

Gymnopédie for Merida

(Peter Hurley)

Peter Hurley is an Australian composer and teacher who was born in 1959. He completed a bachelor of music degree at Melbourne University, and also holds Associate and Licentiate qualifications in piano, organ and teaching from the Yamaha Music Foundation. In addition to composing and teaching, Mr Hurley is also an AMEB examiner. He currently lives in Victoria.

The title *Gymnopédie* was used for three piano pieces by the progressive French composer Erik Satie (1866-1925); it refers to dances performed before statues of ancient Greek gods in the festival of Gymnopedias, to honour those who had died in battle. The languid rhythms, static harmonies and meditative character of Satie's *Gymnopédies* (which were composed in 1888) provided compositional models for Hurley's piece.

Formal analysis

The main tonality of *Gymnopédie for Merida* is Bb lydian mode - that is, a Bb major scale with a raised 4th degree (E instead of Eb): Bb C D E F G A Bb. There is no real modulation. However, some chords borrow notes from other modes, such as F lydian (a white note scale starting on F), and Bb mixolydian (a Bb major scale with a flattened 7th - Ab instead of A). The formal structure is free:

- b.1-4 **Introduction** - the first 7 notes of the main theme, unharmonised and in free rhythm.
- 5-20 **Main theme.** Two 4-bar phrases followed by an 8-bar phrase. Each phrase begins on a tonic 13th chord (Bb-[D]-F-[A]-C-E-G in b.5, b.9 and b.13).
The melody is all in Bb lydian, beginning on the tonic note and ending on the dominant. The rhythm of the left hand is the same in each bar, and is the same rhythm that Satie used in his *Gymnopédies*. The bass line is mostly in Bb major, beginning on the tonic note and ending on the dominant note; the flattened 7th in b.17 is from the mixolydian mode. Some chords are based on 4ths rather than triads (e.g. b.7-8). The chords in b.7 and b.11 are borrowed from F lydian (all white notes).
- 21-36 A **variation**, or written-out improvisation, on the main theme. The bass line is identical to b.5-20, and the chord progressions are similar. The rhythm of the right hand is now more varied and spontaneous. The melody is still in Bb lydian mode, and the complete scale can be heard in b.28. The harmony becomes more chromatic in the last four bars, with some "blue note" clashes (e.g. bar 34: E in the left hand and Eb in the right hand; bar 36: F in the left hand and F# in the right hand).
- 37-40 **Coda.** All in Bb lydian, with a tonic pedal in the bass, ending on a tonic 13th chord.

Terminology

quasi recitativo means like a speech rhythm (free, spontaneous); *In tempo* means more strictly in time; *calando* means becoming softer and slower.

Stylistic characteristics (drawing on both Classical and Jazz traditions):

- gentle, meditative character; unhurried tempo and unchanging accompaniment rhythm.
- subtle syncopations (long notes on weak beats, rests or tied notes on strong beats).
- simple expressiveness, without excessive dynamic contrasts or extravagant emotion.
- modal scales and static harmonies, with delicate use of dissonance and "blue" notes.
- complex chords such as 13ths, and chords based on 4ths; simple major or minor triads are never used.
- frequent use of sustaining pedal, with no silences except for the introduction.