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Anna Webber's Balance of Freedom Within Structure

An Analysis of *Kore I*

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In many cases, jazz musicians can find too many factors to consider in their improvisations to be limiting. Excess chord changes, complex rhythmic features, obnoxious comping from assisting musicians, etc. Classical musicians, on the other hand, live in a world of relative rigidity, where their expression comes from the practice of interpreting the restrictions of the written score. Anna Webber's music falls anecdotally within the jazz idiom, with many features that seem to serve her philosophical aspects of composition, as well as her thoughts on improvisation within the music. A student of John Hollenbeck, and following the compositional lineage Bob Brookmeyer, Webber believes that a soloist should serve the composition, rather than use the composition to a means to their own ends of expression. At the same time, her compositions have an expert balance of rigidity in form, and free flowing, almost aleatoric, nature. Previously in jazz, most performances served the soloist first, using the melody as a vehicle for improvisation. Webber has flipped the script on this. In her eyes, restriction breeds creativity. By creating a demanding environment for the musicians in her ensembles both musically and creatively, Webber has begun to create her own musical idiom in the form of freedom within structure.

In this analysis, I focus on the aspects in which Webber has retained elements of the jazz idiom, and restructured them within her own interpretation, specifically within the piece *Korē I*. I seek to provide evidence of compositional elements that arise in both jazz and Webber's music, and how they provide similar utility, yet are almost sonically dissimilar. Due to the influence of Xenakis' piece *Persephassa*¹ on this project, and the intentional use of inventive and

¹ Kriegeskotte, Christian. "Clockwise by Anna Webber Expounds Upon the Essence of Timbre." I CARE IF YOU LISTEN. August 24, 2019. Accessed December 09, 2021. <https://icareifyoulisten.com/2019/08/clockwise-anna-webber-expounds-upon-essence-of-timbre/>.

unconventional orchestrations, I believe that Webber has situated herself as a musical polyglot, concerning herself with not only improvisation, but also strict artistic sensibilities in her compositions, that align her closer to modern 20th ct. composers. This mode of musical thinking is imperative to the future of jazz, as this utilization of rigid composition begins to bridge the gap between jazz and modern music, and simultaneously helps to breed further innovation from both composers and improvisors.

Influence

Korē I is found on Webber's album *Clockwise*², a project which employs the influences of many 20th ct. composers' percussion pieces. Specifically, Webber focused on the use of snippets from individual pieces and redevelops them into new works within her own compositional idiom. Additionally, one of Webber's main concerns was the elimination of harmony and pitch as a center point of the composition, and to instead rely on the timbre of the piece as the main developmental principle³. A challenging task, this ultimately generates the works heard on *Clockwise*, creating strictly composed forms and structures relying on intricate rhythmic schemes and matrices that maturely and eloquently place harmony as a secondary quality to the piece.

In the case of *Korē I*, Webber primarily turned to Iannis Xenakis' *Persephassa* for inspiration, a piece originally composed for six percussionists. At nearly thirty minutes long, there are many points Webber may have chosen to analyze for inspiration. However, it would be best to contextualize Xenakis' compositional background rather than to explain the individual

² "Anna Webber - Clockwise." Discogs. January 01, 1970. Accessed December 09, 2021. <https://www.discogs.com/master/1750785-Anna-Webber-Clockwise>.

³ Lofoco, Alberto. Anna Webber. Accessed December 09, 2021. <http://www.akamu.net/webber.htm>.

elements of *Persephassa*. As a composer, Xenakis was known for his avant-garde notions on structure and orchestration, but with good reason. With a background in architecture⁴, Xenakis' compositions were primarily based on precision and structure, rather than sitting within the ideals of other western European classical musical archetypes. In the case of *Persephassa*, Xenakis tasked himself with considering not only the formal structure of the piece, but the sonic aspects of performance as well, and how this is affected by the timbre of the percussion instruments used. By dispersing the performers amongst the audience, Xenakis was able to take full advantage of the imitative polyrhythmic schemes in the piece, creating a piece that is not only demanding of the musicians, but also challenges formal listening constructs known within the European classical music idiom.

This influence is immediately heard in Webber's *Korē I* and is an incredibly pure example of the strict compositional structure she conceived for this piece. Upon first listen, *Korē I* proves to be challenging. Beginning with a steady pulse, one expects to track this throughout the piece, only to be quickly thrown by a jolting interruption in the piano, before returning precisely to the initial pulse. As challenging as this is for the listener (even entertaining), the ultimate challenge falls to the musicians performing it. In the context of the everyday jazz musician, would this be playable? What about for the trained classical musician? Precision is a necessity for them, but error may be found in the coming improvisational sections. *Persephassa* demanded precision from its performers as well, at the risk of the piece's total failure. Webber's *Korē I* requires the same attention to detail.

