

ÁSKELL MÁSSON'S SOLOS FOR SNARE DRUM: MAXIMIZING MUSICAL
EXPRESSION THROUGH VARYING COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES AND
EXPERIMENTATION IN TIMBRE

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This dissertation and accompanying lecture recital explores the musical elements present in Áskell Másson's three solos for snare drum, *PRÍM* (1984), *KÍM* (2001) and *B2B: Back to Basics* (2010). Two of the primary challenges for the performer when playing solo literature on a non-pitch oriented instrument are identifying thematic structures and understanding how to interpret all innovative sound production techniques employed within the music. A thematic and compositional analysis, as well as an investigation into the experimentation of timbre found in Másson's three pieces for solo snare drum will help to clarify the musical complexities that are present throughout.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1970's, Áskell Másson's compositions for percussion, including his solos for the snare drum, have gained worldwide attention for their originality and innovative compositional techniques.¹ Másson has stated that there has been a certain need for concert pieces for the snare drum. This need for concert snare drum music has resulted in three solo works, one duet and one concerto for the instrument.² The three solo pieces, entitled *PRÍM* (1984), *KÍM* (2001) and *B2B: Back to Basics* (2010) were written for Danish percussionist Gert Mortensen, and have been performed internationally by world-renowned soloists such as Dame Evelyn Glennie and Markus Leason. Glennie has contributed greatly to the popularity of Másson's works, with worldwide performances of his snare drum solos and premieres of his snare drum concerto *Konzertstück* in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada.³ In writing the solo works, Másson has stated that he wanted to approach the instrument in a different way and that each piece "came individually rather than all three at once as an overview of what might be possible for the instrument."⁴

The lack of ability to play harmony or pitched melody presents aural limitations for the snare drum in solo settings. In all three of Másson's pieces for the instrument, he uses extended techniques to create varying timbres, which contribute to thematic development and musical phrasing throughout. The variance of timbre in these compositions illuminates specific thematic elements, aurally emphasizing the musically expressive qualities that are present.

¹ "Biography," Áskell Másson, accessed January 3rd, 2015, <http://askellmasson.com/biography.php>.

² J. Michael Sammons, *A Performance Guide to Áskell Másson's Marimba Concerto* (The University of Arizona, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2010), 126.

³ "Concertos," Evelyn Glennie, accessed June 1st, 2015, <https://www.evelyn.co.uk/archive/concertos/>

⁴ Áskell Másson, Electronic mail interview by John O'Neal, July 5, 2015.

Two of the primary challenges for the performer when playing solo literature on a non-pitch oriented instrument are identifying thematic structures and understanding how to interpret all innovative sound production techniques employed within the music. A thematic and compositional analysis, as well as an investigation into the experimentation of timbre found in Måsson's three pieces for solo snare drum will help to clarify the musical complexities that are present throughout.

CHAPTER 2

ÁSKELL MÁSSON

Icelandic native, Áskell Másson (b. 1953), is a prolific composer whose works are remarkable for their depth of expression and brilliance of sonic structure.⁵ His compositions for percussion have been performed by world-renowned soloists including Dame Evelyn Glennie, Gert Mortensen, Markus Leoson, the Swedish percussion ensemble, Kroumata, and the Israeli percussion duo, PercaDu. Másson's compositions have received international recognition, having been featured at international festivals including the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC), Gulbenkian Festival, International Society of Contemporary Music (ISCM) World Music Days, Hong Kong Arts Festival, Sydney Spring Festival, and Nordic Music Days, presented by the Nordic Composers Council (NCC).⁶

While Másson did play the drum set some as a child,⁷ he began his formal musical studies on the clarinet in 1961 and studied at the Reykjavik College of Music in Iceland. He furthered his education in London, taking private lessons in composition with Patrick Savill and in percussion with James Blades. It was through his relationship with Blades, that Másson established connections with other pupils of Blades and emerging soloists including Dame Evelyn Glennie, Roger Carlsson and Gert Mortensen. These relationships have resulted in several collaborations including *Konzertstuck* and his *Marimba Concerto*, both written for and premiered by Roger Carlsson. *PRÍM* (1984), *KÍM* (2001) and *B2B: Back to Basics* (2010) were written for Gert Mortensen.⁸

⁵ Másson, "Biography."

⁶ J. Michael Sammons, *A Performance Guide*, 16.

⁷ Áskell Másson, Electronic mail interview by John O'Neal, July 22, 2015.

⁸ Áskell Másson, Electronic mail interview by John O'Neal, July 5, 2015.

His compositions encompass an array of musical genres including symphonies, solo concerti, works for choir and various chamber ensembles, big band and solo instrumental pieces. Másson's music is regularly performed around the world by prominent ensembles including the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio Paris, Radio Symphoniker, Wien, Residenz Orchest Den Haag, New Juillard Ensemble, Ensemble Intercontemporain and the Swedish percussion ensemble, Kroumata.⁹

Másson's most frequently performed works include his opera *The Ice Palace* (2001); three symphonies; concerti for a variety of instruments; orchestral works *Rún* (1994), *För* (2003), *Okto November* (1994) and *Hvörf* (1992); chamber orchestra works *Elja*, *Ymni*, *Maes Howe*, and a large number of solo and chamber works for a variety of instrumental combinations.¹⁰ He has also composed music for the theatre, film and television as well as several radio documentaries.¹¹

⁹ Másson, "Biography."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

PRÍM

PRÍM (1984) was written with Másson's intention to explore the possibilities of the snare drum as a solo instrument.¹² The piece came about in January of 1984, when percussionist Gert Mortensen approached Áskell Másson and suggested he compose a piece for solo snare drum. In looking back to this encounter, Másson states:

I didn't know of any such piece was in existence and also -maybe therefore- I had some doubts of whether this was in fact possible.... I was at the time resident in Copenhagen in an artists' and scholars' flat named after Iceland's first president, Jón Sigurdsson working on preparations for my opera, *The Ice Palace*, based on the book by the Norwegian Tarjei Vesaas. After some thought, I decided to try to compose such a piece for the snare drum, but I had no instrument with me. When I, shortly later, presented the piece for Gert, he simply said: '..og dette har du gjort helt uden tromme!' (.and this you have done without any drum!).¹³

The first fifteen prime numbers (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43) are the basis for the primary rhythmic theme of the overall work, using the 32nd note as the beat unit.¹⁴ The first measure of the piece, shown below in Example 1, is the rhythmic motive derived from the first fifteen prime numbers. A thematic derivative based on this number sequence is used in multiple instances throughout the work, at times using as few as the first four or five notes.

