

Master Lesson on Hartley's *Poem*

by
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One of the most frequently-played compositions for tenor saxophone and piano is Walter Hartley's *Poem*. Written in 1967 for tenor saxophonist James Houlik, this work is published by Tenuto Publications, a division of Theodore Presser. Although only three and a half minutes long, the *Poem* is packed with emotional and dynamic extremes. Below are some suggestions to consider when approaching this piece.

Tempo — The *Poem* is marked *Andante molto* and I like to play it at a relaxed pace of quarter note = 60-63. At this speed, the initial piano ostinato seems to flow best and all of the technical sections are quite manageable. Although there are no tempo changes marked in the music, there are several opportunities for flexibility. In the piano part, the melodic figures of bars 9-10, 37-40, and bar 59, played without saxophone, work well if performed somewhat rubato. Similarly, the saxophone lines in measures 14-17 and 40-50 call for a freer interpretation.

Style — One of the most appealing things about Hartley's short work is the stark stylistic diversity. The *Poem* contrasts quite and simple sections with ones of great intensity. If these stylistic contrasts are not properly emphasized, the piece will lose much of its dramatic flair. The most obvious way to emphasize these dramatic extremes, one of the hallmarks of Hartley's compositional style, is by the accurate performance of dynamics. Hartley uses a wide range of the markings, from *ff* to *ppp*. Exaggerating the dynamics will make the soft sections sound gentle and relaxed and the loud ones aggressive and majestic. This is probably the key element to a successful interpretation of the *Poem*.

Vibrato can also play a significant role in stylistic interpretation. Using a narrow vibrato for the quiet sections will make them more tranquil. Fading away with a straight tone, as in bars 21-22, 50-51 and 63-64, can be most effective and musical. In contrast, a full and wide vibrato during the forte passages will help to increase the excitement and energy. Experiment with variable vibrato as an expressive nuance.

Other aspects important to stylistic interpretation are the articulations and expressive markings. Hartley uses slurs, staccato and tenuto articulations, and accents throughout this piece to indicate specific musical inflections. Play the accented passages with a bit of space between the notes and the staccato notes rather short. (Be sure to play the accents with greater air pressure, not a heavier tongue!) Proper attention to Hartley's details is critical.

Problem Areas — Every time I teach this piece, I find students having similar problems. A quick review of these places may save you from making the same mistakes.

Controlling softer dynamics, especially in the low register, is always a challenge. Play the *Poem* only as softly as you can control your best tone. This may change from day to day as reeds and pads undergo slight changes. Do not fight the piece by trying to play softer than you can, regardless of the dynamic marking. Otherwise the soft sections will sound awkward instead of peaceful. Some saxophonists may even want to experiment with a doughnut-style mute to help keep the low notes from blasting out.

A trick that may prove useful for attacking the low D of measure 25 and the low Eb of bar 53 is a gentle key pop. First, finger the note you want to play. Set the embouchure firmly, the same as when playing. Start a slow stream of air just before you want the note to speak, but do not create any sound. When you are ready for the attack, blow the air a bit faster and gently pop the middle finger of your right hand to start the tone. Do not use your tongue; the air and key pop

create the articulation. This technique will take time to coordinate, but it is a great way to gracefully attack low notes softly. Remember, gentle is an important word to remember for this technique. Do not make a loud key pop or the effect will be ruined.

Playing softly can also create many intonation problems, primarily sharpness. You cannot really alter the embouchure much when playing quietly or the tone will change. I suggest using altered fingerings to help bring the notes in tune. For instance, the high A in bar 7 is frequently sharp, especially at *pp*. Adding the middle finger of the right hand is a standard alteration that often places this note in tune. The G# in measures 20-22 can be kept in tune by lowering the three fingers of the right hand one quarter to half way, creating a type of half-hole fingering. The high C° in bar 50 can be lowered by adding all three fingers of the right hand. The Gb in measures 62-64 can be tuned by partially lowering the first finger of the right hand. Discover the intonation tendencies of your saxophone and use these or similar altered fingerings to help avoid unwanted sharpness.

Saxophonists must take care to perform the more technical passages rhythmically correct. Bars 14-17 present a dotted-eighth-and-sixteenth rhythm, followed by triples and finally eighth- and sixteenth-note figures. Care must be taken to play these rhythms exactly as notated. Similar rhythmic changes occur in bars 40-48. Be sure the duple and triple figures are precise. The six-note arpeggio in measure 17 and the thirty-second-note figures in measures 47-48 should not be rushed. These are best played rather stretched to obtain the proper intensity needed for these climactic sections.

Like the saxophonist, the pianist has some areas that need special attention. Hartley has been specific in his pedaling instructions and they should be carefully followed to create the proper effects. The work begins with precise pedaling indications from measure 1-8. Bars 9-19 instruct the pianist to pedal *ad lib.*, defined here as meaning “as needed.” Measure 21 indicates *senza ped.* or “without pedal,” and measures 25 to the end are again marked *ad lib.* Be sure the pianist strictly adheres to Hartley’s instructions.

Another important aspect in the piano part is the 8va indication from bar 51 to the end. Measures 51-58 specify that the right hand should be played up an octave. Measures 59 to the end indicate that the right hand is played at the octave notated (*loco*), but the left hand should be performed down an octave. Hartley’s registrations are an important part of the piece and must be observed.

Hartley’s *Poem* is an emotionally charged composition. Every serious tenor saxophonist should study and hopefully perform it. Attention to these few details may make the piece a more rewarding experience for performer and listener alike.