⁴ Hoffmann, Peter. "Xenakis, Iannis." Grove Music Online. 2001; Accessed 9 Dec. 2021. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000030654>.

An additional point of influence on Webber's work may also come from her many musical associations with John Hollenbeck. Originally attending McGill University for her undergraduate work, Webber eventually moved to Germany in 2011, and studied under Hollenbeck at Jazz Institut Berlin⁵. Incidentally, Hollenbeck moved back to North America in 2015, and began teaching at McGill as professor of jazz composition and improvisation⁶. This began continual musical collaborations between the two, including Webber's SIMPLE Trio, her album *Idiom*, and their newest project GEORGE, among various others. A student of Bob Brookmeyer, Hollenbeck shares many of the same artistic sensibilities as his mentor, including challenging compositions for his performers that require an intricate attention to detail. This mentoring lineage is evident in Webber's work, as there are common principles in terms of structural aesthetics that found in all party's works.

The Listening Experience

Webber absolutely presents a challenging listening environment for her audience. While one may assume they are about to listen to a contemporary jazz album, even that supposition can be withheld in order to fully consume her music appropriately. *Clockwise* as a whole stands up as a piece of work that wishes to break down the barriers of composition in jazz, without the assumption that one must confine themselves to the idiomatic styles of western composition. To combat this, Webber has generated and expanded on parts of her own compositional language to create a truly unique product. But with everything that is new, there is always detractor. With new music, one must listen to it like their life depends on it. For the listener, this can be a

⁵ "Anna Webber (musician)." Wikipedia. November 18, 2021. Accessed December 09, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Webber_\(musician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Webber_(musician)).

⁶ "John Hollenbeck." Music. August 27, 2021. Accessed December 09, 2021. <https://www.mcgill.ca/music/john-hollenbeck>.

challenge at times; yet the greatest triumph is digesting what Webber has to say in her work, and fully appreciating the art that she has created.

To a classical musician, one may approach this with the mindset of “new music” as associated with Bang on A Can, or Alarm Will Sound. As Webber has associations with both these ensembles, this wouldn’t be surprising. However, her individual take on composition requires one to drop their assumptions in this manner and appreciate it as a new product. With the infusion of improvisation into the pieces, they no longer fall within a fully “classical” idiom, yet they neither fall into fully “jazz” circles either. So, what are they?

This is the question the listener must answer for themselves. One may find it to be a modern take on jazz composition, with the infusion of strict classical composition, or vice versa. Or one can see it as an interpretation of the source material, *Persephassa* (a challenging listen itself), reimagined through Webber’s eyes. What everyone can agree on, however, is that it is unique in its own way, painting itself into the fabric of music that we refer to as art.

Musical Objects

As previously stated, one would “anecdotally” align *Korē I* as jazz music. In many opinions, this is more so due to the realms of music it does *not* fall under (rock, indie, classical). Further, some jazz musicians of an older generation may adamantly deny that *Korē I* is jazz due to its contemporary and restrictive compositional or improvisational nature. However, throughout the piece, there are multiple elements that are not only borrowed, but are directly taken from jazz, and placed within the context of Webber’s own compositional idiom. While she has taken great care to redevelop the musical aspects from Xenakis’ *Persephassa* into new and

unique settings, the familiar structural elements of a jazz piece can still be identified, albeit in different forms.

Beginning with the immediate, Webber hasn't stepped too far from traditional jazz instrumentations. While the use of an alto flute and cello is unusual, their use in the ensemble is typical in terms of the purpose they are serving as harmonic embellishments to primary lines, or as unisons with the rest of the ensemble. The other two melodic instruments are a tenor saxophone and trombone, familiar to standard jazz settings. Opting for a standard rhythm section of bass, piano, and drums, the instrumentation remains the same there as well. However, the composed nature of the piano part, along with the "prepared" aspects of the piano augment its standard use in typical jazz ensembles. At first glance, one may see this instrumentation and assume it to be a normal ensemble, with the addition of alto flute and cello. However, its Webber's utilization of the instrumentation in atypical forms that combined the familiar sound of a jazz ensemble with modern compositional sensibilities.

