

60. Red stripe band Yellow Bird

(For Unit 6 Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and Performance Circumstances

- This tune, often thought to be a traditional Calypso melody, in fact originates from the island of Haiti, where it was a song in the Creole dialect.
- Its original title was 'Choucouné' and it was written in 1893, with words by Oswald Durand, the Haitian poet laureate and music by the American/Haitian composer Michel Mauleart Monton.
The original subject matter concerned a woman from the island. Another, similar tune is the early Haitian 'méringue' – 'Ti zwazo', which some sources trace even further back to an old French Chanson melody 'Non, non, je ne marierai pas'.
- The English version, 'Yellow Bird' was popularised in the 1950's, most famously by the Jamaican singer Harry Belafonte. For this reason it is often assumed to be Jamaican, and has found its way into the repertoire of the Caribbean's many Steel bands.
- Steel bands developed in the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago, firstly as 'Tamboo-Bamboo' – tunable bamboo sticks hit on the ground to produce sound. In the late 1930s metal instruments based on frying pans, biscuit tins and brake hubs began to be used, and eventually the 55 gallon oil drum, which has been the basis for the steel pan ensemble ever since, was pressed into service.
- These all-percussion ensembles play an important part in the cultural life of the Caribbean, not only in Carnival and Calypso settings, but also in 'serious' competitions, where virtuosic versions of classical pieces are played at impressive speeds.
- The Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra was founded in 1951 to play at the Festival of Britain, and from this time the style began to spread internationally, especially to England, with its growing West Indian population.
- The version on CD4 was recorded by The Red Stripe Ebony Steel Band, and it appears on the compilation album *The Best of Latin America*, released in 2000.

Performing forces and their handling

- Steel pans were traditionally made from oil barrels, although modern manufacture uses sheet metal of a higher quality.
- The top of the barrel is stretched downwards to form a bowl shape, on which the tuned notes are then hammered out.
- The pitch of the note is determined by the size of its oval shape on the drum – the larger the note's area, the lower its pitch.
- The higher pans (Single tenor/ping Pong) can play many notes on one instrument, while the lower instruments (Basses) might only play three notes, meaning that a player needs more than one to cover the note range. The 'skirt' of the pan is longer for the lower notes and much shorter for the higher pitched members of the group.
- The instruments are chromatic.

- The pans are played with rubber tipped wooden sticks, with a mixture of single hit and rolled (tremolo) notes, which allow longer note values to be sustained.
- The instruments used in this recording are, in descending order of pitch:
 - Tenor Pan.
 - Double second.
 - Double tenor.
 - Four-pan cello.
 - Bass.
- There is also a drum kit on this recording to keep the beat, featuring heavy use of the cymbal, hi-hat, lower tom-toms and bass drum. Notably, there is little snare drum in evidence in this recording.
- Each part has a fixed role in the ensemble here:
 - The top two parts carry the melody almost throughout, mostly in unison, but with occasional passages in thirds and with a brief descant line in the top part between bars 27 and 33.
 - The double tenor begins with a syncopated ostinato like figure, but for the second half of the A section and the whole of the B section, it plays semibreve harmonic filling in the Alto range.
 - The Four-pan cello plays a tenor part, mostly in minims and semibreves.
 - The bass pans play triadic shapes throughout, using the 'habanera' rhythm borrowed from Cuban music.
- The parts are therefore polarised – the outer parts containing the most important material, while the inner parts are little more than harmonic filling.

Texture

- The texture is entirely homophonic, with all of the inner parts and the bass supporting the melody at the top. This can also be called melody –dominated homophony.
- The texture varies from four to five parts, depending on whether the top two parts are playing in unison at the time.
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Structure

- AABA_vAvB
- Section A is 16 bars long and features two ideas:
 - The 'Yellow Bird' motive, which is four bars long and repeated.
 - A second idea, based on repeated, syncopated, upward arpeggio-like figures, rounded off by a figure falling to the tonic in the last two bars.
- Section B is nine bars long with three two -bar phrases and one three bars in length.
- There is no contrast of key, or indeed much attempt to create musical contrast at all.

Tonality

- G major throughout, without modulation. (Of the few accidentals, the F natural signals a 'nod' in the direction of the subdominant (C) in bars 8-9, while the recurring C# in the initial melody is a chromatic lower auxiliary note.)

Harmony

- Most of the piece is based around the three diatonic Primary chords of G major.
- There is some variation as a result of the A natural in the melody (bars 9 and 13) which gives the impression of a IIb chord.
- The diatonic nature of the harmony is reinforced by frequent moves from V 7 to I.
- The melody sometimes creates extended chords momentarily – for example a dominant 9th chord is heard in bar 15.
- The harmonic rhythm varies, from one or two chords to a bar to chords which last two bars.

Melody

- The first half of the Section A melody is based around the fifth, fourth and third degrees of the scale, with a chromatic lower auxiliary (C#). The movement is mostly stepwise.
- A three note chromatic figure joins this idea to.....
- The second half of the A section, largely based on a repeated, syncopated rhythm. The melody features upward arpeggio figures (bars 9 and 10 form a descending sequence), using intervals of thirds and fourths. A large leap at the end of every bar is created, the line dropping variously by a ninth, octave or seventh to the low E or D. The phrase structure of the melodies is discussed under structure (above.)
- The B section melody is triadic, using intervals of 3rds and 5ths. It ends with a similar descending stepwise figure to that of the end of the A section.

Rhythm and metre

- Notated in 4/4, but the feel is more strongly duple, particularly at the chosen tempo.
- The syncopations in the melody possibly derive from those of Latin American music, Samba, and those found in the Caribbean Calypso.
- There is a strong feeling of part of the Latin American 'Claves' rhythm throughout this piece. This rhythm, heard both in the lower drums, and in the melodic rhythm of the second half of A, consists of two dotted crotchets followed by a crotchet, or in quavers, 3+3+2.
- The repeated Bass rhythm is the 'habanera' ('from Havana') rhythm of Cuban music, popular in the 19th century throughout Europe.