

Sonata for Alto Saxophone & Piano (2003) – Sy Brandon  
Analysis by Brian Kauth

American composer Sy Brandon's (<http://www.cooppress.net/index.html>) works have been performed across the United States and abroad, including performances by U.S. Service bands, the Kiev Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Czech National Symphony Orchestra. He has composed several works for saxophone in various musical combinations, including many solo works and chamber pieces. His Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano was commissioned by Polish saxophonist Dr. Dariusz Samól and premiered at The Festival of New Music in Szamotuly, Poland in 2004, with the American premiere given by Dr. Joseph Murphy at Mansfield University in 2005. The sonata is a neoclassical work utilizing traditional classical forms, including sonata and rondo, but also incorporates subtle jazz influences and other idiosyncrasies inherent in Brandon's personal compositional style.

The first movement of the sonata is cast in a traditional sonata form (exposition mm. 1-66, development mm. 67-94, recapitulation mm. 95-146). The saxophone's opening theme is very rhythmic, always shifting meters between 4/4, 7/8, and 3/4. Though the metric changes occur frequently throughout this opening section (mm. 1-24), the music has a seamless fluidity, as the sixteenth-notes seem to "cascade" evenly throughout the saxophone's and piano's melodic gestures. A diminuendo in mm. 22-24 slows the musical momentum during the transition to the second theme at m. 25. The second theme, as is typical of classical sonata form, is more lyrical in character than the primary theme and does occur following a modulation; however, the expected modulation to the relative major (customary in minor-key sonata form movements) is not adhered to. Instead, Brandon modulates from the tonic G minor to the altered supertonic of A minor, which is a rather striking contrast compared to the modulation to the relative major. The saxophone's melodic line outlines an F# minor ninth harmony (transposed) while the piano's "walking-bassline" accompaniment provides a complimentary subtle jazz influence. Measure 47 begins the final melodic idea of the exposition—a scalar variation of the second theme.

The first movement's development section (mm. 67-91) returns to the original key of G minor; however, the rhythmic shifts characteristic of the exposition is now streamlined into an almost constant 7/8 meter. Shades and hints of the opening material are developed, incorporating the dotted rhythmic ideas found near the end of the exposition. The meter change to 5/8 in m. 80 develops more expository material, leading into the transition of mm. 92-94 to the recapitulation.

The recapitulation begins in m. 95 with Brandon presenting the themes in reverse order, rather than the original order of the exposition. As is typical of classical sonata form, the lyrical second theme is stated in the tonic key (G minor). A short piano transition in mm. 117-120 sets up the return of the primary theme in m. 121, followed by a short codetta (mm. 142-146) that rounds off the sonata movement.

In contrast to the rhythmic vitality of the outer two movements, the sonata's second movement takes on a neoimpressionist character. Formally, this movement follows an ABA'B'A" scheme. Though the key signature indicates G minor, there is a fair amount of tonal ambiguity throughout this movement—perfect fourths predominate the opening piano part, and the saxophone's sustained trills create an ethereal sonic experience. By the time the saxophone's theme begins in m. 10, the accompanying harmonies suggest D-flat major/F minor as the tonality. Through the use of harmonic and melodic sequences, Brandon hints at other tonalities, including D major, G major, and C major, before returning to the quasi-tonic of F minor in m. 26. At m. 27 (the A' section), material like that found at the opening of the movement (containing perfect fourths) provides further ambiguity regarding the tonic. It is not until m. 36 that the music begins to suggest G minor as tonic, and even then, only remotely, as sequences and arpeggios are utilized again to further blur the established tonality. The final two measures (which recall the movement's opening material) finally resolve the tonic question by outlining a G minor triad; however, the final open fifth (G-D) seems to leave the tonic question without a well-defined answer.

The sonata's final movement is structured as a rondo—however, this rondo form has been modified to include six sections, as opposed to the traditional five or seven sections of a classical rondo. The overall form of this movement can be described as ABA'CAB' with a concluding coda. Each appearance of the A section provides a solid rhythmic 6/8 pulse, which is contrasted by alternating 6/8 and 5/8 meters in the B section, and many shifts between 4/4, 3/4, and 7/8 in the C section. The first theme begins in m. 7 and is characterized by many arpeggiations and chromatic passages, whereas the second theme (m. 24) follows a diatonic succession of pitches. It should be noted that despite the indicated key signature (A minor), this movement is clearly in G minor, as many cadential areas outline G minor harmonies. The central C section provides the most interesting music of the movement—the frequent metric shifts, coupled with the cascading sixteenth-notes of the third theme, which are accompanied by many perfect fourths and fifths in the piano, create a very dynamic musical atmosphere. There are only minor alterations to the music of the A and B sections upon their return near the close of the movement, and the coda concludes the sonata in a dramatic flourish.

Sy Brandon's saxophone compositions are some of the most approachable and programmable works available today. His combination of lyrical melodies, interesting harmonies, rhythmic vitality, and clear formal structures provide saxophonists with music that is not only enjoyable to play, but also enjoyable to listen to. Student saxophonists and their teachers will find studying Brandon's music to be beneficial to their overall musical education.