As stated before, restriction breeds creativity. This applies not only to the improviser, but the composer as well. By choosing to use an augmented instrumentation, as well as apply the influence from *Persephassa*, Webber has forced herself into a box that she can only compose her way out of. The key in this all is to write in an incredibly creative and mature style that enhances not only the aesthetical aspects of the piece, but the inherent skills of the musicians as well. As Webber states in a DownBeat interview about the project:

"I wanted to see what everybody else was capable of and really tailor my writing to those specific people—and not just to 'the trombone' or 'the cello,' but actually to Jacob Garchik or Christopher Hoffman.⁷"

⁷ Rodriguez, Alex. "Anna Webber's 'Clockwise' Spans Musical Worlds." DownBeat Magazine. March 20, 2019. Accessed December 09, 2021. <https://downbeat.com/news/detail/anna-webbers-clockwise-spans-musical-worlds>.

The musicians Webber chose are ultimately what ties the compositions together, creating the landscape for the entire piece to unfold. While the inherent abilities of the musicians are what dictates the finer points of the composition, they are both an asset and a restriction. Yet, restriction still breeds creativity. In Xenakis' previous experience as an architect, he knew the importance of having strict engineering, precise figures, and clear communication to create a successful structure. He worked with his restrictions to create incredibly precise and unique structures. In his compositions, he took it a step further and created restrictions in order to breed a level of creativity beyond what was required for the modern composer.

Consider the famous estate by Frank Lloyd Wright, Falling Water⁸. Built into the side forest, surrounded by trees, and accompanied by natural water features, the idea of building a house in that environment without upsetting the prevailing ecosystem is a daunting task. However, these restrictions engendered the creativity to create one of the most beautiful pieces of architecture in modern America. By viewing the environment as an asset, Wright developed a creative solution to overcome these restrictions. While some may view a group of musicians as "insufficient" for the performance of demanding music, Webber instead has insisted on looking at the landscape they can provide, and challenged them to go to their furthest extents creatively, thus bringing about some of the best of their own musical tendencies.

While this is shown brilliantly on *Korē I* and throughout the rest of *Clockwise*, this isn't a new concept in terms of jazz composition, either. Duke Ellington famously spoke about his compositions as tailored to the individuals in his band. This in turn helped create the timeless "Ellingtonian" sound that is consistently associated with traditional jazz. Two notes from Johnny

⁸ "Fallingwater." Wikipedia. December 04, 2021. Accessed December 09, 2021. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallingwater>.

Hodges' alto saxophone on *Isfahan*⁹, and most avid jazz listeners will immediately know it's an Ellington recording. While this can be in part due to the Ellington organization's commercial success and popularity, the success of the composition comes from his intricate attention to detail when writing for the individual members of his ensemble. Every aspect of the piece was designed with the ensemble's strengths in mind.

Bob Brookmeyer spoke frequently about was the idea of "framing the soloist."¹⁰ This is meant in the sense that the improvisation serves the composition, not the other way around. When composing a piece, you have an idea of the pitches, rhythms, textures, and affects the composed material can generate. When asserting the action to "solo" or "improvise" on someone without regulation, you lose control of the piece. This is meant in the sense that the material for the composition dictates the aesthetical and philosophical components that should be emphasized throughout the piece.

In the case of *Korē I*, Webber has stepped in. In a highly composed structure such as *Korē I*, it would make little sense to give someone total freedom to improvise however they would like. What's remarkable is that a simple restriction places the improviser (in this case, Jacob Garchik on trombone) further within the context of the piece. By requiring the soloist to use a harmon mute, an atypical choice for trombone improvisation, Webber restricts the timbral options, as well as the improvisational language of the soloist. Garchik is forced to improvise within the affectual connotations of the piece, having a different sense of creativity pulled from this challenge. This effect becomes even more apparent once Garchik removes the mute towards the end of his solo, notably changing his dynamic levels, flexibility on the instrument, and

⁹ "Duke Ellington - The Far East Suite." Discogs. January 01, 1967. Accessed December 09, 2021. <https://www.discogs.com/master/280135-Duke-Ellington-The-Far-East-Suite>.

¹⁰ Rivello, David. *Bob Brookmeyer In Conversation With Dave Rivello*. New York, NY: Artistshare, 2019.

harmonic utilizations. With a simple tool, Webber is able to incorporate the improvisation as an aspect of the piece as a whole, rather than as a showcase for an individual, while at the same time taking the challenging the individual to improvise in a creative way to become one with the rest of the piece.

