

Butler University  
Indianapolis, Indiana

JAZMINES:

A Composer's Viewpoint

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## PREFACE

Work on my composition Jazmines began in October, 1977, and was completed one year later. On November 15, 1979, the piece was premiered at a concert of the University of Chicago New Music Ensemble. A tape of this performance along with the score have been submitted to Butler University in partial fulfillment of the thesis requirement for the degree Master of Music in Composition. An additional requirement for the degree was that I provide "an introductory essay covering the genesis of the work, a descriptive analysis, and a translation of the Spanish text."<sup>1</sup> This material is provided in the essay that follows.

Grateful acknowledgment is due Dr. Bradley Nelson, my thesis advisor during the period of composition, and Dr. Richard Osborne for his continued advice and support. The eleven unpaid musicians who worked so hard to premiere the piece have my deepest gratitude and affection. To my wife, Jeannie, who played the harp, did much of the copying, and helped in a thousand ways, I can never and will never say thank you enough.

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<sup>1</sup>Modified thesis proposal approved February 12, 1979, by Butler's faculty of the Department of Music, History, Literature, and Theory.

## INTRODUCTION

My aim in this descriptive analysis is to present a subjective rather than technical explanation of how the music works. I hope this will prove more interesting and helpful to the reader than a detailed discussion of connections between motives, phrases, sections, etc. Some of the more important connections are cited. However, their significance derives principally from their relation to the text and to my understanding of the text. These relations are the focus of my essay.

## JAZMINES

### A Composer's Viewpoint

Jazmines was conceived as a chamber work for string quartet (two violins, viola, and violoncello), woodwind quartet (flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon), solo harp, and solo baritone (voice). A poem by the Spanish poet and Nobel laureate, Juan Ramon Jiménez, (1881-1958), is the text for the work. It is taken from the volume, Lorca and Jiménez: Selected Poems, translated by Robert Bly.<sup>2</sup> The text and translation of the poem are included in the appendix to this paper and in the score.

I chose to set the poem in Spanish rather than English because it helped preserve, for me, a sense of mystery surrounding the events narrated. It allowed the words to speak to me and my audience in much the same way that the music and the two characters in the poem speak---indirectly, through inflections, gestures, and hints. In their exotic images and sounds, the Spanish words contribute to a ritual-like portrayal of the encounter between the man and woman. Basic to this ritual is the mystery of the love of the man and woman,

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<sup>2</sup>Juan Ramón Jiménez and Federico García Lorca, Lorca and Jiménez: Selected Poems, trans. Robert Bly (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), pp. 10-11.

coexisting with their differences in character reflected in their inability to fully share the beautiful evening in the garden.

These ideas directly determined some of the musical aspects of my setting. In the first place, I felt that the different characters of the man and woman could, in some sense, be paralleled in the musical characters of the parts for baritone and harp. Thus, the baritone part is the most stable and conjunct of all, moving in longer note values and generally at the bottom of the instrumental texture. I constantly had in mind, while writing this part, the model of a chant-like cantus firmus. Often in the process of composition, this voice part was written first, and the instruments were coordinated with it in colorful, dancing figures.

By contrast with the baritone, the harp moves much more impulsively, by fits and turns and in smaller note values. It carries the burden of the woman's personality and, by its presence or absence, helps to define the sectional structure of the piece. It has a virtuoso part, more so because of its continuing difficulty than for any particular problems it presents.

My interpretation of the poem as a ritual helped determine the breadth of the harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary in the piece in the following way. I reasoned that the music, like the narrative, should have a kind of ceremonial continuity that would preclude harsh or sudden changes of style or technique. In order to sustain a piece of twelve minutes duration, then, a wide harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary would need to be established at the outset. From this realm of possibilities, the piece could call on one or the other rhythmic or harmonic element in order to remain fresh and interesting

without the need for jolts or surprises.

My technique for composing Jazmines was basically improvisational. Serial and chance methods of composition were avoided. Although the piece is not consciously tonal, it is "harmonic" to the extent that vertical sonorities were chosen to create a more or less smooth succession with voice leading analogous in some respects to tonal harmony. The main differences are in types of harmonies employed, symmetrical harmonies such as those containing augmented triads and juxtaposing tritones being favored, and in the constantly shifting harmonic goals. A good idea of the harmonic usage can be had by looking at the succession of harmonies in the strings in the first ten measures (Fig. 1). With one exception, every harmony in these measures contains either juxtaposed tritones or an augmented triad. An inversion of the initial harmony appears as the goal of the harmonic motion in measure 10. A principle of harmonic motion between "augmented" and "tritone" harmonies seems to be at work here, although it was neither consciously nor systematically employed.