EXAMPLE 1: *PRÍM* m. 1 - the primary rhythmic theme.



PRÍM is written in 11/8, so there are eleven eighth notes in each measure, resulting in a maximum of forty-four possible 32nd notes. Figure 1 compares the first measure of the piece with subdivided 32nd notes, numbered in the figure 1-44. The rhythmic theme aligns with the first

¹² Sammons, *Performance Guide*, 126.

¹³ Áskell Másson, Electronic mail interview by John O'Neal, July 5, 2015.

¹⁴ Performance notes, *PRÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 1984).

fifteen prime numbers (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43) shown in the constant 32nd note subdivision.

FIGURE 1: *PRÍM* m. 1 compared to the 32nd beat unit and the resulting alignment of the first fifteen prime numbers (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43).



PRÍM can be divided formally into three sections: Section A, which includes measures 1 through 37; Section B, which includes measures 38 through 65; and Section C, which includes measures 66 through 79. A chart showing formal divisions and how the thematic material is treated can be found below in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: The formal division of *PRÍM*.

Formal Division	Measure Numbers	Thematic Treatment
Section A	1-37	Initial Statement/Episode
Section B	38-65	Developmental
Section C	66-79	Coda

Section A (measures 1-37) can be divided into four separate sections and can be labeled as Section A1 (measures 1-10), Section A2 (measures 11-20), Section A3 (measures 21-33) and Section A4 (measures 33-37).

Section A1 begins with a complete statement of the primary rhythmic theme in measure one. As stated earlier, this theme is the motivic basis for the entire work and appears in a variety of contexts as either a complete statement or fragmented. Measure 2 fragments the primary theme by omitting some notes so that the present figures align with the prime number digits 3, 7, 11, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37 and 43.

Sudden changes in dynamics are found throughout *PRÍM* and consistently contribute to phrase and thematic development. In the first measure, Masson emphasizes the initial thematic statement by placing it at the *fortissimo* dynamic level. Measure 2 utilizes a series of varying dynamic markings to displace the rhythmic emphasis of the original material. The crescendo midway through measure 3 helps build the intensity only to resolve it at measure 4. These measures are shown in Example 2.

EXAMPLE 2: *PRÍM* mm. 1-4.

The musical notation for Example 2 consists of two staves. The first staff shows measures 1 and 2. Measure 1 begins with a forte fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic marking. Measure 2 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a crescendo to a forte (*f*) dynamic, then a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, and ends with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second staff shows measures 3 and 4. Measure 3 begins with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, followed by a decrescendo to a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic, then a piano (*p*) dynamic, and a crescendo to a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 4 starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, followed by a decrescendo to a piano (*p*) dynamic, and ends with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The notation includes various dynamic markings, crescendo and decrescendo hairpins, and a fermata roll in measure 4.

The first major cadence point in Section A1 occurs at measure 10, on the fermata roll. The measures leading into this cadence utilize several fragments from the primary rhythmic motive. The first fragment appears in measure 8. Two variations on this fragment can be found in measure 9, the first using ornamentation to enhance the thematic material. The second thematic variation is at the end of the measure and appears in diminution, twice as fast as the original statement. Immediately preceding the roll in measure 10 is another statement of fragmented thematic material, using ornamentation to accentuate the musical statement. The ornamentation contributes to the increasing intensity of the phrase, leading to the fermata. The fermata briefly suspends time, aurally delaying the anticipated resolution, which occurs at the beginning of the next phrase in measure 11. These measures are shown below in Example 3.

EXAMPLE 3: *PRÍM* mm. 8-10.

In measures 11 through 20, or Section A2, Másson uses one or two bar fragments from measures 1 through 10 and states them in retrograde form in measures 11-20. Figure 3 shows how measures 11-20 correspond with measures 1-10.

FIGURE 3: Comparison of *PRÍM* mm. 1-10 with mm. 11-20.

Comparison of Measures 11-20 and Measures 1-10	
Measures 11-20	Measures 1-10
11	1 in retrograde
12	2 in retrograde
13-14	3-4 in retrograde
15-16	5-6 in retrograde
17-18	7-8 in retrograde
19	9 in retrograde
20	10 in retrograde

Section A3 begins in measure 21 and again uses thematic fragments from the primary theme. Fragments from the original theme appear in measures 21 through 23. In measures 24 through 28, Másson creates a sustain quality at the dynamic level of *p* through the use of a series of rolls. A rhythmic emphasis is added to this sustain with written non-rolled figures at the fortissimo dynamic level.

In measure 30, Másson utilizes a sound created when one drumstick is placed on the snare head and is then struck with the opposite stick. Másson notates this by using “x” note-heads. He states, “Hold left stick pointed on skin and beat the stick with right stick. Moving gradually towards and away from the tip of left stick.”¹⁵ The resulting effect rises and lowers in pitch. In measures 30 (shown below in Example 4) and 58, Másson uses this extended technique in a thematic fragment consisting of the first three notes of the primary theme from measure 1.

EXAMPLE 4: *PRÍM* m. 30.

30

Hold left stick pointed on skin and beat the stick with right stick
Moving gradually towards and away from tip of left stick

ff *p* *ff* *f* *dim.* -----

Measure 31 contains a complete restatement of the primary rhythmic theme from the first measure; however, in this instance it is embedded within a constant sextuplet rhythm. The thematic statement uses the constant sextuplets as its primary beat unit, whereas the original statement used the 32nd note as the primary beat unit.

