

Setting by Mel Powell
Analysis by David Mitchell

Mel Powell (1923-1998) was a composer with a rich musical background. He was a jazz pianist and arranger with the Benny Goodman Orchestra and he toured with Glenn Miller during World War II. After the war, he was a pianist and arranger at MGM studios. He studied at Julliard School of Music and with Paul Hindemith at Yale University. In 1957, he succeeded Hindemith as the chair of the composition department at Yale. In 1960, he founded the Yale University electronic music department. In 1969, became the first dean of the California Institute of the Arts School of Music. In the 1950s, he was inspired by the music of Pierre Boulez and Anton Webern and he moved into serialism. It appears he was also a minor league baseball player when he was younger. Mel Powell was a very eclectic and busy person. He makes me feel like a lazy slob.

I believe *Setting For Guitar* by Mel Powell is based on a literary model and he is using the devices of language to give this piece an overall structure and form. I looked up Mel Powell on the web. And it appears he has set several haikus and a prayer set to music. Additionally, the term setting in music usually refers to setting a text to music. Mel Powell uses another literary reference by using the word “syntactical” in his program notes. The word syntactical or syntax is usually used in the literary field to refer to the sentence structure of language. He also uses the term “metaphorically” to refer to the opening line of music and its embedded elements, another literary term. He says that there is no literal repetition of material from the opening line of music, but there is a

metaphorical link between its elements and the piece as a whole. It “provides an interplay of resemblances at continually shifting levels of differentiation”. I believe Mel Powell uses the opening line of music as a metaphorical title to this piece. Each indentation that we see (i.e. measures 7, 24 etc.) is a metaphorical paragraph. The first indentation is similar to a title containing the essence of the piece. The second indentation marks the end of a metaphorical introductory paragraph. The middle of the piece is the body of the work and it is the fleshing out of his total concept in greater detail. At the end of the piece, we find a final indentation that marks the end of the piece in a kind of the concluding paragraph.

This piece is based harmonically on twelve-tone serialism and has elements similar to Webern’s style of composition, one of Powell’s favorite composers. Powell seems to be using the twelve-tone series freely and not adhering to a strict tone row. The harmonics seem to appear at the end of a twelve-tone series or in the middle of a twelve-tone series. This seems to divide the piece into a series of quasi-whole and half cadences. This is probably Powell’s way of giving the harmonic structure of the piece a modular feeling. He says in the program notes that this piece is a modular composition.

The rhythmic structure of this piece is also modular. Powell achieves this effect by grouping notes in rhythm clusters using triplets and larger rhythmic groupings based on time signatures. This piece is highly structured rhythmically, but the effect is a very irregular rhythm. Upon close inspection, one can find triplets in groups of 3, 5, 6, 7, and 11. The time signatures are 4/4, 5/4, 6/4, 7/4, and 8/4. Above some of the measures he indicates specific subdivisions of the measure. Some of the subdivisions of the measure are 1/4, 2/4, and 3/8. If we take into consideration all of these groupings, all rhythmic

groupings from 1-12 are represented except 9 and 12. This is a kind of rhythm row used freely to give the overall rhythmic structure of the piece a highly organized but irregular feeling.

I think the piece is effective.

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