

Everette Minchew

*Waiting (always) upon a fragile instant...* for baritone saxophone and harp

Analysis by Brian Kauth

One of today's unique musical voices, Everette Minchew (b. 1977, <https://everetteminchew.wordpress.com>) has contributed several works to the saxophone, including solo works, quartets, and assorted chamber music. His saxophone quartet, *Constructions for Julie Mehretu*, has already been discussed in a previous edition of this column. For this installment, I will be discussing another work of his, *Waiting (always) upon a fragile instant...* (2012, rev. 2014) for the unique combination of baritone saxophone and harp. This work was commissioned by the Kontra Duo ([www.kontradu.com](http://www.kontradu.com)), who recorded it on their debut recording, available for purchase through their website. Minchew's title comes from a line in the e.e cummings poem, "before the fragile gradual throne of night", which he was reading at the time he composed the piece.

As in Minchew's other works, several notational aspects must be considered before performing the piece. Like much of his other music, *Waiting (always) upon a fragile instant...* is written in spatial notation without barlines and without specific rhythmic values—noteheads without stems are utilized exclusively, with the exception of gracenotes and repeated figures enclosed in boxes. This absence of defined rhythm creates a sense of timelessness, a character found in much of Minchew's music. Additionally, this allows the performers a great deal of rhythmic flexibility—so much so that both parts are essentially played in their own time with little coordination between the performers.

One further aspect of time which must be discussed is the notation of the fermatas throughout the work. Three different types of fermata are used: a pointed fermata is utilized for short sustained tones; the standard rounded fermata is used for moderately long sustained tones; and the square fermata is employed for the longest durations. The players must ensure that they make a difference between the three fermata lengths found in the work.

Tone color plays a substantial role in all of Minchew's music. He employs several different timbral effects in the saxophone part, including straight tone (without vibrato), flutter tongue, multiphonics, and overblown harmonics. The different registers of the baritone saxophone also create different colors, such as the penetrating quality of the upper register and the richness of the low register—colors that add to the overall character of the piece. Even the harp plays a considerable role in creating mood using tone color—the pizzicato articulation of the instrument is manipulated to various degrees, and by employing single tones or chords, textural changes are found throughout the work.

Subtlety of articulation is of paramount importance throughout the work. There are only a handful of accented and staccato tones in the piece, which should be emphasized to come out of the very legato texture. It is interesting to note that only one of the multiphonics is accented—saxophonists performing the piece must ensure that the other multiphonics are "voiced in" rather than articulated. Minchew places tenuto marks over several tones throughout the piece; however, this is done only to provide a reminder to the performers to sustain each tone fully, not to re-articulate.

Dynamic nuances are also crucial to the mood of the work. The composer marks the score judiciously with dynamic indications, all of which should be followed explicitly. The prevalence of soft dynamics is important for creating the quiet intimacy of the work, while the sparsely marked forte and fortissimo dynamics are used to emphasize changes in the musical structure.

Minchew's *Waiting (always) upon a fragile instant...* provides saxophonists with an opportunity to play chamber music with the often-neglected harp, as well as enlarging the relatively small repertoire of the baritone saxophone. If a harpist is not available, the composer has conceded that the harp part may be played by piano, if the pianist plays each figure very delicately and applies a generous amount of pedal. Interested parties may contact the composer to obtain scores of his music.