

Confessions of a Contra-loving Composer

Roger Soren interviews Daniel Dorff

As the Assistant Principal and Contrabassoonist of the Louisville Orchestra, my duties have always been quite varied. Some weeks I play Principal on an opera, another it's Second Bassoon on a Masterworks concert, and the next week Contra on a new music concert. With 18 bassoon students (all of whom I make reeds for) and 3 small children at home, I have more than enough to keep me busy. I have always been serious about the contrabassoon as an orchestral instrument, but never considered trying to perform as a soloist on anything longer than 8 feet!

In 1994, I received a tape of Daniel Dorff's recently premiered Concerto for Contrabassoon that changed my mind. Upon hearing the first notes, I knew this work was different. It was accessible and beautiful, yet very exciting at the same time. I definitely wanted to perform this work. Surprisingly enough, after a little schmoozing, I got the chance to perform it on 4 education concerts with the Louisville Orchestra. I recently had the privilege to perform it again, this time with the Haddonfield (NJ) Symphony under its Music Director, Daniel Hege (who is also Assistant Conductor of the Baltimore Symphony).

In between these two performances, I gave the world premiere of Dorff's "In a Deep Funk" for solo contrabassoon at the 1997 IDRS convention in Evanston. Daniel Dorff now has written even more contrabassoon music. Why is he so obsessed with writing for this noble beast? I'm going to ask him.

RS: Since you're not a bassoonist yourself, how did you get started writing contrabassoon music?

DD: In June 1989, Norman Spielberg asked if I'd write a concerto for contrabassoon and strings for him to premiere with the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia. Norman had been playing Vivaldi bassoon concerti with them every spring, and he felt it would be refreshing to use his concerto slot differently. Norman chose me because he wanted a composer who'd show the lyrical expressive side of the contra and who could write passagework sympathetic to the player while still being flashy. Since I'm a bass clarinetist, my ear, attitude, and fingering knowledge would be a head start.

My first reaction was to say no thanks! I'd already composed enough music for odd combinations, and I didn't want to create another dead end. Fortunately, Norman pointed out that every professional orchestra has a solid contra player with no standard repertoire

to play, and he also reminded me how alluring the contra solos are in Ravel's *Mother Goose* and *Concerto for the Left Hand*.

I realized this would be a fascinating project and asked for a few instruments other than just string orchestra for the accompaniment. I chose clarinet and horn because the high bright clarinet emphasizes the contra's deepness while blending in a colorful way, and the horn's rich long notes make the contra's passagework seem even more supple.

RS: How did you build the concerto, and were you concerned about balancing the contra against the orchestra?

DD: I was very concerned not to cover up the soloist and spent a lot of effort working out textures to ensure this. Many players have told me that's one of the reasons the concerto is a success.

Concerto for Contrabassoon is in three movements played without pause, and it basically goes from slow to moderate to fast and faster, like a Rossini overture. Movement I is just a short prologue for the orchestra with a contrabassoon cadenza in the middle (one way to avoid balance problems!); Movement II glides through a chain of dances in 3; Movement III is also dance-based, but in 4, with a more evident jazz influence.

Being a clarinetist, I knew F Major was the bassoon's most natural home key, so I put many themes and some flashy passagework in F, but the harmony moves out of strict keys and through sharp keys, so there's a lot to practice!



from *Concerto for Contrabassoon*, Mvt. 3, © by MMB Music, Inc. Used by permission.

Norman Spielberg premiered the *Concerto* in November 1991; after the performance, Sol Schoenbach warmly congratulated Norman for launching what he called the first piece that will live on as standard repertory for contrabassoonists.

RS: Why are there two different piano reductions for the *Concerto*?

DD: Many passages have thick and fast-moving jazz chords in divisi strings, and the color contrast of the woodwinds is important, so I found it difficult to make an effective and playable piano reduction. Susan Nigro began giving exciting performances in piano reduction soon after I sent it to her, but I still felt something was missing from that piano version.

