Verne Reynolds's Etude No. 6
from 48 Etudes
by William Eisenberg

Verne Reynolds published his 48 Etudes for French Horn in 1961. These etudes, like those of Chopin, Scriabin, and Rachmaninoff, are both technical studies and works of art – works with “sufficient musical merit” to deserve performance, as Reynolds states in his introduction. Nevertheless, the etudes have remained mostly in the practice room and off the stage. Perhaps the lack of performances and recordings is due to their significant technical difficulty, which overshadows their musical worth. Yet, to my mind, these are wonderfully expressive compositions that deserve to be performed. This article examines some of the challenges one faces in Etude No. 6, sheds light on its formal and harmonic language, and suggests how one might use this knowledge to craft a more compelling performance.

An interpreter of this etude faces significant challenges from the structure, harmonic logic, and lack of tonality. Without a single key to govern tonic-dominant progressions and cadential gestures, it is easy to get lost. In a tonal work, tension and release is driven by traditional voice leading – dissonance is carefully resolved by step, minor sevenths resolve downward, leading tones resolve upward, and so on. Without these guiding practices, it is difficult to pinpoint the real points of arrival, on the small scale and the large, and the piece can end up sounding like a long run-on sentence. Therefore, one must get a handle on the organizational logic that drives the phrase structures and the large-scale form.

Verne Reynolds states that this etude is one of his “interval studies.” The minor third plays a vital role in the underlying harmony and the ends of phrases and sections. Reynolds generates different harmonies by combining minor thirds in a variety of ways (see Figure 1). Specific set classes serve different functions: [0369], the set-class of the diminished 7th chord works as a signature harmony or signpost; [0134] is the collection of the piece’s head motif; and chromatic clusters appear throughout. These collections, with their distinct intervallic profiles, mark new sections.

The etude is in an ABA’ form, with the overall structure outlining a rise and fall in several ways. The A section begins in the middle range of the horn, and stays in this register until m. 28. The highest point appears in the middle of the B section, which runs from mm. 29-42. The closing A’ section plunges to the lower register, and comes to a close after gravitating to and solidifying the low [as written, in F]. The etude has a hairpin shape dynamically, too – it opens softly, builds throughout the development, and closes with a pianissimo. Rhythmically, the opening and closing sections feature only eighth notes and longer note values while the development relies almost exclusively on triplets and sixteenth notes. The B section also accelerates the presentation of minor third cells. Like a pot coming to a boil, the surface becomes muddied as seconds and major thirds emerge forcefully, overshadowing the clearer presentation of minor thirds in the outer sections. Performers have a choice to make here: they can cut across the grain of some of the slurs to bring out other intervals or continue to emphasize the minor thirds, which compose the lines.

The opening four-bar motif recurs four times, each at an important structural point (see Figure 2). Each statement maintains the same [0134] sonority and rhythmic profile, but serves a unique role. In the first occurrence, the thirds fold in on each other, but the second two-bar grouping doesn’t overlap the first. When the motif returns in mm. 12-15, the measures work upward chromatically, overlapping each other and forming
a central axis around b, a minor third below and above. It is also important to note that the shape of each two-bar cell is an inversion of the opening gestures. The next occurrence in mm. 29-32, which marks the beginning of the B section, uses the same gesture as the opening, but starts lower, allowing Reynolds to return to the opening pitches when he sequences the motif up a perfect fourth, just as he did earlier. The final appearance of the motif, from mm. 43-46, marks the start of the A’ section. Like the second occurrence, the gesture is inverted, but instead of closing on an expected e♭, it drops an octave from the f, and then another octave to f in the next bar. These octave leaps signal a change in section and are a sign that the piece is coming to its final phrase. If treated properly, this change of pattern on the fourth (and final) occurrence has the potential to be a particularly surprising and expressive event.