An additional detail that Webber has reincorporated from traditional jazz settings is the use of “background” figures during the trombone improvisation. In a swing setting, these backgrounds would normally be accenting parts of the form, whether through syncopated hits, countermelodies, pads, or various other devices. Webber approaches it differently on *Korē I*. To address this difference, it’s important to first understand two concepts in jazz improvisation: the action of “comping” from an accompanying musician, as well as the dialogue known as “call and response” in a piece, improvisational or otherwise.

“Comping” is typically the accompanimental rhythmic and harmonic figures provided by a rhythm section member (typically a piano or guitar) behind a soloist. This is usually done in the form accented off-beats, rhythmic developments on the improvisors material, or outline the chord changes to help lead the solo harmonically. A “call and response” come from the blues genre, where an initial musical statement would be given out by a primary voice, usually rising to a dominant chordal function (the call), and would be answered by another voice returning to the tonic (the response). This can be integrated into comping figures as well, where the accompanist responds to the calls sent out by the improvisor, in turn helping complete their phrases for them.

In *Kore I*, there is a noticeable emulation of these processes, as filtered through Webber’s compositional idiom. At the entrance of these backgrounds at rehearsal letter “D” in the piece, the idea of comping or background figures is combined, and written directly into the form itself.

Performed by the tenor saxophone, flute, cello, and piano, the highly rhythmically composed figure interrupts the steady dotted quarter pulse appearing underneath the trombone solo. To navigate this, Garchik either stops playing while the backgrounds are playing, or plays into them, emulating this “call and response” nature found in jazz. Coupled with Garchik’s own musical sensibilities, there are many cadential points harmonically where he ends phrases by leading into the backgrounds using blues improvisatory language.

Due to the combination of “comping” and “call and response,” as well as the integration of the improvisation as an aspect of the piece, it begins to feel as though Garchik and the ensemble are playing towards and supporting one another, instead of the traditional feel of backgrounds supporting a soloist. Garchik’s improvisation is seeped into the texture, creating an egalitarian environment amongst the ensemble. By the time it seems as though the backgrounds have fully overtaken the sonic space, the solo has ended at rehearsal letter “E,” and they have joined together in a foggy unison, which can be related the rejoining of parts in a big band piece after a solo, leading into a “shout” chorus.

Transformative Materials

The backgrounds hold part of the key to the construction of the piece. Due to the timbral nature of the piece, pitch is a secondary concern to its construction. However, that doesn’t mean that it wasn’t taken into consideration for the construction of its harmonic aspects. Since this piece is seemingly “atonal” rather than polytonal, one could argue that there is a lack of symmetry within the chromatic configurations that Webber used. However, this isn’t the case. There’s clear [014] structures throughout the background figures, and an identifiable

transformative scheme between the figures themselves, which begin to unravel the harmonic schemes found later on in the piece, as well as the beginning.

To start, let's look at the background figures at rehearsal "E," in their entirety. They have been labeled "K" for the individual sets.

Additionally, here is a chart that shows their transformations:

Label	Set	Transformation
K1	[014]	
K2	[014]	T2
K3	[014]	I0
K4	[012]	Interruption
K5	[025]	<I9> from K1
K6	[026]	<I9> from K2
K7	[026]	<I11> from K3
K8	[012]	T5 from <K4>
K9	[026]	I11 from K7

During this sequence, there is also a pedal "G" occurring, which if taken into consideration would alter the pitch sets above. However, since Webber's score instructed the backgrounds to disregard it, we will do so as well for our analysis. The first three sets all present as [014], and have a recognizable transformative scheme between them. Using the bass notes along, it appears to step up a major second, then a minor second, creating an interval of a minor

third. However, this is harmonized with the prevailing [014] harmony, which first moves by T2 between K1 and K2, but then I0 between K2 and K3, changing the voicing while still retaining the harmonic shape.

The intense 1/8 bar acts an interruption, accompanied by a cluster of [012] in K4. Here it moves smoothly back to a 4/4 where the ensemble plays half note triples at K5-7, first on [025], then on [026] for both K6 and K7. While these are similarly related harmonies that are possible to map onto each other, it is more interesting how they map from the initial statements from K1 through K3. In this sense, K1 maps onto K5 through <I9>, K2 maps onto K6 also through <I9>, and K3 maps onto K7 through <I11>. K8 shares a similar [012] harmony as K4, which maps onto it by T5. And finally, K7 maps onto K9 through I11, similar to the <I11> function previously used to come from K3. Further, the bass notes of this entire background figure end up completing a set of just [0123456], or simply, the extension of [06].