Section A4 begins on the eighth beat of measure 33 and functions as a coda for the first half of the piece. Másson utilizes contrasting versions of the snare drum roll in measure 35 and 36, shown below in Example 5. In these two measures, Másson notates a roll, in which each hand is instructed to “Press ‘too hard’ making a very short buzz,”¹⁶ resulting in an audible pulse. This alternates with an open rudimental style five-stroke roll.

¹⁵ Performance notes, *PRÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 1984).d

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

EXAMPLE 5: *PRÍM* mm. 35-36.

35 Press "too hard" making a very short buzz R L L R R L R R L L R

36 R R R R R *mf*

Másson uses another non-traditional technique in measure 37, shown below in Example 6, in which he instructs the performer to “Hold left stick pointed on skin, rub the right stick to and fro on left stick.”¹⁷ The aural result of this technique is a fading effect, substantially changing the timbre and intensity, ending the first section of the piece.

EXAMPLE 6: *PRÍM* mm. 36-37.

36 R R R R R *mf*

37 Hold left stick point on skin, rub the right stick to and fro on left stick *rit. e dim.* snare off

Section B of *PRÍM* encompasses measures 38 through 65 and can be divided into two sections. Section B1 includes measures 38 through 54, while Section B2 includes measures 55 through 65. A compositional characteristic found throughout Section B is that the primary rhythmic theme is consistently written into a variety of timbral and rhythmic contexts. In this section, Másson develops more of the complete theme, whereas earlier in the piece, the composer experimented with smaller fragments of the theme.

At the beginning of Section B1, in measure 38, shown below in Example 7, Másson combines two very different timbres on the snare drum. He writes the instruction that the left

¹⁷ Performance notes, *PRÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 1984).

hand must lie “flat on the rim ‘latin style,’” while the right hand is instructed to play “normal.”¹⁸ The term “latin style” implies that the performer should play in a manner similar to the technique a drum set player might use when playing in the bossa nova style. With this technique, the back of the stick should touch the head, functioning as a hinge, and the shoulder of the stick should strike the rim. The primary rhythmic theme is placed in the left hand and is written in augmentation, while the right hand plays all of the 16th notes that are not included in the theme. The composer instructs in measure 37 that this should be performed without the snares turned on, resulting in two distinct contrasts, with the primary theme being audibly projected within the contrasting textures.

EXAMPLE 7: *PRÍM* mm. 38-39.

A tempo
 38 L flat on the rim "latin style"

 mf
 R normal

Measure 41 begins another complete statement of the primary theme, in augmentation, reducing the pace to a quarter of the speed of the original statement. The rhythmic figures are ornamented with a varied number of grace notes, ranging in number from 2 up to 14, as shown below in Example 8. It is important that the performer execute the large number of grace notes in a manner that does not distort the aural perception of the theme.

¹⁸ Performance notes, *PRÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 1984).

EXAMPLE 8: *PRÍM* mm. 41-44.

A partial statement of the theme is made in measures 45 through 47, shown below in Example 9. The thematic material is presented at the dynamic level of forte, and is notated to be played “at the centre of drum.”¹⁹ The non-thematic notes, using a rhythmic pattern comprised of 32nd notes and 32nd note triplets, are played towards the edge of the drum at the dynamic level of *piano*. To end the segment, Másson crescendos the non-thematic ostinato until the phrase culminates with *fz* roll, which decrescendos, followed by a *ff* rim shot, and concluded with a fading statement of a thematic fragment in diminution.

EXAMPLE 9: *PRÍM* mm. 45-47.

Measures 52 through 54, shown below in Example 10, serve as a transition between statements of the primary rhythmic theme. Measure 52 is an ornamented, retrograde version of measure 1, however it is to be played “freely” and makes use of various types of ornamentation while incorporating rim shots. This measure also includes a series of dynamic contrasts, in which virtually every note has its own dynamic notation, effectively adding rhythmic emphasis and

¹⁹ Performance notes, *PRÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 1984).

direction to the individual figures. Measure 53 features ornamented fragments, utilizing a series of contrasting dynamic markings. The passage concludes with a series of offbeat 16th notes in measure 54.

EXAMPLE 10: *PRÍM* mm. 52-54.

52 freely rim shot
 mf ff p f mf mp ff f p f

53 rim shot rim shot
 mf ff f p ff p f f

54
 ff dim. p

Section B2 begins in measure 55 and is similar to measure 41, in that it is a statement of the primary rhythmic theme in ornamented augmentation using the 8th note as the primary beat unit. In this instance, Másson limits this statement to the first 7 prime numbers, followed by another statement of the first 7 prime numbers, in augmentation, using the 16th note as the primary beat unit.

Measures 57 and 58, shown in Example 11, separates the two hands so that one hand plays a thematic fragment, while the other is instructed to “let stick fall on drum and bounce freely ‘by itself.’”²⁰ A dialogue between the two hands occurs, in which the thematic material goes from one hand to the other. This alternation culminates with the hands returning together to playing the first three notes of the primary theme in measure 58. This fragment is echoed with an extended technique in which one stick strikes the other while it is in contact with the drumhead, in the same manner as measure 30.

²⁰ Performance notes, *PRÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 1984).

EXAMPLE 11: *PRÍM* mm. 57-58.

57
R.H.
f
L.H. let stick fall on drum
and bounce freely ("by itself")
f

58
mf *cresc.* *f* *mp*
(ordinario) come prima

Throughout *PRÍM*, Másson explores varying timbre options of the snare drum roll. Measure 59, shown below in Example 12, requires the performer to play both a standard orchestral roll, or what is commonly referred to as a “long roll,” and a single stroke roll, in which each stick produces a single sound and the sticks strike the instrument at a rapid speed. The varying roll qualities disrupt the musical flow of the fragmented statements and contribute to the musical contrasts within the composition.

EXAMPLE 12: *PRÍM* m. 59.

59
single stroke roll "long roll"
ff *ff* *mf*

This section reaches its climax at the single stroke roll in measure 64, which crescendos into 32nd note sextuplets and continues through a passage that serves as a written out ritardando in the midst of a decrescendo. The rhythmic material then increases in speed, returning to a 32nd note sextuplet rhythm at the *f* dynamic level. It is at this point that the composition begins what can be considered Section C of the piece.

