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# On Unaccompanied Horn Music

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On the Unaccompanied Horn

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## On Unaccompanied Horn Music

Unaccompanied music provides a host of challenges for solo musicians, and especially for wind players. The performer cannot rely on accompaniment for embouchure rest or for realization of the harmonic content, due to only being able to play one pitch at a time. An unaccompanied musician has to breathe life into the music by themselves, requiring an intimate knowledge of the music, even moreso than is already required. The pacing of the music, the dynamics, phrasing, and articulation need to be clearly conveyed to the audience by the performer alone. Likely due to the horn not having valves until the mid-19th century (and even then, taking decades longer before they were adopted into mainstream), there was a very limited repertoire of unaccompanied pieces for the horn until the 20th century. For my honors project, I performed a lecture recital for high school students focusing on Bernhard Krol's *Laudatio* and Vincent Persichetti's *Parable VIII*. In this paper, I will examine the background of these musicians as both performers and composers, analyze *Laudatio* and *Parable VIII*, and compare these compositions.

Bernhard Krol was born in 1920 in Berlin into an impoverished family, though they were still supportive of his aspirations. Growing up, he studied piano and violin from family members, and became the organist and choir director for his church as a teenager. Then, in 1937, the German military draft began for what became World War II. Bernhard's father warned him that "It look[ed] like war (Kilp)," which led Bernhard to decide to join a military band rather than the infantry; however, he did not play a wind instrument. His mother came across an old horn from a

yard sale and purchased it for him. With the assistance of method books, he then began to teach himself how to play the horn. He joined a local amateur orchestra, and eventually earned a spot in a military band. Towards the end of the war, he began to take lessons from Josef Keller and later Gottfried Freiberg, the former of whom was the Principal Horn of the Berlin State Opera. At the end of the war in 1945, Bernhard had become the Principal Horn of the Berlin State Opera, playing with both them and Linden Opera as a member from 1945-1961; during this time he also would frequently play with the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra. In 1963, he was hired to play with the Stuttgart Radio Symphony, and played with them until 1979, after which he retired to fully devote himself to composition (Kilp).

Krol first explored composition in his twenties. Later, after WWII had subsided, prolific foreign and Jewish composers started to come back to Germany, and Krol sought them out for lessons. Krol met Josef Rufer, who was a former student of Arnold Schoenberg. Krol learned the 12 tone system, as well as other atonal techniques, but he also spent an amount of time studying Brahms's compositional style. Krol's study of Brahms inspired him to study many other great composers, from the Renaissance styles of Monteverdi to Bartok's and Hindemith's more exploratory methods (relatively speaking). Through these studies, he decided to not adopt atonal techniques for his compositions, saying that "to [him] atonal music seems to completely lose intensity and excitement (Kilp)." Though Krol does write in a style clearly grounded in tonality, his preferred tonal language does not fit within classical sensibilities, and is more of a "neotonicity" that one could surmise as being in part inspired by his study of Hindemith's personal flavor of sonority ("Bernhard Krol"). One may also notice that Krol had a tendency to draw from his Christian background for composition, and *Laudatio* was no exception to this.

*Laudatio*, written for Hermann Baumann in 1965, was written as a brief meditative piece at about 4 minutes in length. Baumann originally requested the piece so that he could do a radio recording, with it receiving its first live public performance in 1970. *Laudatio* was written just a few years before Krol retired from Stuttgart. The title itself is an allusion to a *lauda*, a hymn of praise and devotion, and the piece contains a variation of the early Christian Hymn *Te Deum Laudamus*, which translates to “We praise you, O God.” It is worth noting that the *Te Deum* is a text that has been used a great number of times by a multitude of composers, and its text was set in German by Martin Luther (Kilp), demonstrating the hymn’s significance beyond the interest of composition.

The piece is unmetred and through-composed, being divided into three sections, an A-B-C form. He opens with his first motive, a Db resolving down to a C, and then immediately follows up with the other motive of the piece, which ascends from G to Ab to Bb. Though these two gestures occur with each other frequently throughout the piece, one can see them as having different statements, and their restatements happen separately often enough that they are their own separate motifs.



Fig. 1 - Opening phrase of *Laudatio*

The first motive serves as a “crying out,” reappearing more frequently in the more active moments of the composition, and experiences many more transformations than the latter motive. The second serves as a question, asking the listener something of an almost spiritual nature.

Michelle Stebleton, Associate Professor of Horn at Florida State University, describes what follows as “a journey, a search for understanding (Boldin).“ The first section serves as exposition to this journey, setting the stage with many phrases seemingly unconnected to each other, as if they are simply their own strands of thought along the journey to understanding. Perhaps the most powerful moment in this section is one of the only two that possesses a metered feeling to it. There is a phrase that is first played at fortissimo, and then immediately after repeated at pianissimo, and is marked “Grave.” The weight given by this moment is dirge-like, giving further darkness to this journey. The first section closes with a restatement of the motifs in their original key, and then stated once again slightly embellished.



Fig. 2 - Grave passage of Section 1, *Laudatio*

The second section begins vivaciously, in what is the only other section in *Laudatio* that feels metered in standard performance practice. This then subsides and leads into the quotation of the *Te Deum*. He opens the quotation with the performer playing stopped, and has them play open again on the next gesture. This technique effectively emulates the call of a church cantor, followed by the addition of a chorus, a very common practice for church services still used in some Catholic churches today.



Fig. 3 - The quotation of *Te Deum* in *Laudatio*



Fig. 4 - A reconstruction of the *Te Deum* chant

As the second section continues, it produces more gestures, more strands of thought, that lead towards another statement of the original motifs without embellishment, closing the second section. The third section, one continuous thought, serves as a coda to the entire piece. It also brings a resolution to the motivic material that has been present in the composition, giving it an authentic cadence, and the audience a sense of closure.

