

Gymnopédie for Merida

Peter Hurley

Composer

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

Title

- 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 Gymnopedia, 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.

Analysis

- The main tonality of *Gymnopédie for Merida* is B \flat Lydian - that is, a B \flat major scale with a raised 4th (using E \sharp instead of E \flat): B \flat -C-D-E \sharp -F-G-A-B \flat .
- There is no real modulation. However, some chords borrow notes from other modes, such as F Lydian (the white note scale starting on F), and B \flat Mixolydian (a B \flat major scale with a flattened 7th, A \flat).
- The formal structure is free.

b.1-4 Introduction - the first seven notes of the main theme, unharmonised and in free rhythm.

5-20 Main theme, **B \flat Lydian**.

The melody begins on the tonic note (B \flat) and ends on the dominant (F).

The rhythm of the left hand is the same in each bar, and is the same rhythm that Satie used in his *Gymnopédies*.

The harmony is gently dissonant, using 7th chords (e.g. C-E \sharp -G-B \flat in b.5, B \flat -D-F-A in b.6) or chords based on 4ths (e.g. b.7-8); simple major or minor triads are never used.

There are passing hints of F Lydian (all white notes) in b.7 and b.11, and B \flat Mixolydian (with A \flat) in b.17, creating *polymodality*, but there is no modulation.

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 B \flat 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. E \sharp in the left hand and E \flat in the right hand in b.34; F \sharp in the left hand and F \sharp in the right hand in b.36).

37-40 Coda. All in B \flat Lydian, with a tonic pedal in the bass, although the harmony remains unresolved in the final bar, since the piece does not end with a tonic triad.

Style

This piece draws on both Classical and Jazz traditions. Stylistic characteristics include:

- 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.
- gently dissonant harmonies, including 7ths (and occasionally 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.

Hurley’s contemporaries include Carl Vine, Elena Kats-Chernin, Nigel Westlake, Phillip Wilcher and Stuart Greenbaum.

Signs and terms (Italian)

- *quasi recitativo* means like sung speech (i.e. free and spontaneous).
- *In tempo* means in stricter time.
- ♩ = 60-68 indicates a tempo range of 60-68 crotchet beats per minute.
- *espressivo ad lib[itum]* means expressively and freely (with artistic license).
- *Ped[ale] simile* means continue pedalling in a similar manner.
- The *acciaccature* (crushed notes) in bars 21, 25 and 29 form a written-out *slide*.
- *ritardando* means gradually becoming slower.
- *a tempo* means return to the former speed.
- *calando* means becoming softer and slower.