In Section C, the primary theme is embedded into constant 32nd note sextuplets and is limited to only the first 7 notes of the theme played at the center of the drum. The rapid accompaniment changes to the rhythmic pattern found earlier in measure 45 and the first 13 notes of the primary rhythmic theme are presented as accented notes, again in the center of the drum. Following the 13th note of the theme, the accompaniment pattern evolves into a roll and the thematic material is stated in its entirety as single strikes on the drum amidst the roll.

PRÍM concludes with a complete statement of the primary theme, in the original form from measure 1. The theme is presented at the dynamic level of *p* and ends with a *ff* rim shot on the final note of the theme, thus completing the piece.

Despite being a non-pitch instrument, Másson uses a primary theme, derived from the first fifteen prime numbers, as a basis for *PRÍM*. The various compositional techniques and timbral explorations that contribute to thematic development help enhance the inherent musical qualities found within the composition.

CHAPTER 4

KÍM

Áskell Másson describes *KÍM* (2001) as “a continuation of my exploitation of the possibilities of the snare drum as a solo instrument, using sounds and polyrhythms which I hadn’t in the earlier pieces.”²¹ One of Másson’s goals in writing this piece was “to establish rhythms in various timbres which would develop constantly new viewpoints by putting these into permutational combinations.”²²

The term “kim” means embryo or germ.²³ Másson’s intent, throughout *KÍM*, is to use the simple rhythmic content stated at the start of the piece, in a variety of musical experiments utilizing non-traditional techniques to develop the “germ” into broad musical concepts.

KÍM opens with the performer entering the stage performing the initial rhythmic material, found in measures 1 through 3. This theme, shown below in Example 13, uses an off beat rhythmic pattern played with two sticks in the air, combined with a foot stomp on beat one of each measure. The initial emptiness of the stage and the simplistic rhythmic material reflect the title of the piece. Throughout the composition, the initial embryonic material is restated and developed in multiple instances.

EXAMPLE 13: *KÍM* mm. 1-6.

Beat the back part of the sticks together, while walking on stage, towards the drum.
or: standing in front of the instrument, beat sticks together high in the air and move about.

♩ = ca. 126-132

mf stamp foot down

4 repeat as necessary if distance to drum is too long

²¹ Performance notes, *KÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2001).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

KÍM has a metric pattern of 3/8, 7/8 and 11/8, which is repeated 32 times. The piece is composed of a series of sections, in which the initial rhythmic idea matures through the addition of rhythmic values, polyrhythms and various non-traditional techniques. As the piece progresses, it cycles through restatements of the main rhythmic idea, followed by several developmental sections before again returning to a final restatement of the original rhythmic material. Figure 4, shown below, illustrates the formal structure of *KÍM*.

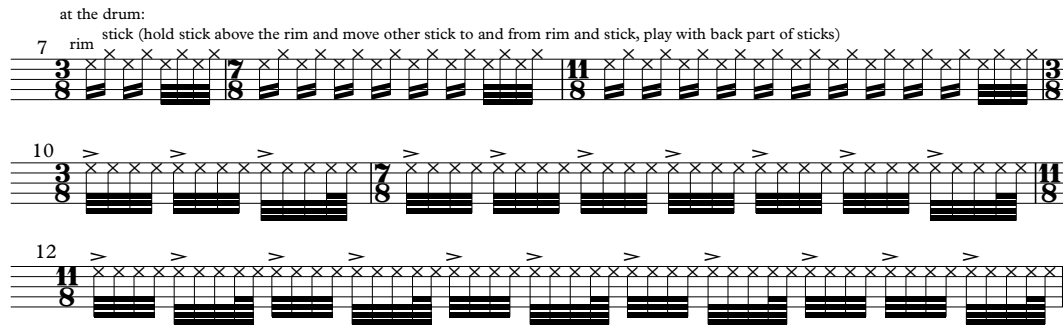
FIGURE 4: The formal structure of *KÍM*.

Formal Division	Measure Numbers	Musical Development
Initial Rhythmic Statement	1-6	Initial statement of the principal “germ” theme
Section A	7-12	Increase in rhythmic activity and the addition of timbral elements
Section B	13-21	Increase in rhythmic activity and the addition of timbral elements
Restatement	22-24	Restatement
Section C	25-34	Addition of timbral elements
Transition/Partial Restatement	35-36	Incomplete Restatement with added accompaniment figure
Section D	37-48	Addition of rhythmic figures to accompaniment
Restatement	49-51	Restatement
Section E	52-60	Addition of rhythmic elements into offbeat figures
Section F	61-73	Incorporation of polyrhythms
Section G	74-84	Incorporation of polyrhythms and extended techniques
Section H	85-93	Decrease in rhythmic activity
Restatement	94-96	Final Restatement

In measure 7, Másson increases the level of intensity by adding strikes on the rim, while maintaining the original offbeat rhythm in the stick clicks. The buildup continues in measures 10 through 12 with the addition of 32nd and 64th notes, which substantially increases the rhythmic intensity. These additions are illustrated below in Example 14.

EXAMPLE 14: *KÍM* mm. 7-12.

at the drum:
7 rim stick (hold stick above the rim and move other stick to and from rim and stick, play with back part of sticks)



The piece changes in timbre at measure 13 or Section B, from the sounds created by striking the rim and beating the sticks together, to playing on the “limpet practice pad,”²⁴ which is placed on the snare drum prior to performance. Due to the construction of the “gladstone” style practice pad, which fits entirely over the top drumhead and features a raised-circular center section for extra dampening, Másson is able to exploit varying timbral alternatives by moving the playing surface between the thick and thin portions of the pad on the drum. The composer adds double stroked 64th notes and strikes on the rim, increasing the rhythmic and timbral intensity as the phrase moves toward its resolution in measure 22.

