Three Dimensions for piano – Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph

The prescribed repertoire for the 2008 Eleventh Unisa/Vodacom International Piano Competition included a brand new piano work by the foremost South African woman composer Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph. As I sat in the auditorium listening to one of the contestants perform her *Partials and Pedals*, I was once again struck by Zaidel-Rudolph’s innate skill at idiomatic writing for the piano. She knows her instrument – an excellent pianist herself, she trained with, amongst others, the world famous pianist, John Lill in London.

Zaidel-Rudolph’s piano works span the length of her creative career and bear testimony to the significant development of her compositional vocabulary and language. These works highlight her journey from free atonality and the formal structures and ordering of the neoclassical style (*Sonata no.1*), through experimentation with the spatial dimensions of sound and trans-cultural elements (*Three Dimensions*), to a multi-tonal vocabulary which integrates Jewish mysticism and cabbalistic religious elements (*Virtuoso 1*).

*Virtuoso 1* is arguably her best-known piano work – commissioned and conceived for the Fourth UNISA/Transnet International Piano Competition of 1988 – it has frequently been performed, recorded and broadcast. It is currently included in the Unisa Grade VIII piano examinations syllabus and has become a popular choice for candidates.

A piano work of Zaidel-Rudolph’s that warrants more exposure and greater attention is *Three Dimensions* for piano. She composed this piece in 1974 during her sojourn as a postgraduate composition student at the Royal College of Music, London. This extraordinary work provides the creative performer with an excellent vehicle for imaginative interpretation; its distinct African flavour situates it as a prime example of indigenous art music. Because of its effective pianistic felicities and unique rhythms, it is also a most satisfying work to perform. It would make an artistic addition to any national or international recital programme – audiences are fascinated by its extraordinary and exotic sound world and unusual timbral effects such as the plucking of the piano strings. Given its substantial musical and technical content, *Three Dimensions* could also constitute an appropriate alternative ‘own choice’ work for the Unisa Licentiate piano examinations.

*Three Dimensions* has generally been neglected – I suspect the reason being that it has never been published and officially printed. I am grateful that, with the editor’s consent, a copy is included in this publication. A reputable piano tutor, Prof Joseph Stanford of the University of Pretoria, shares my admiration of this work – he has taught it to several of his students. A good recording of the work by one of my former piano students, Annalien du Plessis, is featured on the EMI album, *Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph* (EMI EMCJ (A) 4061831), commercially released in 1988.

*Three Dimensions* is included in my own repertoire and I have frequently performed it, both locally and abroad. My performance of it at the Pretoria State Theatre elicited the following comments in Afrikaans: “*Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph se ‘Drie Dimensies vir klavier’ is heel eenvoudig een van die meevoerendste komposisies wat nog deur ‘n Suid-Afrikaaner neergepen is... Dit is opwindend om te bese dat daar ‘n komponis in ons mids is wat met ware hartstog en virtuositeit vir die klavier kan komponeer*”. [Translated: Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph’s *Three Dimensions* for piano is simply one of the most captivating compositions for piano ever written by a South African ... It is exciting to realize that we have a composer in our midst who can compose for the piano with true passion and virtuosity] – (Paul Boekkooi, *Die Beeld*, 6 September 1988).

**Structure and Style**

At the juncture in her career when she wrote *Three Dimensions*, Zaidel-Rudolph says that, having been influenced by the creative work of European composers such as György Ligeti (who was later to become her composition tutor), she was in the process of freeing herself from her former preoccupation with abstract rhythmic and pitch orderings.
and to re-focus on the changing tone-colours and densities of the sound itself. Timbral transformations depicting changing atmospheres and shapes became an important structural parameter of her compositional language at the stage (Interview with the composer: 05-07-2008).

The narrative goal of Three Dimensions appears to rest on the emotive power of the sounds themselves in their numerous and changing articulations. The juxtaposing of various sonic effects is achieved with convincing and logical coherence throughout. Conventional phrase and periodic construction has made way for building blocks of contrasting sonorities and kaleidoscopic tone colours. Carefully chosen intervals are organically transformed by means of intricate motivic and rhythmic permutations. Sound patterning frequently anticipates forthcoming structural material to lend structural unity, whilst at the same time allowing smooth transitions. The mirroring of elements between opening and closing subsections creates equilibrium and balance. The compositional style of this work is thus best described as eclectic because of the fusion of avant-garde and African stylistic traits.

Three Dimensions consists of three sections (of varying lengths) with programmatic subtitles:

A European City Awakens (Bars 1-21; 21 bars in length)

An African City Pulsates (Bars 22-83; 61 bars in length)

An Eastern City Meditates (Bars 84-105; 20 bars in length)

(Acknowledging the composer’s deeply-felt patriotism towards the country of her birth, the African section, as structural nucleus, constitutes the large centre-piece of the work).