Krol creates an interesting dissonance between his piece and its source material. As mentioned previously, *Te Deum Laudamus* translates to “We praise you, O God,” with the text of the chant following in that spirit; however, the piece is clearly in F minor, which is typically associated as being “sad” music to Western sensibilities. To address this, one must understand that much of the traditional Jewish folk music is in a minor mode (here meaning any mode where the third is minor, not exclusively Aeolian), for reasons of spirituality (Freeman). It is not particularly unreasonable to assert that, due to Krol spending much time studying under Josef Keller (a Jewish composer), he was influenced to an extent by Jewish folk music and drew from that for this composition. The other possible explanation is that he simply wanted a deliberate juxtaposition between his source material and his personal realization of it. This is supported by the nebulous ambience given by an unaccompanied piece’s use of rubato throughout, as well as the overall slower pacing *Laudatio* has compared to the average Jewish folk song. However, it is

likely that Krol created this juxtaposition between text and tonality realizing the parallels one could draw between his piece and Jewish folk music.

Vincent Persichetti was born in 1915 in Philadelphia. He began his musical career at the age of five, studying piano before later branching out to studying organ, double bass, and tuba, as well as theory and composition. At age 11, he performed professionally as an accompanist, radio pianist, orchestra musician, and church organist; all of this allowed him to fund his own music education. When he was 16, he became the organist and choir director of his church, a position he held for twenty years. In 1935, Persichetti earned a Bachelor's of Music degree from the Combs College of Music in Composition, where he then almost immediately became the head of the Theory and Composition department, as well as studying conducting with Fritz Reiner at the Curtis Institute and piano with Olga Samaroff at the Philadelphia Conservatory, and even taking the time to privately study conducting. He later received a Diploma in Conducting as well as both a Master's and a Doctorate in Music. Persichetti went on to become the head of Theory and Composition at Philadelphia Conservatory in 1941, and joined the faculty of Juilliard in 1947 (Johnston).

Persichetti has written for nearly every musical medium, completing over 120 compositions. He is widely regarded as one of the primary composers for Wind Band literature. Within all of these compositions, two unique sets stand out: his *Serenades* and his *Parables*. Persichetti wrote fifteen *Serenades* for a wide variety of instrumentation, including piano duet, orchestra, band, a trombone, viola, and cello trio, and many others. His *Parables*, however, were much more personal. He wrote a total of twenty-five, each with a unique instrumentation, and he describes them as “music where [he is] avoiding a truth in order to make a point;” he also

mentioned the *Parables* being stories about either other music he's written, or things that have personal meaning to him (Duffie).

*Parable VIII* was written in 1972, towards the end of Persichetti's career. It contains three main motives within it. The piece opens with the first motive, a simple open 5th from E to B, evoking the calls of hunting horns. The second is a strong declaration of presence, with a minor third up followed by a major second down (on no particular starting pitch). The third motive, which acts as a counter-motive to the second, is simply a major arpeggio. This seems to ask a question rather than asserting a truth. What makes the second and third motives possess the meaning that they do is neither the notes nor rhythm, but the style in which they are played: the second is loud and marcato, while the third is much more subdued.



Fig. 4, 5, 6 - the three motives in *Parable VIII*

Towards the beginning of the piece, Persichetti writes material that is based upon his *Symphony No. 7* (which is subtitled the "Liturgical Symphony"), specifically the Nicene Creed at the opening. The Nicene Creed is a creed from the Bible, and is essentially the creed of belief: a statement of belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is likely that this was used to reinforce the idea that this parable is a story of progress. To open with a perfect fifth - a foundational interval for the horn, and to then follow it up with a declaration of a foundational creed, heavily implies that the piece's story is that of the horn itself. The piece as a whole has a palindromic structure - though not exact, if you were to play the piece in reverse, the overall thematic structure of the piece would remain relatively unchanged. As the piece progresses

towards its middle point, the music becomes more harmonically and rhythmically diversified, requiring much more of the performer as it goes on. In the middle is a cadenza section, which explores the horn's extended techniques to an even greater degree than the piece has thus far. After this cadenza, the piece has a slow but steady degradation of intensity, returning to the initial thematic material, and closing with one last perfect fifth. This structure could remind one that it is important to return to one's roots, which certainly supports the piece's overarching story as a whole.

An interesting observation one makes when comparing the two compositions is that both were inspired by the composers' religious backgrounds. Both *Laudatio* and *Parable VIII* use overt reference to Christianity - Krol to its musical past and liturgy, and Persichetti to the Bible itself. Both pieces also have an intricate story to tell beyond their harmonic progressions, and both can be interpreted as a story of progress. Krol asks the listener a question, and then takes them upon a tumultuous journey that ultimately gives the listener the answer they sought. Persichetti, however, opens with a solid foundation that is built upon, but is ultimately returned to; a journey whose goal is only the journey itself. The most stark difference between the two pieces is the presence of a meter (or lack thereof), and even that produces less contrast than one might expect, given the free nature of an unaccompanied piece. The only other notable difference is in the level of difficulty a performer might expect from the pieces - between the length of the piece and the level of technique required to play it, *Parable VIII* is simply a more challenging piece. This is not unexpected, given that a composer's later pieces tend towards the more experimental side, and Persichetti was much further into his career than Krol was when they wrote their respective pieces.

Despite the significantly different backgrounds Krol and Persichetti possess, there are a number of similarities in not only their compositions, but in the inspirations to these pieces as well. Each piece is obviously its own work, however, and a joy to have performed and lectured about. Playing unaccompanied, though having a host of challenges that do not exist within accompanied music, is an extremely rewarding endeavor; this is especially true if one takes the time to learn about the intricacies of the piece beforehand.

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