The diverse tone colors in Section B are notated through a combination of written instructions and specific note head designations. While Másson does indicate specific stickings in this section, he also states that the written “R” in the score dictates that the strong hand should play those notes and the weak hand should play all notes designated as “L.” A sample of this notation is shown below in Example 15.

²⁴ Performance notes, *KÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2001).

EXAMPLE 15: *KÍM* mm. 13-15.

13 Limpet practice pad (soft rubber suction pad with a thick hub - gladstone pad) is placed on drum before the playing of the piece. Snares should be off. Lowest note = on the thick part. Higher note = on the thin part

R = strong hand
L = weak hand

15 LL RR RR RR RR RR on the rim RLLRLL

Measures 22 through 24, shown below in Example 16, restate the original motivic material. In this instance the statement incorporates a non-traditional technique in which 32nd notes are performed on the underside of the drum with the left hand fingers, while simultaneously holding the drumstick in the same hand.

EXAMPLE 16: *KÍM* mm. 22-24.

22 play on snare head under drum with fingers thumb holding stick

24 remove practice pad while playing

New rhythmic material appears in the right hand at measure 25, signifying a new section of development and growth, Section C. As the right hand continues, the left hand begins to interject sextuplets, off beat 32nd notes and quintuplets. Másson separates the two voices with specific instructions on how and where to play on the drum. He states in the score that the right hand must play “always with the back part of stick, play between center and rim,” while the left hand is instructed to play “with tip of stick in the middle of the drum.”²⁵ These performance variations create significant timbral variations between the voices. This is shown below in Example 17.

²⁵ Performance notes, *KÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2001).

EXAMPLE 17: *KÍM* mm. 25-27.

always with the back part of stick
play between center and rim

with tip of stick
in the middle of drum

Section C ends at measure 35, with the entrance of the brush on the drumhead. The composer creates a new sound texture in the piece by instructing the performer to play a specific rhythm while sliding the brush on the drumhead for 16th notes and striking the drumhead on the eighth notes. These sounds are notated through instructions, arrows designating the direction of the sliding, and dictated stickings. This rhythmic material becomes an accompaniment figure for the right hand, which states the original offbeat 16th note motive on the rim in measure 36, then moves to the drumhead at the start of Section D, in measure 37, again experimenting with timbre while using the original theme.

Like Másson's other compositions for solo snare drum, *KÍM* utilizes several variations on the snare drum roll. At measure 40, a “press roll” is notated. This roll must be executed with the right hand alone, due to the rhythmic accompaniment being played with the brush in the opposite hand. Measures 45 and 48 present another rebound technique, in which Másson instructs the player to “let stick fall and bounce freely.” This is reminiscent of measures 57 and 58 in *PRÍM*, which utilize the same technique. In *KÍM*, the technique functions as part of the motivic development, while in *PRÍM*, it plays more of an accompaniment role to the thematic material. Sections from both pieces are compared below in Figure 5.

FIGURE 5: M. 57 of *PRÍM* compared to m. 45 of *KÍM*.

PRÍM m. 57

57
R.H.

L.H. let stick fall on drum
and bounce freely ("by itself")

KÍM m. 45

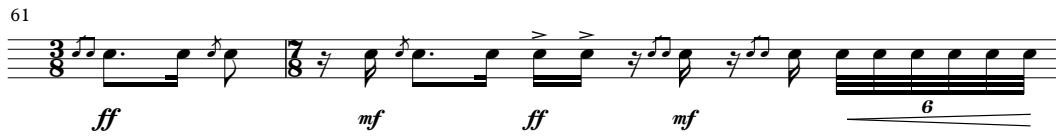
45 let stick fall and bounce freely

Section D continues until measures 49 through 51, where there is a restatement of the original material from measure 1. At the end of measure 50, the original figures are embellished with the addition of stick clicks and strikes on the side of the drum.

Section E incorporates the greatest dynamic contrasts to this point in the composition. Timbre exploration in this section is limited to playing between the center and edge of the drumhead, playing in the center, and striking the rim.

Measures 61 to 73 are rhythmically different than the earlier sections. This section, Section F, no longer hints at the offbeat figures that are present in the original rhythmic theme, and have been so prominent in the piece thus far. The new motivic material, shown below in Example 18, emphasizes the dotted 8th followed by a 16th note rhythm and provides a musical contrast to the thematic material earlier in the piece.

EXAMPLE 18: *KÍM* mm. 61-62.



In Section F, the composer increases his use of polyrhythms in the music. In measure 66, Másson notates four notes, to be played in the time of three eighth notes. In measures 67 and 68, the composer notates three sets of sextuplets with one hand “on skin close to the rim,”²⁶ while the other hand plays three sets of straight 16th notes, thus creating a two against three rhythm.

As Section F progresses towards the fermata in measure 73, the motivic material from measure 61 is played at the soft dynamic levels of *p* and *pp*, with 32nd note interjections at the accented *f* and *ff* levels. The section ends with a two-against-three polyrhythm at the dynamic level of *pp* in measure 73.

Section G begins in measure 74 and also features several polyrhythms. In measure 75, a polyrhythm is created between the two hands - one hand playing three sets of 16th notes on the rim, while simultaneously, the opposite hand plays 4 notes. The effect is a rhythmic figure of 6:4, which is immediately followed by the 3:2 polyrhythm. This measure is shown below in Example 19.

EXAMPLE 19: *KÍM* m. 75.



Measures 76 through 78 include a new texture that involves rubbing the sticks together and rubbing the sticks on the drumhead itself. Másson combines these sounds with striking the

²⁶ Performance notes, *KÍM for snare drum* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2001).

rim of the drum and beating the sticks together. Rhythmically, this brief segment hints at the accompaniment figure that was played with the brush in measure 35. The section begins at piano and crescendos, leading into another four-note polyrhythm in measure 81.

Section H begins in measure 85. Measures 90 through 93 features a long, sustained roll that begins at the dynamic level of *ppp* and crescendos to *fortissimo* in measure 93. The inclusion of the eighth note figures amidst the roll in measure 93 is reminiscent of *PRÍM*, in which this same technique was used in measures 74 through 79.