Fig. 1. String harmonies in Jazmines, mm. 1-10

The image shows a musical score for string harmonies in measures 1 through 10. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The treble staff contains ten measures of music, each with a chord of notes. The chords are: Measure 1: G4, B4, D5; Measure 2: G4, B4, D5; Measure 3: G4, B4, D5; Measure 4: G4, B4, D5; Measure 5: G4, B4, D5; Measure 6: G4, B4, D5; Measure 7: G4, B4, D5; Measure 8: G4, B4, D5; Measure 9: G4, B4, D5; Measure 10: G4, B4, D5. The bass staff is empty. The notation is in a simple, hand-drawn style.

These same ten measures framed by the opening harmony and its inversion are highly unified motivically. Falling and rising tritones are the most prominent melodic intervals. Initially the tritones emphasize the pitches in the string harmony of measure 1. This harmony itself is drawn from the first and last pairs of notes from the opening harp figure. In measure 6, pairs of notes from this opening figure are played vertically in the harp. From the middle of measure 8 to measure 10, the opening figure serves as the source for a rising line from D# to B<sup>b</sup> in the harp. Most of the material in these ten measures can be similarly derived from the harp's first six notes. These notes later recur to each statement of the phrase, "del poeta de mis sueños" ("of the poet who knows my dreams").

Measures 11-24 may be heard as a variation on the first ten measures. After a restatement (in the harp) of the motive which began the piece, the baritone enters with the words, "Yo estaba" ("I was sitting"). At first he sings long notes in rhythmic unison with the strings. Above this chordal foundation, the woodwinds dance in figures reflecting both the piccolo motive from measure 2 and the tritone motive from the first ten measures. As the narrator's situation becomes more vivid (the "flowers" and the "bitter and melancholy book"), his lines become more florid and concentrated in small interval motions. One melodic idea in particular, a circulation among the three notes in a whole step or diminished third, helps to determine the expressive character of these lines. Simultaneously with the voice, the harp engages in wide-ranging, rhythmically varied ascents and descents that have a more impulsive, energetic nature. In measure 30, the quartet

of woodwinds takes over the chordal motion of the strings. For his last line, the baritone returns to the opening motive of the piece, accompanied by the strings heard singly for the first time. Notice the resemblance of this measure (m. 24) to the ending of the first phrase at measure 9, particularly in the slowing of the rhythm and the F → B motion of the last two violin notes.

Sequencing melodic and rhythmic motives make up most of the instrumental interlude that follows. These build to a climax with the winds and strings in rhythmic unison at measure 35. Although motivic connections with the preceding section are not hard to find (m. 31 in the clarinet is like m. 14 in the flute and oboe, the flute figure in m. 3 recalls that in m. 4, etc.), this section, more than anything else, must be understood on the basis of its dramatic or "programmatic" intent. The narrator sits reading the book of the poet who knows his dreams. As the book unleashes his imagination, so too the music lets loose. Certain melodic ideas glimmer in the thick texture, notably the woodwinds in measures 29-32 and the clarinet in measures 39-40. A woman enters and the imagination is put in check. When the baritone sings, his lines are smoother, less intensely expressive than before (mm. 42-48).

The woman's first words (m. 50) are set in a higher tessitura and are accompanied by the entry of the woodwinds. Fast notes in the harp interact with her line, "Si los versos te gustan más que mis labios" ("If the poems please you more than my lips"). Her phrases outline major and minor thirds. These will recur in a similar musical context at the end of the piece.

At measure 61, the woman's words and the music take on a sense



of anticipation, an expectation of something new. A sustained harmony in the bassoon, second violin, and viola sets off her simple question, "¿Vienes conmigo?" ("Are you coming?"). Her long-held A<sup>b</sup> is accompanied by increased activity in the instruments paralleling her excitement over the beauty of the evening. A clarinet figure developing out of chords in measure 72 carries this excitement to its first peak (m. 73). A calmer motion prevails in the following measures largely because of the more consistent instrumental colors and the increased repetition of pitches.

At letter **G**, the man speaks again, at first intimating through his music and words a kind of sympathy with her excitement. His detachment from her, however, is made clear in the following lines accompanied by a chamber ensemble of harp, solo violin, and oboe (mm. 81-90). At the word, "jazmines," the harp line suddenly flowers into a wide-ranging arpeggio. When the clarinet restates its figure from measure 61 (in m. 91), it leads to the final statement of "del poeta de mis sueños." Here the voice line and harp glissando make use of the initial motive from the beginning of the piece.