The above three subtitles have biographic origins in Zaidel-Rudolph’s career. As a student in Europe, she was exposed to a multitude of new musical ideas, yet she felt herself nostalgically drawn to her African roots with their pulsating rhythms and sounds. Philosophically and spiritually, she felt a strong affinity towards Eastern beliefs and spirituality (Interview: 05-07-2008).

The free-flowing construction of the work has a unifying effect since each section calls forth the next one with growing necessity. In performance, the one section flows into the next uninterruptedly. The composer says that “barlines are [only] present to aid the performer…; the music must have continuity without any emphasis…” (Composer’s Notes, 1974).

Towards Interpretation

In Three Dimensions, a comprehension of the music’s architecture will aid the performer in conveying its true character. Because of the esoteric nature of this music, an analysis of the structural elements should not only be of a purely technical nature, but must of necessity also concentrate on the aesthetic and philosophical aspects. The performer should try to synthesize the technical and interpretative elements towards an imaginative and artistic manipulation of the composer’s language and intention.

The score abounds with interpretative detail and direction. Detailed dynamic indications change frequently and border on extreme contrasts - the range varies from the pp at the start of the composition to the fff at the conclusion. In the following extracts from the score, I have added additional dynamic indications to aid in the shaping of the sound material as well as fingering suggestions to facilitate the execution of taxing technical figurations. Where the composer’s pedaling indications were found to be limited, I have added my own suggestions, based on my practical experience of the work.

The European City

This opening section of the whole work is of an improvisatory nature and in a sense symbolizes the over-all construction of the work – three subsections (building-blocks) of contrasting static timbres that are announced sequentially.

The opening subsection (bars 1-7) exhibits the undulating repetition of 4-note vertical structures in contrary motion (descending minor second) interval plays a pivotal role in delineating motivic permutations – the initial 5-note group (bar 1) is extended by means of random accumulative techniques to a 10-note group (bars 2 and 3) to a 9-note group (bars 4 and 5) and finally, to another 10-note group.

The incessant and relentless reiterations of the patterns create a chant-like effect, almost like the far-off ringing of church bells in a generic European city.

Dynamic shading here should be very subtle and the touch should remain fairly gentle, measured and cantando, even during the crescendo in bars 6 and 7. I recommend an alternation of fifth and fourth fingers for the outer voices and some finger-changing for the inner voices to achieve the desired legatissimo. Frequently changed half-pedalling enhances the luminosity of the texture. The una corda may also be used at the outset.
In the next subsection, (bars 8-13), the sonority changes. Sudden and dramatic off-beat punctuations of dissonances trace angular melodic sounds to simulate early morning traffic. The sudden ff indication necessitates a martellato touch with staccato in appropriate spots (which I indicate) to outline the angularity. The pedal should be used appropriately.

The final subsection (bars 14-20), apart from providing the structural link to the “African” section, constitutes yet another change in timbre. Proportional graphic notation is used – strict bar-division is abandoned so that the performer can interpret note durations according to the visual spacing of note symbols and the horizontal length of the beams. The music is indeterminate in time, suspending the temporal element in the piece prior to the stamping, pulsating rhythms of Africa. In an interesting contradiction it could also be heard as a philosophical preparation for the advent of Africa and its ‘timelessness’.
African City

The African-sounding section with its contagious rhythms is also divisible into various smaller subsections. The language here comprises a ritualistic style of writing; sustained muted colourations are interrupted by disjointed-sounding *staccato* patterns. Dense *ostinato* sound-layers are frequently punctuated by dissonant cross-rhythms. Structural and material manipulation guides sharply ascending pitch contours into the extreme registers of the piano. Metric divisions are extremely varied, but aggregates of twos and threes predominate as rhythmic core units.

The opening subsection features an *ostinato* rhythmic pattern in semi-quaver triplet figurations played in the upper register by both hands. The pre- eminent pitch is the E flat which serves as a metric spill-point into the following metric groupings: 5+7+9+5+5 (all larger sums of twos and threes). The irregular patternings evoke the earthy, feet-stamping and dance-like invocations of the ancestors.

The metronome indication here is the fastest of all those in the work, i.e. 152 to the quaver, which makes the triplet figurations challenging to play. With a comfortable fingering (I provide a logical pattern) and a slightly non-*legato* touch (I would suggest a very close proximity to the keyboard with a slight ‘pulling’ action in the fingertips so as to avoid excessive wrist motions), the figurations will prove easier to play.

In the following subsection (bars 28-36), the stamping of a Zulu dance is simulated commencing at *pp* and building to a *ff* dynamic level. The wide interval leaps require swift lateral adjustments in contrary motion and exaggerated ‘down-up’ movements of the forearms – keep wrists extremely ‘loose’ and flexible. The short notes can almost be viewed as embellishing ornamentations. Rhythmic pedaling and a gradual *crescendo* from bar 30 onwards will enhance the climax-building to a large degree. The 10ths in bars 34 and 35 may be split to accommodate a small hand.
A bilinear structure that sounds typically African is found in bars 50-58. The right hand plays an undulating rhythmic pattern in a 7-note sequence in quavers and semi-quavers. The rhythmic grid causes a constant shift in placing and accentuation. Against this shifting *ostinato*, that reminds one of the sound of an Mbira¹, the left hand plays varied but larger intervallic shapes, the melodic contour of which (although rhythmically transformed), makes a direct reference to South Africa’s erstwhile national anthem, *Die Stem*. This quotation was meant to be a tongue-in-cheek reference. (Interview: 05-07-2008).