The final three measures consist of a restatement of the thematic material from measures 1 through 3 and are shown below in Example 20. The motivic material is performed in a standard performance manner on the top drumhead before returning to the original orchestration involving foot stomps and striking the sticks together, functioning as a return to the simplistic germ motive.

EXAMPLE 20: *KÍM* mm. 94-96.

The musical score for Example 20 consists of three measures (94-96) for a drum set. Measure 94 is in 7/8 time, marked with a dynamic of *f*. Measure 95 is also in 7/8 time, marked with dynamics of *f* and *p*. Measure 96 is in 7/8 time, marked with dynamics of *mf* and *f*. The score includes a 'whisper with mouth' section with 's-s-s' notation and a dynamic of *(mp)*.

One of the primary compositional characteristics of *KÍM* is the use of non-traditional techniques to create motivic development, contrast and variation. Másson uses more non-traditional techniques in *KÍM* than either of his other two solos for snare drum. By experimenting with these techniques, Másson is able to create a musical composition consisting of thematic growth and development.

CHAPTER 5

B2B: BACK TO BASICS

According to the composer, *B2B: Back to Basics* (2010) is inspired by “listening to and seeing several masters of traditional drumming.”²⁷ With regard to inspiration for this piece, Másson states that:

With B2B I wanted to pay respect to the different traditions of snare drumming. Styles, approaches, techniques and attitudes fascinated me in this respect. An inspiration I would like to name was a DVD I got at PASIC once. It’s called “The Historic Drummer’s Heritage Concert,” which features drummers with very different styles of drumming.²⁸

The Historic Drummer’s Heritage Concert features a number of groups in the traditional rudimental drumming style, including C.A.D.R.E. - Canadian Associates Drumming Rudimental Excellence, Camp Chase Fifes and Drums, Colonial Williamsburg Fifes and Drums, The Oak Village Marching Percussion Ensemble and The University of North Texas Drumline.²⁹ These ensembles presented a lineage of rudimental marching percussion music and these performances often included visual aspects of drumming. Clearly, this was an inspiration for Másson in his composition, *B2B: Back to Basics*.

According to Jane W. Davidson, “recent studies in the psychology of music perception show that visual information combines with auditory information in the perception of musical expression.”³⁰ *B2B* places more emphasis on using rhythms to highlight the visual elements and

²⁷ Performance notes, *B2B: Back to Basics* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2010).

²⁸ Áskell Másson, Electronic mail interview by John O’Neal, July 6, 2015.

²⁹ *The Historic Drummer’s Heritage Concert*, Video (Percussive Arts Society, n.d.).

³⁰ Jane W. Davidson, “Visual Perception of Performance Manner in the Movements of Solo Musicians,” *Psychology of Music* 21 (1993): 103-12.

sticking patterns common to traditional drumming, in order to enhance perceived musical expression.

The composer states, in the latest edition of *B2B*, it is important that this piece be performed on a piccolo snare drum and the performer should “play confirmedly, but in a refined and neat way with rather light sticks.”³¹

B2B: Back to Basics is notated in a different style than Másson’s other two works for solo snare drum. While *PRÍM* and *KÍM* are notated with a standard 5-line staff, *B2B: Back to Basics* is written utilizing a 1-line notation system. The extended techniques are identified through his use of varying note head shapes and written composer instructions. Throughout *B2B*, Masson dictates a number of visual aspects common to traditional drumming and not found in his earlier compositions for the snare drum.

The first visual instruction occurs in measure 1, where Másson writes that the performer should play the written rhythm with the right hand, while holding the left stick in the air. The lack of movement in the left stick while it is being held in the air enhances the repeated and fixed quality of the rhythmic material. The visual element reflects the unchanging and fixed rhythmic figures - the rhythm does not change and the held stick does not move, remaining in a fixed position. The rhythmic figures are restated periodically throughout the composition, serving as the primary repeated motivic element in the piece. These measures are shown below in Example 21.

³¹ Áskell Másson, Electronic mail interview by John O’Neal, July 6, 2015.

EXAMPLE 21: *B2B* mm. 1-4.

Andante con moto [$\text{♩} = 96$]
hold left stick in the air

The first timbre variation appears in measures 19 through 23, where the composer notates an accelerating rhythmic figure with the instructions “beat tapered end of left stick lying on head.”³² In this instance, the performer must hold the stick loosely while touching the drumhead so that the stick bounces when it is struck. This technique creates a moment of suspended time, disrupting the musical flow, before reentering in tempo at measure 24. These measures are illustrated below in Example 22.

EXAMPLE 22: *B2B* mm. 19-25.

Tempo giusto

In measures 58 through 71, there are a series of metric modulations, in which the tempo equivalents are notated in the soloist’s score above the appropriate measure. According to the composer, the meter changes “should all be clearly marked.....with the eighth note as a constant factor.”³³

The motivic material in measures 70 through 73 is taken from “Hani, Krummi,” an Icelandic folksong featuring lyrics enumerating numerous domestic and rural animals in

³² Performance notes, *B2B: Back to Basics* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2010).

³³ Áskell Másson, Electronic mail interview by John O’Neal, July 6, 2015.

Iceland.³⁴ In his explanation of the piece, the composer states that this is of no real musical significance, as the pattern is not repeated anywhere in the composition and Másson did not want to make this prominent.³⁵ The rhythmic pulses are grouped in the sequence 4-3-4-2, which Másson notates by cycling through the time signatures of 4/8, 3/8, 4/8 and 2/8. The composer states that these measures, shown below in Example 23, should be played “with a slight accent at the beginning of each bar.”³⁶ Másson also adds rhythmic emphasis to certain notes by instructing the player to “beat stick on drum with stick.”³⁷ This is reminiscent of the extended technique used in measure 30 of his first composition for solo snare drum, *PRÍM*.

EXAMPLE 23: *B2B* mm. 70-73.

