

Alan Theisen's *Arcanum*
Analysis by Brian Kauth

The works of American composer Alan Theisen (www.alantheisen.com) are becoming more well-known amongst audiences here in the United States and abroad. He is currently an Associate Professor of Music at Mars Hill University in North Carolina, following the completion of his doctorate at Florida State University. Theisen, himself a saxophonist, has composed numerous works for the instrument, including a sonata, a concerto, a duet for two alto saxophones, two saxophone quartets, and several smaller works. His most recent composition for the alto saxophone, *Arcanum* (2014), is an extended eighteen-minute unaccompanied work dedicated to fellow classmate and U. S. Army band saxophonist, Christopher Condon.

Theisen states in the program notes that the work should carry the impression of an improvisation, the effect of which is compounded by the presence of several improvised sections within the context of the larger work—a performance path (among others) that Theisen's scores from 2010 to the present possess. This improvisatory character certainly has an impact on how one interprets the work, as well as on analysis.

The first parameter under consideration in this analysis is the form of the piece. Even though it possesses an improvisatory character, the piece is not without form. Like the improvised solos by the great jazz artists, which have a structure behind them, improvisation in a classical music context should also bear a similar logic and pacing. Six large sections form the torso of *Arcanum*: A (mm. 1-33), B (mm. 34-81), C (mm. 82-174), D (mm. 175-200), E (mm. 201-233), F (mm. 234-340). Each section may be described thus: A (slow, very quiet and shimmering), B (more motion, “winding up”), C (rhythmic, scherzando), D (cadenza), E (“Spiegelsaal”, similar to the beginning), F (presto, agitated, virtuosic, coda).

The opening [014] pc-set (F#-G-D#) forms the basis of the opening gestures of the A section, gradually expanding in range and dynamic. Throughout the first ten measures there is a gradual expansion of both range (up to a perfect 11th) and dynamic (from *ppp* to *p*), while the pc-sets used both expand and contract, incorporating [015], [016], and [014]. To play this melodic phrase (and the entire opening section, for that matter) effectively, it is crucial to show this expansion. The remainder of the opening section of the piece shows similar expansive traits, culminating in the broken chromatic scale gesture of m. 21. Up to this point in the piece, the levels of musical intensity and dynamic should slowly build, but never beyond the *f* that is marked in mm. 15 and 21. Measures 22-33 reprise the opening [014] pc-set gesture, albeit in a slightly more expanded form, releasing the musical tension created up to this point.

Incremental increases in tempo and more rhythmic activity are the featured traits of the B section. By gradually increasing the tempo and rhythmic fluidity over a relatively long period of time, Theisen creates the effect of a written *accelerando*—an effect that must be readily perceived by the listener for the section to be effective. Several components aid with the increasing musical tension of this section, including frequently shifting meters, a general presence of rhythmic diminution, slap-tongued quadruple stop figures, a gradually increasing dynamic to *ff*, and the use of heavily accented rapid minor second trills functioning as transitional passages within the larger context.

The C section exhibits the most stabilizing sense of rhythm up to this point in the piece, with only three short meter changes and a preponderance of triplet and thirty-second note figures. Minor seconds and minor thirds (derived from the work's opening [014] pc-set) are prominent intervals throughout this portion of *Arcanum*. Interspersed throughout the continuous rhythmic activity are shorter, contrasting, more lyrical phrases, as well as very dry slap-tongued moments. Theisen indicates that the slap-tongued tones should be played “like a funky walking bass,” which creates an additional contrast to the traditional staccato and *marcatissimo* articulations present throughout this section. It is clear that these differences in

articulation style should be strictly adhered to in order for the musical subtleties to come through, including bringing out the “hidden” counterpoint within the saxophone line. This frenzied music brings about an impassioned cadenza, featuring subtle counterpoint (mm. 185-190) similar to Paul Bonneau’s *Caprice en forme de valse*, in which a waltz-like melody is incorporated into the swirling flurry of tones in between the main melodic tones. As the motion decreases and the dynamic level diminishes, very soft tremolos usher in the “Spiegelsaal.”

Measures 201-233 comprise the “Spiegelsaal” (literally, hall of mirrors), the quietest portions of which should be played without vibrato, while vibrato should be used sparingly until the final measures, which reach *ff*. A few quarter-tones are also utilized in this section to create a “smearing” between various pitches. The entire section recalls the tranquility and shimmering qualities of the opening of the piece; but most importantly, the entire section features mirrored phrases. Following the opening phrase, its repetition (mm. 206-209, with subtle alterations) is mirrored in the subsequent phrase, and mirrored phrases are also found in the next four statements, as well, including the shimmering tremolos in mm. 221-224. Theisen achieves an interesting harmonic effect in mm. 225-226: he outlines C and D major triads in m. 225, and by utilizing G, D, and E as anchor pitches while moving the other two pitches by stepwise motion, he creates G, B \flat , and E major triads in m. 226. The high G \sharp , present in both measures, also acts as a type of anchor pitch, which creates a pc-set of [0146], an expansion of the work’s opening [014] set. The mirrored melodic motion of these triads is matched in mm. 228-229, as these two phrases are also mirrored. The optional improvisation in m. 230 should therefore feature some kind of mirroring, in order to retain the character of this section.

The final section, a *moto perpetuo* presto, showcases the saxophonist’s virtuosity to bring the piece to its conclusion. According to the composer, this section was heavily influenced by the finale of Lutosławski’s Partita for violin and orchestra. After listening to this work, it’s clear that the incessant triplet rhythm provides the musical momentum throughout, and the passages containing pedal tones were also inspired by Lutosławski’s work. There are only occasional deviations into longer rhythms, and register/articulation changes bring out “hidden” counterpoint within the solo line. The soft *bizarro* section in mm. 270-272 is a subtle nod to the fast movement of Theisen’s alto saxophone sonata (2003, rev. 2007), and the following counterpoint and wider intervals aid in bringing the musical energy up another level. Triplets give way to sixteenth-notes, and unequal groupings provide a rhythmic agitation that leads perfectly into the work’s coda, culminating in heavily accented tones and a distorted glissando before the final two pitches.

Alan Theisen’s *Arcanum* is a virtuosic tour-de-force for any saxophonist. It perfectly encapsulates Theisen’s musical language and idiomatic writing for the instrument, and is a fresh, vibrant work deserving serious study. *Arcanum* will be featured on Christopher Condon’s upcoming CD release, *Pieces*, later this year.