

## Master Lesson on Paul Creston's *SONATA*

by  
Steven Mauk

When Giuseppe Guttovoggio, who later changed his name to Paul Creston, composed his Opus 19 Sonata for alto saxophone and piano in 1935, he could not have imagined that it would become one of the most frequently-played works for this instrumental combination. Dedicated to American saxophonist Cecil Leeson (who Creston accompanied in the 1930s), this popular piece is studied and performed by most serious saxophonists. The following comments may prove helpful to those who are beginning to study this composition, as well as those who have played or taught it for years.

**Style** — This sonata is one of the most unique works ever written for saxophone and piano. Creston combines an energy, variety, and musical interest that draws from many styles. His music displays a remarkable freshness and sparkle when compared with the other standard works for saxophone written around the same period by Glazounov, Heiden, and Ibert.

The first clues to Creston's stylistic intent come from the initial tempo indications: I - With vigor, II - With tranquility, and III - With gaiety. Upon hearing the work, there can be no doubt that each movement musically represents its descriptive tempo marking. In the first movement, the exciting first theme is contrasted by the more broad and free second theme. This contrast heightens the energy of the movement and helps to impart the very vigor Creston indicates. The performer must be aggressive in the opening and other similar sections to properly establish this style. Be careful not to merely play what's on the page in this movement; add plenty of expressive dynamics to direct the music vigorously onward.

Within the first few beats of movement two the listener hears the tranquility of Creston's writing. A simple scalar melody, accompanied by regular, triadic harmonies, allows the listener to relax from the excitement of movement one. This simplicity can be augmented by limiting the vibrato in the first saxophone statement of the theme. Since the piano part becomes busier in bar 15, the saxophonist should use a normal vibrato here to add greater intensity. Be sure that there is no decrescendo in measure 31 or the pianist, who continues at a fortissimo level, will be left to diminuendo too soon. The dramatic climax of measures 27-33 is then countered by the return of the calm first theme, which eventually fades to the end.

Movement three is full of fun and life. Creston's choice of the word crisp to describe the style is apt. There should be a snap or bite to the notes, although the articulation must be light. (Remember, accents are produced by a sudden air increase, not a heavier tongue!) The mordent-figured quarter notes contain three accents (those of dynamics, duration, and ornamentation), so don't overdo them or they can become heavy. Observe the pp-mp dynamics used through much of this movement (intended to convey a hidden intensity), but contrast these sections with the explosive and sudden crescendos indicated.

**Tempo** — An essential aspect to consider throughout this composition is tempo. When Creston visited Ithaca College in 1976, he heard a student of mine perform this work in a master class. When I asked him about the tempo markings he said, “The person who put the tempo markings on this piece was a fool! Yes, I’m talking about myself. The first movement works well at the tempo 126, but the second and third are too fast. The second movement should be played around 52-56 and the third around 144.” From that day on I have used Creston’s amended tempos in performing and teaching this piece and suggest other saxophonists do so as well.

The first movement has the greatest tempo fluctuation. While the exciting first section is well suited to the 126 marking, the second (starting at measure 13) works best around 108-112. This theme is much freer than the first, especially due to the piano’s sixteenth-note figurations. Bars 10-12 should be played in a calming and slowing manner to set up this new tempo, with the in time in measure 13 interpreted merely as a return to a constant tempo after the retard slightly of bar 12. This calmer and freer style remains through the piano interlude, leading up to the climactic downbeat of bar 27. The saxophonist’s entrance there marks the beginning of a quick accelerando to bring the movement to its original tempo around bar 29. This tempo is maintained until the retard slightly of measure 55, which returns the piece to the second theme and its 108-112 tempo. This marking continues until the in time - a shade slower of bar 72, where the tempo works well at 100-104. From measure 79-84 the pace quickens to the original 126 and, after the one-bar retard, the piece remains at this tempo to the end.

