



JOEL PHILLIP FRIEDMAN

Elastic Band

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Elastic Band is scored for clarinet, string quartet and one percussionist (marimba, vibes, three toms, pedal bass drum, three suspended cymbals, crotales, and woodblock).

Elastic Band was conceived as a fun, divertimento-like work. The title refers to both the elastic nature of the work – which happily straddles the Classical, 20th Century, and Pop music worlds – and to a pun: the ensemble writing is often more reminiscent of a jazz “little big band” than a traditional chamber ensemble. The scoring for clarinet and string quartet has classical resonances. But, add percussion to the mix, and a decidedly jazzy-rock tinge emerges: the Mozart Clarinet Quintet... with a *twist*, if you will.

I wanted all three music worlds to co-exist and co-mingle within the piece. Among the Classical elements are: the clarity and symmetry of phrases, and the four-movement design (a more serious-toned opening movement in sonata form; a quirky “Ellingtonian” scherzo second movement; a lyrical slower third movement; and, finally, a lighthearted rondo-like *finale*). However, the free chromatic writing, quick tempo shifts, and irregular meters and rhythms are 20th Century concert music. That said, much of the work’s detail - the rhythmic, harmonic, and gestural language - comes from jazz, or its cousin funk-fusion music.

Growing up playing jazz, rock, and classical I was always struck by how the harmonic and rhythmic materials found in some 20th Century music, e.g. Stravinsky and Bartok, resembled the sound worlds of jazz and funk. *Elastic Band* is steeped in that favorite scale of the 20th Century: the eight-note octatonic scale (an alternating pattern of whole and half steps, referred to as the “symmetric diminished” scale in jazz). By selecting only parts of the scale I could make a “filter.” “Tightening” the filter created familiar, “tonal” jazz harmonies. “Opening” the filter, using more of the scale, allowed for denser, more chromatic sounds. But, probably the most striking element in both Stravinsky and Bartok’s music was their fantastic sense of rhythm. Like jazz and funk, their music heavily employs rhythmic syncopation against a clear strong, sometimes changing pulse – a trait common in my music as well.

The first movement of *Elastic Band* is cast in a tight sonata form and is a good example of the previously mentioned “filtering effect.” The tenser, more chromatic opening theme is opposed by the more expansive and tonal-sounding second theme. Motivically the movement is very organic: almost everything heard is thematically related to either the clarinet’s opening melodic idea - a falling perfect 4th followed by a rising major 2nd- or the brief, seemingly improvisatory rock-style drum breaks that periodically explode during the movement (and which later reappear in the pitched instruments). For the musical detectives in the audience: these drum breaks echo a figure used by Ringo Starr in his only *commercially* recorded Beatles drum solo (here’s a hint: it’s on *Abbey Road*). At the center of the movement is a brief moment of repose – the eye of the storm – that also marks the beginning of a terse development section that gradually re-gathers momentum driving towards the return of the opening themes. The movement ends with a tense perpetual motion coda.

The second movement, “Pure Happenstance,” functions like a quirky scherzo with Duke Ellington overtones in the primal drum *ostinato* and the clarinet’s timbre (think of Ellington’s 1920’s “jungle music”). This movement relies more on juxtaposition and pop-like repetition than the classical-style motivic development found in the outer movements. The scoring is reminiscent of jazz big band writing and the percussion, unlike the outer movements, is totally unpitched throughout.

The 3rd movement, a free fantasy in an ABA arch form, continues in the piece’s playful vein. The introductory section is a series of false starts and endings that revisit and quote the past: the tense, perpetual motion ending of movement 1. Finally, more expressive and lyrical music peeks out and asserts itself as the tension dissipates. There

are more organic motivic connections: the A section's theme, accompanied by soft tremolos, will reappear as the lyrical, broad central section in the last movement. Again there are echoes of the first movement (e.g. the descending 4th). The middle, B section is a free accompanied cadenza for the clarinet that darkens in hue with the tremolos becoming intense and biting. An impassioned restatement of the lyrical A theme fades into an oscillating pair of unresolved chords setting up the *finale*.

The fourth movement, while often the most overtly "jazzy," also harkens back to the Classical model of the *finale*: a fun rondo-like romp. While the musical materials might be a cross between *Earth, Wind, & Fire* and the *Brecker Brothers*, the irregular meters, sudden temporal shifts, and developmental process are 20th Century concert music. Ideas from the first movement freely float in and out of the *finale*. The rondo idea, and the subsequent second theme, are characterized by funky, syncopated rhythms. In contrast, the central section, signaled by the first sudden tempo change, is lyrical and broad recalling the previous slow movement. Later on a swaggering blues treatment of the second theme briefly appears only to be cut short by a compact, breathless coda.

Joel Phillip Friedman (2007)