The next section in *B2B*, measures 75 through 109, features a series of roll variations and visual elements. The first roll variation appears in measure 77, in which the composer states “press buzz” over the rolled note, making each roll short and articulate. The roll is followed immediately by a strike with one stick onto the other stick, while it is in contact with the drumhead. This resembles the technique used in measures 30 and 58 of Másson’s first piece for solo snare drum, *PRÍM*.

In measures 86 through 90, the sticking for the written figure is dictated by the composer’s indication, regarding whether to use the tip or the butt of the stick in the right hand. During the two repeated left hand notes, he instructs “(turn the R stick),”³⁸ paying homage to the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Áskell Másson, Electronic mail interview by John O’Neal, July 6, 2015.

³⁷ Performance notes, *B2B: Back to Basics* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2010).

³⁸ Ibid.

back sticking technique that is common in traditional drumming. The rolls in these measures are labeled “ord.,” and should be executed as standard orchestral rolls. Measures 89 and 90 are notated with the instruction “come prima,” meaning the measures should be played with the same back sticking technique from measure 86.

The timbre differences of using the back sticking technique creates an audible eighth note pulse, which alternates with the sustain quality of the rolled measures. The visual stimulation created by the back sticking technique projects a visual excitement in conjunction with the sextuplet rhythm, creating an exaggerated contrast with the lack of visual motion and rhythmic activity in the sustained, rolled measures. The visual element used here is new to Másson’s compositions and was not featured in his earlier solos for snare drum. Measures 84 through 90 are shown below in Example 24.

EXAMPLE 24: *B2B* mm. 84-89.

In measures 108 and 109, shown below in Example 25, the composer states in the score that the sticks should strike each other on the first two notes of each set of 16th notes. The composer includes the instructions “beat upside of R w/L” on the first note and “beat upside of L w/R” on the second.³⁹ The motion required to beat the topside of each of the two sticks adds an exaggerated visual aspect to the conclusion of this section. The increase of physical motion and variations of timbre, in conjunction with the written ritardando at the *f* dynamic level,

³⁹ Performance notes, *B2B: Back to Basics* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2010).

increases the musical tension, only to be deceptively resolved back in tempo with 32nd notes at the *pp* dynamic level.

EXAMPLE 25: *B2B* mm. 108-110.

The musical notation for Example 25 shows three measures. Measure 108 begins with a double bar line and a fermata. Above the staff, the tempo marking 'rit.' is followed by a dashed line. The notes are marked with 'x' and the dynamic 'f'. Above the first note is the instruction 'beat of R w/L', above the second is 'beat of L w/R', and above the third is 'ord.'. The notes are marked 'L' and 'R'. Measure 109 is marked 'sim.' and 'f'. Measure 110 is marked 'A Tempo' and 'pp'. The notes are marked with 'R R L L R R L L'.

The next section begins in measure 110, and is characterized by a series of roll variations and visual elements. The 32nd notes in measure 110 are designated with a sticking pattern identical to an open or double stroke roll, leading to the single stroke roll in measure 118. It should be noted that Másson’s interest in the varying timbres of the various roll qualities is prominent in all three of the snare drum solos.

In measure 127 through 129, shown below in Example 26, Másson incorporates another visual element to exaggerate the expressive quality of the notated rhythm. These measures feature a triplet figure in which the last two notes are “x” note heads with the instruction “beat L stick in the air w/R stick” above the first note head and above the second the instruction reads “beat R stick in the air w/butt end of L stick.”⁴⁰ These measures create a moment of significant contrast, both musically and visually, from the surrounding passages. By utilizing the triplet, Masson creates a musical feel similar to the waltz, in which there is an emphasis on the first beat and the following two notes occur as a reaction to the first beat. The visual element on the second and third beats of the triplet create less emphasis and a suspended quality which is resolved when the sticks come back to the drum to strike the notes on the downbeat of the measure.

⁴⁰ Performance notes, *B2B: Back to Basics* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2010).

EXAMPLE 26: *B2B* mm. 127-129.

Following this segment, there is a restatement, in measures 136 through 141, of the rhythmic material from the first three measures. The visual aspect of holding one stick in the air while the other plays is also present, again bringing attention to the repeated and fixed rhythmic statement. The same visual element is used in Measures 154 through 164. In this case, the stick is being held in the hand while the other is playing repeating sets of three eighth notes. Like measures 136 through 141, this visual element exaggerates the unchanging and fixed rhythmic figures.

In measure 173, a polyrhythm is present in which a set of four dotted 16th notes are played over the span of three 8th notes and are rolled in a press roll manner so that each note is audibly articulated. The four-note polyrhythm disrupts the musical flow of the strict triple meter rhythms in the previous bars.

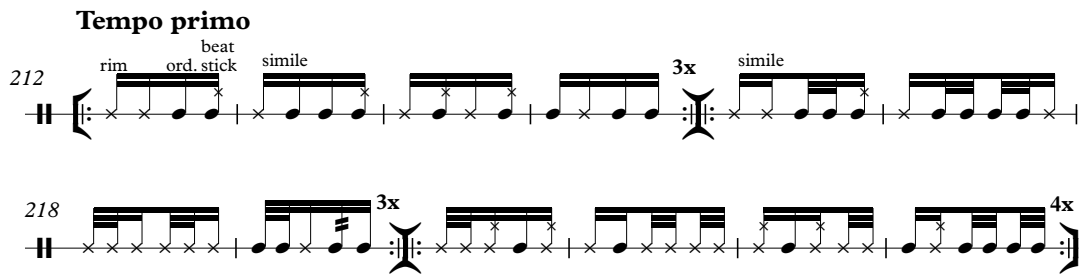
The section beginning at measure 212 features three four-measure passages, in which each is repeated three times, and uses a number of non-traditional playing techniques. In this instance, the performer must go from playing on the rim, to playing on the head, to beating the sticks together. Másson develops the motivic material through the addition of notes and varying timbres. The primary thematic material and its development is illustrated below in Figure 6.

FIGURE 6: The development of the thematic material in *B2B* mm. 212-223.