In 1995 I made a “quartet reduction” keeping the clarinet and horn on their original parts, with the piano playing a reduction of only the string parts. This was much more full-voiced and playable for the pianist, and it had the contrapuntal interplay of chamber music. Lori Tiberio premiered this quartet version at UNC-Charlotte in April 1996, and a few months later Sue Nigro performed it at IDRS-Tallahassee, with me playing the clarinet part. This was scary since I kept gleefully listening to Sue and the others when I should have been counting rests!

RS: How did the *Concerto* lead to your next contra piece?

DD: The contrabassoon community has a tightly-knit grapevine, and the internet has made it even easier for contra players to share information. This led to Mark Trinko hearing a tape of the *Concerto* in 1995, which led him to commission a contest piece for his International Contrabassoon Festival in Las Vegas. Mark was flexible about what I could write, so this was a great opportunity for something I’d been thinking about for awhile – a modern parallel to Bach’s Cello Suites, using a low instrument to play movements based on more recent dance rhythms. I’ve played Bach Suites on bass clarinet, so the feeling was already familiar. The title *In A Deep Funk* popped up pretty early on.

RS: How should classically-trained musicians approach the rock-inspired style of *In A Deep Funk*?

DD: Movement I, “Hustle Misterioso” is based on the Hustle dance rhythm. It helps to know the disco song “The Hustle” to play this with the right feel and articulation. It needs the power and bounce of Latin dance music, rather than Brahmsian legato!



from *In A Deep Funk*, “Hustle Misterioso,” ©1997 by Theodore Presser Company, used by permission.

The melodic intervals of this movement are a little reminiscent of the “Powerhouse” theme used in many old cartoons, and the movement is structured as a baroque two-part form. After a two-bar intro framing the music in Bb, the music moves chromatically from Bb to a cadence in F to end the first structural “part.” The second half moves from F, through chromatic instability, back to rich low Bb’s at the end, allowing performers to milk their low notes.

Movement II, “Twist Variations,” is a twelve-bar-blues covering a lot of ground. The starting theme is a straightforward Twist. This opening should be performed with a tempo and drive that you could really Twist to, (not slower!). From there, it follows the 19th-century approach, using many variations to create a few major sections of a few variations each; there are a few consecutive loud ones, gentle ones,

chromatic ones, rhythmically-different ones, and so on. In live performance, it’s fine to add extra breathing room between sections, and probably best to take these at significant changes between types of variations rather than breaking up a pair of variations. It’s also fine to slow down a bit for the difficult variations, as long as the Tempo Primo is an authentic Twist.

The Las Vegas competition didn’t take place due to small registration, but Mónica Fucci gave master classes in the *Concerto* and *In A Deep Funk*, and I was delighted to see a videotape of her leading a roomful of contra players sightreading the “Twist Variations” in unison!

Movement III, “Bear Hug,” is the kind of slow feel that we all looked forward to at high school dances. When you and I prepared this for your premiere at IDRS-Evanston, we jammed on Smokey Robinson’s “Ooh Baby Baby” in the practice room to set the right mood and tempo.

Movement IV, “Funk Scherzo” is the most abstract piece of the set, being based on funk motives rather than a rhythmic groove. Originally I thought this would be the 4th of 5 movements, but for such a difficult unaccompanied piece, enough is enough!

The outer sections of this movement should be heavy, but the middle section is played on tiptoes. That section reminds me a little of the long bass pizzicato section in Sibelius’ *Symphony No. 2*, but the rest of this movement is somewhere between Bartók and Led Zeppelin; and when you play it all on contra, it fits together like one world.

RS: This is the most difficult solo piece I’ve performed. Did you mean it to be so challenging?

DD: I usually try to keep things playable and practical, but *In A Deep Funk* calls for the agility of a flute and control of slow notes in the high register. At first it seemed like I had written beyond the contra’s limits, but after you pulled it off in front of many contrabassoonists in Evanston, it’s now getting performances on undergraduate recitals. In late 1999, Jeremy Van Buskirk will premiere a bass guitar transcription in Boston.

RS: How did *The Tortoise and the Hare* come about?

DD: In January 1995 the Minnesota Orchestra’s Kinder Konzert program commissioned me to set any three Aesop fables for narrator with any diverse mixture of 8 instruments. The search panel that selected me included educators and administrators, plus Norbert Nielubowski, the Minnesota Orchestra’s contrabassoonist.