In contrast to the tempo complexities of the first movement, the second retains its basic tempo throughout. Since this is the slowest of the three movements, I prefer to play it at a tempo of 48-52. This allows all of the sensuous harmonies in this gorgeous movement to be fully heard. Although I suggest a rather constant beat, as determined by the quarter-note pulsations in the piano, be sure to use expressive rubato within the beat. The use of *tenutos*, vibrato emphases, and creative pushing can give much hidden energy to an otherwise metric interpretation. Take care to add three important tempo corrections to the saxophone part. Bar 24 should read increase and accelerando, measure 26 is missing the word retard, and bar 27 should include a little broad. These three omissions are crucial to the movement’s climax, punctuated by the saxophone’s high F in measure 27. Without them the busy piano rolls and arpeggios starting in bar 28 can be rushed. In the second movement, always interpret the in time sections to mean a return to the original tempo.

Movement three keeps its tempo constant. Only the words hold back slightly in measure 285 of the piano part interrupt an otherwise metronomic performance. Dynamics, articulations, accents, and mordents serve to shape this movement, rather than tempo variations.

**Dynamics** — Few pieces exploit the dynamic potentials of the saxophone as much as Creston’s Sonata. The extremes are presented in the pp-ff dynamics of each movement

and one of the keys to performing this piece effectively is to observe all the specified dynamics.

Along with the standard letter indications, Creston uses some plain English to convey his dynamic instructions. Such phrases as “increase”, “increase slightly”, “less loud”, “increase gradually”, “dim. gradually”, “dim. quickly”, “hold back”, and “hold back slightly” appear to be unique in the repertoire. Though some people may be confused about the meaning of “increase”, it is understood to mean “crescendo” in this piece. Another important dynamic aspect is the use of accents. Creston loved to change meters without notating meter changes. He often did so through his use of accents to displace the metric pulse. One example occurs in movement one, from bar 44-51. Creston uses accents to help shift the meter from 4 beats per measure, to 2, 3, and even 5. To ignore or underplay these accents means that these metric shifts are less obvious and Creston’s intent may be missed.

**Ornaments** — During that visit, I also questioned Creston about the mordents found in movements one and three. I had heard almost every saxophonist perform them as two grace notes before the beat rather than playing them on the beat as in Baroque music. Creston was rather upset about this and indicated that he did intend for the mordents to be played on the beat and couldn’t figure out why saxophonists kept misplaying them. Accurate performance of the mordents in both the first and third movements is essential to convey Creston’s intentions.

**Special Problems** — There are a few spots in this piece that need special attention. In movement one the saxophonist has to negotiate not only tricky technical passages, but also the performance of an altissimo G. For those students just starting to play in the altissimo, this may present quite a problem. Not breathing or resetting the embouchure during the preceding rest can stabilize the voicing of the G. Also, by making the high F long and by slurring into the G, many students have greater success. Even adding a grace note F# before the G can add security. Try these suggestions to add confidence and gradually work toward the original notation for the performance.

In movement two the player must be sure to play only as softly as he/she can support a lovely tone. Watch out that the triplets in bars 39 and 40 don’t become an eighth-and-two-sixteenth figure. The intonation in the last measure is particularly difficult, since the dynamic is so soft. Bring the pitch of the G double sharp down by adding the middle finger of the right hand. Finger the A# with the bis plus the right hand middle finger and partially lower the second finger of the left hand as needed to keep the note in tune. Without a doubt, the most difficult technical passage of the entire piece begins in bar 194 of movement three. Although this is only a descending B-flat scale in thirds, almost everyone has problems here. Using bis for the B-flats and bis plus side C for the Cs may help clean up the figure. Probably the greatest help will come from thoughtful practice of the B-flat scale in thirds at 144 as part of the daily warm-up routine.

Creston’s Sonata is challenging, demanding, and musically satisfying. It is a work that all saxophonists should know. Try these suggestions to help make this piece more approachable and accurate.