro Gallery. This arrangement, for jazz big band, was written at the request of Brian

² David Weininger, “A New Adams Piece is More Ecstatic than Earthly,” *Boston Globe*, 17 June 2011. www.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2011/06/17/john_luther_adamss_four_thousand_holes_gets_its_first_live_performance_at_jordan_hall_next_week/.

Sacawa, Curator of Baltimore's Mobtown Modern Music Series, but was not motivated by any desire to mark the approaching centennial anniversary of Stravinsky's ballet in 2013. Sacawa thought it would translate well into jazz; Brenzel agreed and began his adaptation in the fall of 2008.

Brenzel retains the fourteen scenes of the two acts of the original, begins each with its distinctive themes, and assigns them to the instruments in his band that evoke the colors of Stravinsky's scoring. Whereas Stravinsky's *Rite* runs about thirty-three minutes, Brenzel's performance lasts nearly an hour and a quarter, meaning that about two-thirds of the CD comprises material written by Brenzel or improvised by members of the band.

The Mobtown Modern Big Band (MMBB) is an ensemble of jazz virtuosos, and although no larger than earlier big bands (the Sauter-Finnegan Orchestra and those of Stan Kenton and especially Don Ellis—who had a passion for complex meters—come to mind), there is a notable variety in instrumentation. There are six sax players (counting Brenzel on solo alto in the closing *Sacrificial Dance*) who double on clarinet and flute, and four trumpeters who double on flugelhorn. Showcasing the latter, Michael Johnston effectively sets the mood of the *Introduction* of act 2 and the close of scene 13, *Ritual Action of the Ancestors*. The four trombones provide solid chords and angular riffs that capture Stravinsky's unique rhythmic and metric traits, notably in scene 6, *Procession of the Sage*. (The duration of the movement in Stravinsky's score is about forty seconds; Brenzel's version extends to about four minutes.) Keyboardist Timothy Young's tasty improvisation in this movement is based in part upon Stravinsky's harmonies.

The Sage, movement seven, comprises only four measures in Stravinsky's score. Bassist Jeff Lopez (or Brenzel?) expands it to three minutes of compelling improvisation, played pizzicato, and recalls the sustained pitch collection of measure four. Brenzel begins the signature movement of the work, *Dance of the Young Girls*, with an inserted four-bar drum introduction that sounds weak compared to what follows. The brass carry the iconic chordal material of the dance, and although they preserve the accents of the movement, which negate the traditional effect of the barline, one misses the timbre of the heavy down-bows of the strings in the original. Additionally, changing the groups of four even sixteenth notes of Stravinsky's bassoon part (m. 9) into a triplet and an eighth detracts more than it adds, and the mixed meters of *Ritual of the Rival Tribes* seem to have been reduced to a consistent and less interesting 4/4.

Stravinsky was himself not averse to re-scoring the works of other composers (Bach, Grieg, Chopin, Mussorgsky), and rhythmic and harmonic elements of jazz pervade his works. Some of his pieces were even composed in specific jazz styles (*Piano-rag-music*, 1919), and one could argue that the first two musical influences to encompass the entire globe were jazz and the music of Stravinsky.

Further, attempts to wed classical idioms, genres, and styles with jazz are numerous. Consider Ellington's *Nutcracker Suite* (after Tchaikovsky), the so-called Third Stream works by Gunther Schuller (his "Little Blue Devil" from *Seven Studies on Themes of Paul Klee* is a tour de force), and the arrangements by Gil Evans. Some jazz-classical composers experimented with twelve-tone serialism. The desire to make jazz "classical" has been an ongoing passion of composers in both genres.

And that brings us back to the recording at hand. *Rewriting* a piece by Stravinsky in a jazz idiom gives reason for pause. What are the objectives? One would certainly not presume to improve on the original. Transcriptions from one performance medium to another are legion, and making a composition available to an instrument or ensemble for which it was not originally intended can have aesthetic and pedagogical value. How a “rewriting” of a work of the stature of the *Rite* is justified, however, is less obvious. A general audience might not be sufficiently familiar with the original work to appreciate the merits of the arrangement, and some might accept the arrangement as an accurate re-orchestration of the original. The uneven responses from the audience to this performance, retained on the CD, and the occasional cheers for featured soloists sound self-conscious, and lead one to wonder if they understood Brenzel’s objectives. Brilliant solos—and there are many on this recording—are often followed by anemic applause.

A literal rewrite of Stravinsky’s score may not have been Brenzel’s goal, but his liner notes do little to suggest where themes, harmonies, and rhythms are cited or paraphrased, and most important, where improvisations begin and end. The space devoted to an extensive description of his personal angst in undertaking and completing the project, and the photographs and trendy design of his liner notes would have been better used to assist the listener in sorting out Stravinsky’s rhythmic and metric techniques, and especially his harmonic language, and how these were transferred to an arrangement for big band. Cross-references to the score used to create the rewrite would be helpful to the jazz scholar and performer.

Despite these concerns, this is a CD that serious jazz musicians should listen to. The improvisations are fresh, section work is tight, intonation is excellent, and the band swings. The sound mix is very good, although the baritone sax is sometimes too heavy, and for a live recording, the audio quality is outstanding. Jazz musicians in colleges and universities with jazz programs would benefit from playing this score (assuming there is a comprehensible score available). If there is a reissue of the CD, I suggest a more accurate title: “Improvisations on themes from Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*.”

Richard D. Wetzel