The next four measures (mm. 93-96) are meant to sound weak and lethargic, expressing the woman's disappointment at the distance his words have placed between them. The string harmonics reinforce the impression. Clarinet figures from earlier (mm. 31-32 and 53-54) are recalled in measures 95-96 as if in memory of "what might have been." When the baritone reenters (m. 97), he describes the woman's eyes as full of love but saying no. Rhythmic combinations derived from the first instrumental interlude build to a flute figure (last two beats of m. 103) recalling the opening of the piece. These

rhythmic combinations return later following the woman's poignant "¿No quieres? Voy sola..." ("Don't you want to? I'll go alone."). Her statement is accompanied by figures in the oboe and flute which plainly recall the harp and flute interaction in measures 1-3.

After the man returns to his book, the situation at the beginning of the piece is reestablished. Fifteen measures of music are repeated literally, or nearly so. At measure 125, the music begins to depart from this literal repeat as the tempo slows and the woman is described as suffering in silence. Earlier music (mm. 61-68) is recalled in a highly varied form and there is a gradual acceleration to the large climax on the word "jazmines." Motivic references to earlier sections, mounting harmonic tension, thickening textures, and rising lines all contribute to the vibrancy of this crescendo in which all the suppressed passion between the two characters surges and falls back. What is left afterwards (letter **M** to the end) is a resignation to the situation as it is and a sadness that it has to be that way---the woman in the garden...the man with his book. Again the harp expresses itself in impulsive, technically difficult arabesques (mm. 143-149, 159-161), and the baritone through his small-interval, chromatic melody. Much of the music is drawn from the section between letters **C** and **E**. At letter **P**, and again in the final measures, minor thirds reminiscent of the woman's melody reappear as a sign of her "alone-ness" in the dark and peaceful garden. Aside from this important detail, the last four measures consist of music new to the piece, music that rises and dies away like the piece itself and the passions it depicts.

Jiménez's poem expresses the relationship between the man

and woman through images which momentarily draw them together...the beautiful garden, the flowers---and images which finally keep them apart...the book, the darkness of the garden. Jazmines, with its hints at relationships, at processes, at developments and symmetries never carried to completion, is a mirror of what I take to be the fabric of the lives of the two characters. Their attempt and ultimate inability to share the beautiful evening in the garden reflects one aspect of every human relationship. Even though we may never hope to fully share another person's life, a great deal of life's beauty and poignancy is found in the attempt to do so.

APPENDIX

Yo Estaba Junto a mi Mesa

Yo estaba junto a mi mesa  
y entre mis flores, leyendo  
el libro triste y amargo  
del poeta de mis sueños.

Ella se acercó callada  
y me dijo: -Si los versos  
te gustan más que mis labios,  
ya nunca te daré un beso.

-¿Vienes conmigo? ¡La tarde  
esta tan hermosa! Quiero  
antes que llegue la noche  
ir por jazmines al huerto.

-Si quieres, vamos; y mientras  
cojes jazmines, yo leo  
el libro triste y amargo  
del poeta de mis sueños.

Me miró triste; sus ojos  
llenos de amor, me dijeron  
que no. -¿No quieres? Voy sola...  
Entonces seguí leyendo.

Con lento paso, la pobre  
se fue, sufriendo en silencio;  
se fue al huerto por jazmines...  
y me quedé con mis versos.

Iba vestida de blanco.  
Después mis ojos la vieron  
llorando y cojiendo flores  
allá en la sombra del huerto.

Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958)

## I Was Sitting

I was sitting near my table  
among my flowers, reading  
the bitter and melancholy book  
of the poet who knows my dreams.

She came to me silently  
and said: "If the poems  
please you more than my lips,  
I will never give you another kiss."

"Are you coming? The dusk  
is so beautiful! Before  
it gets dark I want to pick  
jasmines in the garden."

"If you want to, we'll go, and while  
you're picking jasmines, I'll read  
the bitter and melancholy book  
of the poet who knows my dreams."

She looked at me sadly; her eyes  
with love in them said no  
to me. "Don't you want to? I'll go alone..."  
Then I went on reading.

She walked slowly, the poor  
creature, suffering in silence;  
went to the garden for jasmines...  
I stayed there with my poems.

She was dressed in white.  
Later my eyes saw her  
crying and picking flowers  
there in the darkness of the garden.

-- translation by Robert Bly  
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