

Contra-Dances

for Two 'Cellos (2002)

Jon Jeffrey Grier

Though not stylized dances, these pieces are vaguely suggestive of dancing in their motoric and somewhat repetitive rhythms; they are “contra” in that the two players frequently exchange roles. All are rondo-like forms and employ various sorts of ostinati.

I. Bow-Tied

The ritornelli in this all-pizzicato movement, in a lopsided 3/4-7/8 meter, feature melody that obsesses with a few small motives. The contrasting sections re-order the same motives with an emphasis on augmented 2nds, that together with the special technique in the accompanying part give them a somewhat Middle Eastern flavor.

This should sound energetic but not frantic, accented but not harsh. Vibrato on longer notes will aid in sustaining them and support the mock-serious attitude of the movement. The little 5-note motive in Cello I at measure 10, which returns frequently in both parts, is a sort of humorous sneer; bring this out whenever it occurs. In measures 36-50 and 82-99, the string which is pulled off the side of the neck can be tuned quite precisely; it will produce a buzzing, sitar-like sound. This is an accompanying part and should not overpower the melody. In measures 60-78, played with guitar picks, use a medium gauge pick and work to minimize clacking against the fingerboard; some of this will be unavoidable and not unwelcome. Dressing with bow ties would be a good pun.

Notes with dangling ties (in all three movements) should be allowed to ring. A grace note at the end of a *glissando* is a target pitch which is not articulated. Headless note stems, as in measures 5, 73 and 114, are provided for counting purposes.

II. Multi-Plied

This slow and pensive ABA moves in a more balletic fashion. In the outer sections, diatonic melodies float over colorful accompaniment patterns; the movement's title is suggested by the manner in which the various tone colors and disjunct ranges attempt to give the illusion of more than two layers, or “plies.” In the middle section the two instruments discuss their relationship in a number of brief, lyrical canons. In the return of A, the melodic material is presented in longer phrases.

The outer sections, from measures 1-16 and 34-45, are soft, delicate and intimate. The *arco* parts in 'Cello I in measures 5-16 are brief melodic sighs that just barely peek above the background activity. The *arco* melody in 'Cello II in measures 38-45 deals with some of the same ideas; it is more continuous and somewhat more forward, but still reserved in the end. The mood in the middle section (measures 17-33) is more lyrical, overtly expressive, and a bit somber; there is a brief, slow-motion reference to the 5-note motive of the first movement in measure 20.

All single-note harmonics should be allowed to ring as long as possible. The harmonic glissandi should be played as evenly as possible across their span and allotted time (1 beat) to allow the various partials between the notated pitches to sound colorfully. Both players should use a thin, ghostly sound in measures 30-32, returning to a normal tone in measure 33. The *fermati* throughout this movement should be quite long. It may be helpful in early stages to read this movement from the score.

III. High-Fived

An abundance of (mostly) perfect fifths in melody and harmony and a generally rough-hewn sound lend this sonata-rondo the character of a rustic folk dance.

Though requiring great rhythmic precision, this movement should project an air of reckless abandon. The opening motive is vaguely reminiscent of the 5-note motive of the first movement; it returns several times as a ritornello. Measures 77-129 introduce new motives as well as developing previous ones.

A full and edgy tone is suitable most of the way. All dots are staccatos, short and dry; *sul ponticelli* are as thin and raspy as possible; *glissandi* are as broad and smeared as possible. The pulse should be absolutely consistent except for the *ritardando* in measure 63; steadiness is valued over speed. In measures 40-64, 'Cello II strikes the strings with a pencil; on notes marked with slashes, force the pencil to bounce several times-- a roll. The same technique, minus the rolls, is used in measures 152-163. In either or both of these sections, a snare stick may be the preferred implement; experiment to determine which is most effective and work to minimize the sound of the string slapping against the fingerboard. A third music stand, placed strategically between the two players, will be useful for storage of the pencil/drumstick and bow (and guitar picks from the first movement); position it a little behind the chairs so that the players can sit closely enough to execute the "high-5" at the end-- the bow and 'cello will need to be grabbed quickly with one hand to free up the other for the high-5.

To Jean Loder and Lara Bishop,
with heartfelt Thanks