The conclusion of the solo ends with a line that generates [0123567]. Interestingly, this row generates similar [06] qualities as the previous bass line to the background figures. Additionally, because of the formation of the row, it also generates four individual [016] harmonies as well. This ties into a few important parts of the piece. First, the send off to the trombone solo used a similar 11-tuplet figure as found at the end of the solo, which led into a (C#, C, G) pitch set, which is an [016] that can be derived from that row. Additionally, moving into the last statement of the piece, with all instruments in tutti, a (D, C#, Ab) pitch set can be found, also a [016] which is in the row as well. There seems to be a clear organizational scheme occurring in the tonal language of this piece, which is further enhanced by the brilliant using of rhythmic composition.

Artistic Statements

The greatest thing to consider in any piece like this is “what is the composer trying to say?” By replacing tonal harmony as a center point with rhythm, Webber has reprioritized that structure of the piece. Yet, there seems to still be clear tonal organizational principles in the piece that require an immense amount of preparation to conceive, on the same level as the rhythmic aspects of the piece. One could argue that the tonal aspects are a product of Webber’s own harmonic sensibilities, but that would be unconvincing when there are so many clear harmonic connections. Speaking on the aspect of “playing in the jazz tradition” during an interview with Frank Carlberg, Webber stated that:

“There are lots of musical traditions and they're all valid, and traditions change over time. There's also a difference between what's taught as tradition and what the current performance practice is, and most schools seem to usually be several decades behind what is actually happening in the scene. I play with people who come from all sorts of backgrounds, just because someone can kill it on a standard doesn't mean that they're going to sound good when they play something more abstract, and vice versa¹¹”

I believe that Webber isn’t concerned with committing to a status quo within jazz composition, or delegating her music to fit within normally defined confines of a standard genre. Throughout *Clockwise*, and the rest of Webber’s catalog, it seems she’s concerned with building her own idiomatic form of composition, that is dependent on the restrictions placed upon her by the musicians around her, which she then recontextualizes as assets to her compositional process. Further, her genius in composition is the ability to assimilate multiple sources of influence into

¹¹ Carlberg, Frank. "Anna Webber." Twenty Questions. September 04, 2021. Accessed December 09, 2021. <https://www.twentyquestionsmusic.com/blog/anna-webber>.

her works in order to generate extremely creative that take full advantage of the restrictions and assets placed upon her and the genre as a whole.

Reflection

To approach this analysis, I began by trying to focus more on the aspects of the music that I personally related and expanding from there. As a composer, I understand many of Webber's ideals on composition, especially her use of improvisation within a piece, and if it is necessary or not. What that opened up for me was the realizing the intersection between more idiomatic themes found in traditional jazz, and how they relate to similar compositional devices in her music. As this is "jazz" in a broad sense, form and function can be separated, but the lineage of the music is ever-present, in stratified ways. Due to this, I sought to analyze this piece as if it were a jazz piece, and found that the functional elements in *Korē I* can easily relate to earlier conventions in jazz. What struck me was her very forward harmonic sense, however.

In terms of the listening experience, what I began to focus on mainly was the harmonic details of the piece. As Webber has already state that the timbre of the instruments and the rhythm was the driving force, I was curious why there was a distinct tonal character to the piece. With a quick analysis, I found similar [016] harmonies at various arrival points of the piece, so I knew it had to be significant. Further analysis revealed different iterations of the [016], which amalgamated in the [0123456] cluster, which generated all other [016] harmonies found in the piece. Seeing as this [016] is also a color that can be used over a dominant ($\Delta 3, -7, -3$) I thought there may have been some tonal function. This is clearly not the case though. Instead, Webber

seemed to be using it in the same manner that Webern may have, relating it as a justified color throughout a piece, so that it legitimizes itself within its own idiom.

In terms of connections between this piece in the course, the main point of connection I have would be the discussion of removing the definition of jazz. The Oxford English Dictionary updates itself four times a year, yet we have a standing tradition in jazz that every decade decides to define itself as “jazz” because it includes everything before it, and everything after is now “not jazz.” This reminded me primarily of the discussion about Cage and the AACM. Cage broke through the confines of “art music” in the American sense during his time, only because he refused to adhere to their definitions, and we now refer to him as one of the most influential musicians in the last century. The AACM, on the other hand, sought to redefine jazz (or broaden the definition of) in order to encompass their own aesthetical ideals. An avid admirer of the AACM’s work, I can’t say that I believe this was the right approach. With Webber’s music, along with her peers, I believe the genre is moving towards a more focused style, that allows for the players to incorporate information and history into their compositions, rather depend solely on the conventions of the progenitors. To me, this is no different than Bartok, Debussy, Ellington, or Hollenbeck.