Figure 2

An understanding of the rhythmic structure is also integral to an effective performance. The opening bars lay out two motifs that play vital roles in the etude: long–short followed by short–long. These twin motifs recur throughout. They accentuate the asymmetry of the 5/4 meter, made plain in the opening bars where the motifs are stated with a dotted-half and a half note. In these measures, the long–short gesture brings an increase in volume and intensity while the short–long gesture is heard as a relaxation. Reynolds often uses a series of short notes followed by a longer one as a cadential gesture at phrase endings. The reverse pattern (long–short) signals an increase in tension. In mm. 16-18, for instance, the phrase builds in intensity, as shorter eighth notes follow the opening slower rhythm, then relaxes into the downbeat of m. 18 on the short-long figure. Another example of rhythm intensity occurs in mm. 47-48, where eighth notes push the phrase forward and an exact recurrence of the original short-long motive brings it to a close.

As mentioned earlier, one of the main challenges in this etude is avoiding a run-on sentence. An understanding of the phrase structures is a huge step towards avoiding this pitfall. Although this is an atonal composition, Reynolds makes use of one of the most common phrase structures in the Classical period: the sentence.2 William Caplin defines a sentence as “an eight-measure theme built out of two four-measure phrases.” It “begins with a four-measure presentation, consisting of a repeated two-measure basic idea” and ends with a continuation that “brings closure” (Caplin 1998). In other words, the presentation includes the basic idea (a motif or fragment) and its restatement, either verbatim or with registral or harmonic variations. The continuation typically features an intensification of harmonic rhythm, melodic fragmentation, and a drive towards a cadence. As an example, think of the opening horn statement in the first movement of Mozart’s first horn concerto, or the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (after the first two fermatas). Unlike its companion structure, the parallel period,3 a sentence moves forward with tension and energy – it has, in other words, a “progressive” dynamic.

Sentences saturate this etude and are established at the outset. The basic idea is stated in the first two measures. It introduces the short-long and long-short rhythmic motifs, which combine into a [0134] sonority, the same set as the first four notes of an octatonic scale.4 The dynamic swell of the basic idea, with a crescendo and decrescendo, mirrors the shape of the entire piece. The next two measures transpose the basic idea up a perfect fourth. While a typical sentence has a continuation lasting four measures, this one lasts for seven. The extension runs from mm. 6-9 and explores a diminished-seventh sonority within the context of an octatonic collection. The closing section can also be thought of as an expanded sentence. Measure 39 recapitulates the basic idea from the opening; a new two-measure motive appears in m. 47, which then repeats down a perfect fourth. As was the case with the opening sentence, this continuation is also extended. Reynolds closes on an A-C dyad that mimics the close of the opening four bars, but he lingers on these notes, slowing to a crawl as the piece spends its last eight measures on a single [0347] sonority. This realization of the collection has a more open feel than the opening [0134] gesture: While the thirds in the opening seem to fold in on each other, the thirds at the end open outward, widening spatially along with the broadening of rhythm.

Articulating the climax of the etude is also essential to a compelling performance. The highest note, at a dynamic of forte, occurs on the b’ in m. 36. The etude has been gradually climbing upward to this point, after which the register slowly and inexorably descends until the final measures. This climactic b’ is structurally significant: it is the midpoint of both the entire etude and the B section. On the surface, its arrival is marked by a change in m. 38 from triplet rhythms to sixteenth notes. At first glance, b” appears to be the climax. But a closer reading offers several compelling reasons to maintain the intensity through the b” until the e at the downbeat of m. 37. One reason is the fact that downbeats serve to articulate phrase beginnings and endings as well as new sections. To wit, the opening phrase ends on a downbeat whole note in m. 11, the B section closes on a downbeat whole note in m. 42, and the final note begins and ends on a downbeat. Since downbeats tend to occupy places of strongest arrival, it makes sense to continue to build through the middle of measure 36 until the downbeat of m. 37. Another reason to build the energy to the e’ is that the b” to e’ gesture of the climax has been carefully foreshadowed. The main points of arrival leading up to the climax are the b’ at the end of the opening phrase in m. 11, and the e at the end.
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of the A section in mm. 27-28. Bringing out the gesture in the climax from b- e” connects these three events.