Little did Zaidel-Rudolph know, in 1974, that she would be the composer chosen to blend this melody with that of *Nkosi Sikilele i Afrika* for the country’s first democratic official national anthem in 1995, twenty years later!
I suggest a slightly more intense dynamic level (mp to mf) in the left hand to make the melodic contour stand out. Try half-pedaling, economically though, so as not to spoil the translucent texture. Bars 56 and 57 warrant legato pedaling to support the intensification of dynamic level (I prefer a cresc here).

A subsection of the African section of *Three Dimensions* that is exhilarating to play and listen to, is found in bars 66 to 79. The music, at a prestissimo tempo, reaches a frenetic peak with a strongly driving rhythmic support. Textural activity is allotted to the right hand which plays semi-quaver patterns of fourths (a characteristic African interval) in duple subdivision in fast ascending and descending horizontal waves. The 2+2+2+2 subdivision of the first three bars (67-69) is substituted by the hemiola-type (3+3+2) in bars 70 and 71, with the left hand supporting the syncopation with accented triadic structures.

A carefully planned dynamic application elicits a most satisfactory result. To clarify the texture, one should play the right hand figures non legato throughout with very sparse use of the pedal. One should also avoid playing this section too fast as it will then lose its effectiveness. Legato pedaling in the final three bars (77–79) should be applied. I play the first four demi-semiquavers in bar 79 with my left hand to make the pattern clear.
The Eastern City

The concluding section of Three Dimensions highlights exotic timbral effects. Proportional notation echoes the orientation of the third subsection of the European City section. Brief melodic motives, derived from a pentatonic Eastern scale, the hira-joshi, provide the pitch parameters for waves of glissandi and tremolo sounds. The plucking of the piano strings creates interesting oriental sonorities.
In the opening bars, the right hand plays the first four notes of the *hira-joshi* scale. The left hand (mutely) takes over the keys from the right hand as the right foot simultaneously depresses the pedal. The pianist then rises to reach inside the piano to pluck certain strings with the right hand fingertips, focusing on the falling major 3rd interval. This effect is best achieved on a grand piano; it can however also be executed on an upright, provided that the lid is left open during performance.

The pitches of the demi-semiquaver pattern in bar 85 constitute a transposed version of the initial 4-note motive. In bar 86, the pianist rises again to play a sweeping *glissando* on the strings. Exact pedaling is of prime importance:

Pitch delineation throughout the entire section is based on the Eastern scale quoted above. A good example is seen in bar 95 – even though the timbre features *glissandi* from the bottom to the top registers of the piano, a reduction of octave displacements shows a direct pitch relation to the *hira-joshi*.
The Coda of *Three Dimensions* quotes the well-known religious theme, the “Dies Irae” (E–D♯–E–C♯–D♯–B–[C♯]). Accen-
tuation of its melodic contour comprises vertical quaver-note clusters interspersed by frenetic waves of dissonant chromatic
scale **glissandi**. Philosophically speaking, this tempestuous finale points towards the final apocalypse, when all continents
will be united in a final ‘dimension’. Dynamic application here is extreme (f, ff and fff) as this subsection represents the
climactic culmination of a dramatic ending. I recommend tiny pauses (commas) between the reiterations of patterns by fast
releasing of the pedal.

![Musical notation]

Notes
1 The Mbira is an instrument where metal staves, tuned to the
pentatonic scale, are attached to a resonator (usually made
of wood or the dried-out hull of a halved pumpkin) to be
plucked by the fingers.

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**Other Sources**

Interview with Prof Zaidel-Rudolph: 05-07-2008.

**Scores:**


*Three Dimensions* for piano – computerized print: composer’s copy

**Discography**


THREE DIMENSIONS

For Piano

By
Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph

I A European City Awakens
II An African City Pulsates
III An Eastern City Meditates
\[ \Pi \text{ Presto} \quad \frac{\text{b}}{\text{b}} = \text{ca. 152} \]

\[ \text{Non-legato} \]

\[ \frac{26}{30} \]

\[ \text{Meno Mosso} \quad \frac{\text{b}}{\text{b}} = \text{ca. 138} \]

\[ \text{subito} \quad \text{fff} \]
Prestissimo

accel. to new tempo

Adagio

\textit{subito} \quad \textit{ff}

\textit{b = ca 152 \textit{Tempo primo of II}}

\textit{Marcato}

\textit{simile}