In choosing three fables from the hundreds attributed to Aesop, I knew “The Tortoise and the Hare” had to be included since it’s very pictorial, familiar, and

entertaining, and because the lead characters seemed very natural to caricature with musical instruments.

My strategy for writing *Three Fun Fables* was to pick two other stories to lead into “The Tortoise and the Hare,” with one instrument associated with each lead character in each story. As in *Peter and the Wolf*, this helps tell the story musically and helps educators prepare children for the concert.

The Tortoise is portrayed by contrabassoon, and the Hare is portrayed by a clarinet. The Hare plays fancy arpeggios, bouncing around in Bb Major throughout (making no progress and playing ostentatiously in an easy key), and the Tortoise has ripe long tones which do progress harmonically. It’s an easy and gratifying part that gets a lot of smiles and laughter from the audience. Norbert got to play this 52 times on the Minnesota series during the 1996-97 season.

RS: What about the orchestra version?

DD: There’s more use for music like this for full orchestra than for octet, so I orchestrated *The Tortoise and the Hare*, still featuring contrabassoon and clarinet. This version was premiered by the Haddonfield Symphony in April 1998 with Olympic track legend Carl Lewis as narrator, and I’m fortunate that there are about 20 performances scheduled in 1999, including the Baltimore, Detroit, and Indianapolis Symphonies.

Any contrabassoonists who want a warm sounding medium-size solo that doesn’t require woodshedding ought to suggest this piece to their children’s-concert conductors!

In April 2000 Wolfgang Sawallisch and the Philadelphia Orchestra will premiere the orchestration of the full *Three Fun Fables*.

RS: What led to your short pieces for bassoon quartet?

DD: In the early 1990’s I was the bass clarinetist in a mixed-clarinet quartet called Clarinessence. There’s not a whole lot of repertory for this combination, so I did some arranging and composing for us. Two short dances, *Fast Walk* and *It Takes Four to Tango*, migrated easily to SATB Saxophone Quartet, and the Tokyo-based Harmo Saxophone Quartet put them out on CD before I even heard a read-through of the sax versions.

Several contrabassoonists asked me to transcribe these quartets for 3 Bassoons and Contrabassoon, and when Christopher Wait offered to give them a run of performances with his Ohio State Bassoon Ensemble, that led to creating the bassoon quartet versions.

RS: You also have a new duo for two contras, called *Sonatina d’Amore*.

DD: At IDRS ’97 in Evanston, The Two Contras (Susan Nigro and Burl Lane) gave a duo recital and mentioned that Sue’s next Crystal CD will be duets with Burl. I never planned to specialize in composing contra music, but I sat through the rest of their concert anticipating (and hoping) that my run of contrabassoon compositions wasn’t done yet. By the time Sue asked me that afternoon to write a new piece for the duo CD, I had already planned it out.

Many years earlier I had sketched a sonatina for two recorders. It was a little too chromatic and too wide in range for useful recorder music, and I’d always planned to come back to re-use the main ideas wherever they belonged better.

Since the *Concerto* and *In A Deep Funk* are challenging and for dedicated contra players to spend time learning, I wanted to write something more approachable for more players; reworking the recorder duet sketches seemed the way to have music that wasn’t drenched in 16th notes and that had an innocent charm. Sue and Burl premiered it on the Chicago Symphony’s 1998 Radiothon, and the CD will be out in 1999.



from *Sonatina d’Amore*, Mvt. 2, © 1999 by Theodore Presser Company, used by permission.

RS: What about the meaning of this title?

DD: I called it *Sonatina d’Amore* because: 1) It reflects my love of the sonority of two cantabile contrabassoons crooning together, 2) The many passages in parallel thirds are reminiscent of vocal love duets, 3) the word “amore” evokes lower instruments, as in oboe d’amore, and 4) I wanted an Italian title to honor Sue’s Italian heritage.

RS: How can contrabassoonists find your music?

DD: *Concerto for Contrabassoon, The Tortoise and the Hare* (from *Three Fun Fables*), and *Fast Walk* are available from MMB Music. *In A Deep Funk, It Takes Four to Tango*, and *Sonatina d’Amore* are published by Theodore Presser Company.

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