Breathing is a very familiar issue to horn players. Unlike orchestral passages, where one might quickly snag an unnoticed breath, breathing in this etude is exposed. With this in mind, breathing and phrasing must always go hand in hand. There are two types of breath to consider, active and passive. Active breaths are a part of the musical line and can be thought of as being “articulated” in much the same way a tongued note is. For example, the listener should palpably feel the eighth-note rest in m. 35 – a clear release on the preceding note and sharp attack on the following will ensure this. Passive breaths, on the other hand, are actual silences that serve to create space between sections. Not all passive breaths need be equal, however. Before beginning the second phrase in m. 12, one might pause slightly longer than a quarter rest, but an even bigger space should mark the end of the first main section and the beginning of the B section at m. 29. The silence before returning to the calm of the A’ section at m. 43 should be longer still – even a pause of several seconds would not be out of place. This silence allows the turmoil of the B section to fade away and prepares the listener for the return to the inversion of the opening gesture.

In a perfect world, we would never be forced to “catch” a breath. Since everyone has to breathe eventually, it is important to make these breaths musical. The length of a breath, whether it is active or passive, and how to connect the material on either side of the breath should all be considered. In general, breaths can be taken every two bars, and at the notated rests. Those in parentheses show logical places to put additional breaths, if necessary. It is especially important to make these extra breaths musical, as well. For example, if one does not breath in m. 53, it is easy to emphasize the octave leap from c’ to c, but this is also possible even with a breath: we simply make sure that the breath is active, and feels like a slight lift before the low c, rather than a stop and restart.

Much more remains to be explored in this piece. But I hope that this essay provides insight into the etude’s large-scale rhythmic, dynamic, and registral shape, as well as the frequent use of sentences, the combinations of minor thirds, and the interplay of short-long rhythmic motifs. I also hope that it can serve as a starting point and a guide for performers who are interested both in building technique and making compelling music: For a careful consideration (or “close reading”) of structure, articulation, and logic can inform performances of Reynolds’s other etudes, which contain as much depth and “musical merit” as this one.

Works Cited


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Notes

1. Set classes are a way of classifying collections of notes. Here, I represent set classes as constructs called “prime forms;” all transpositions and inversions of the same collection share the same combination of interval classes, and thus belong to the same prime form. For example, a D diminished seventh chord and an F diminished seventh chord belong to the prime form [0369]. See the works cited for several resources on set class theory.

2. The term “sentence” (Satz in German) was coined by Arnold Schoenberg (an important theorist as well as an extremely influential composer). See Caplin’s *Classical Form* for further discussion.

3. A parallel period features a phrase repeated twice, first with a weaker cadence and then with a stronger cadence. As an example, think of the first two phrases of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” from the Ninth Symphony.

4. The octatonic scale alternates whole steps and half steps: C–C♯–D♯–E–F♯, and so on. This collection is also referred to as a “diminished scale” by many jazz musician.

Sure Shot Playing

Personally I was never a “sure shot” horn player. But when I gradually applied this idea to the whole range, I became a “sure shot!” Ironically, I discovered this remarkable principal about six months before I decided to retire!

“Sure shot” players do not change the texture of the upper lip. They do it naturally without knowing why. Now “sure shot” playing can be available to everyone who applies this upper lip principal!

The biography of Fred Fox, the most recent IHS Punto Award winner, is found on page 59. Fred expounded on this topic at the International Horn Symposium.

Sure Shot Playing (or the “hanging lip”) by Fred Fox

Imagine a woodwind player using a medium hard reed. No matter how high or low he plays, the reed remains medium hard. It doesn’t change regardless of the register or how hard he presses on it.

The same should be true for a brass player. Most brass players make the upper vibrating lip inside the mouthpiece stiffer as they play in the upper range. This creates another “moving part” or an extra error-prone possibility. This upper lip change can be eliminated, thus greatly increasing the accuracy of the player!

Play a middle register note on your instrument. Then play a note one-third higher, concentrating upon keeping the upper lip that is in the mouthpiece identical, with no change whatsoever. Yes, the muscles around the mouthpiece will change but not the vibrating upper lip inside the mouthpiece. That remains like a reed – not harder or softer but the very same texture.

You will be surprised to find that you can play those notes going up and back a third without changing the upper lip tension inside the mouthpiece. Once you can do this, you can gradually extend the range in both directions with no change of the upper lip.