Primary rhythmic theme developed in mm. 212-223 of *B2B: Back to Basics*



B2B: Back to Basics, mm. 212-223



Measures 224-226 utilize changing sticking patterns to present an aural effect similar to varying articulations on a wind or string instrument. The single strokes will sound as staccato notes would on a wind or string instrument, and the double strokes will have more of a sustain quality. The resulting audible subtleties will draw the listener’s attention to the single strokes at the beginning of measures 224 and 225, creating a three-measure musical phrase. These measures are illustrated in Example 27.

EXAMPLE 27: *B2B* mm. 224-226.



In measures 233 through 235, the playing area is designated for each hand. The left hand is instructed to play close to the rim and the rhythmic content includes three measures of eighth note triplets, in which every other note is rolled. Aurally, this divides the nine triplets into sets of two. The right hand plays straight eighth notes towards the center of the drum and the written “simile” suggests the rhythmic figure continues with the alternating tip and butt motion from

measure 232. The conflicting rhythms, when combined with visual aspect of the back sticking, attracts the visual and aural attention of the listener, creating an intense moment of both visual and audio activity. Measures 232 through 235 are shown below in Example 28.

EXAMPLE 28: *B2B* mm. 232-235.

Measure 254 utilizes the extended technique from measure 19 and 22, in which one stick beats the other while it is touching the head, allowing it to rebound. In measure 260, the composer instructs the player to let each stick fall, and to “gradually tighten the rolls of the two sticks until you have a unified roll.”⁴¹ By measure 261, the roll will have evolved into what the composer describes as a “long roll.” In measures 263 and 266, there are several single strikes that must be made amidst the roll. The non-traditional technique in measure 254 and the following sustained roll, create an audible disruption in the musical flow and prepare the listener for the final section of the piece.

The rhythmic accents, amongst a sustained roll in measures 263 and 266 is a compositional tool found in all three of Másson’s solos for snare drum. Portions of *PRÍM*, *KÍM* and *B2B*, are shown below in Figure 7 for a comparison of the incorporation of this compositional technique in all three pieces.

⁴¹ Performance notes, *B2B: Back to Basics* (Vuarmarens, Switzerland: Editions Bim, 2010).

FIGURE 7: The combination of rolls with simultaneous articulated rhythm found in *PRÍM*, *KÍM* and *B2B*.

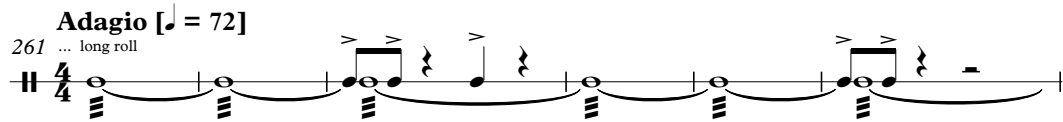
PRÍM mm. 74-77



KÍM mm. 90-93

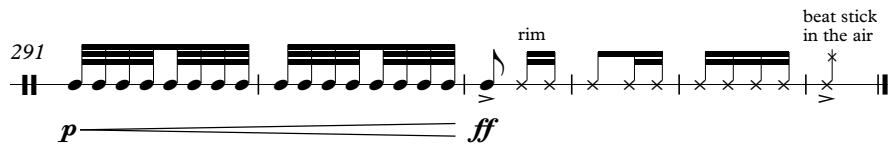


B2B: Back to Basics, mm. 261-266



B2B resumes an audible pulse in measure 271 and maintains consistent tempo for the final twenty-six measures. Measures 271 through 291 increase musical intensity, both rhythmically and dynamically, building to a climactic finale. However, the buildup is deceptive. Masson inserts a musical surprise by placing the final four measures of the piece on the rim, until the final note of the piece, which is played with two sticks striking each other while being held in the air. It should be noted that *B2B* is the only snare drum solo by Áskell Másson that does not finish with a statement of a primary thematic idea. The final six measures, measures 291 through 296 are shown below in Example 29.

EXAMPLE 29: *B2B* mm. 291-296.



While *PRÍM* and *KÍM* emphasize thematic development through compositional techniques and timbre variations, *B2B* uses these same characteristics to highlight visual aspects and specific sticking combinations common to the traditional drumming style. The fundamental style, common to traditional rudimental drumming, is reflected throughout the piece and in the title, *B2B: Back to Basics*.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

PRÍM, *KÍM* and *B2B: Back to Basics* demonstrate Másson's continued interest in using compositional techniques and experimentation with timbre to maximize musical expression on an instrument lacking the ability to play harmony or pitched melody. The composer overcomes possible limitations by using timbral contrasts to contribute to musical development and phrasing throughout.

Masson's fascination with roll quality is apparent by his usage of rolls in each piece. The rolls play a significant part in the musical development of each composition and create moments of audible contrast, while still maintaining the sustain quality associated with rolling on the snare drum. In addition, each piece utilizes a variety of timbres attained by striking the stick itself onto a various playing surfaces. The timbres created when striking different parts of the drumhead, the rim, the drum shell itself and the sticks striking, develop musical phrases and exaggerate the expressive qualities of each snare drum solo.

Compositionally, *PRÍM* and *KÍM* utilize a more linear and melodic approach, highlighting thematic development and rhythmic displacement. In both of these works, Masson develops thematic linear material through compositional techniques, including retrograde or diminution statements, or the addition or subtraction of rhythmic material to the thematic material. *B2B*, however, is different in that it is more vertical in nature and places greater emphasis on expressive qualities that can be enhanced by the addition of visual elements. The sticking variations, in combination with the visual aspect pay homage to the traditional style of drumming. While thematic ideas are used in *B2B*, they tend to be shorter rhythmic statements. In *PRÍM* and *KÍM*, the thematic material tends to be of longer length, focusing more on development and variation.

Áskell Másson's three solos for snare drum utilize a variety of techniques to exploit the musical and visual possibilities of the instrument. Through the use of compositional techniques and experimentation with timbre, Másson creates a sense of melody, phrasing, and musical shape on the snare drum. The identification of thematic structures and the understanding of how to interpret all innovative sound production techniques will help maximize the recognition of musical content in *PRÍM*, *KÍM* and *B2B: Back to Basics*.

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