

Oteri

Dually

*for alto saxophone and guitar
(transposing score)*

Transformatonal Music

Program Note

This composition is called *Dually* for a variety of reasons. On the most basic level it is music for two people. But it is also music that was composed by two very different people: It is based on the very first stand-alone instrumental composition I wrote back in 1979, having gotten deeply interested in classical music for the first time in my life because of a teacher I had at New York's High School of Music and Art named Lionel Chernoff (1936-2016). I was not yet 15 years old. But I have substantially revised it decades later, in 2017 at the age of 52, soon after I learned that Chernoff had passed away. (For a complete account of my original 1979 composition and the full details of all the revisions, read the much longer essay following this.) I have also used the word *dually* to acknowledge that although the classical music canon is built upon the notion that the great composers of the past were solely responsible for their timeless masterpieces, nothing has ever been created in a vacuum and this music also would not exist in our present time without the contributions of many other people—interpreters, presenters and other advocates, and, perhaps most importantly, listeners. All of my own humble attempts at contributing to the repertoire have been the by-product of lots of things I have learned from lots of other people. Many of the most important things I learned in my formative years I learned from Lionel Chernoff and whenever I listen to or write music, I am not doing so alone; he is with me. The word *dually* and the words I used for the titles of each of the four movements of the piece are all adverbs ending in “ly” for Lee, Lionel Chernoff’s nickname which I rarely called him by but by which I will always remember him.

As I was working through this music so it could be something I would be proud of now, I discovered something astonishing about some of the original material I had written which hinted at deeper connections to Chernoff. The emotional climax of the first movement is a melody that sequentially descends by seconds and outlines, in turn, an F major seventh chord, then an e minor seventh, followed by a d minor seventh, and ultimately a C major seventh—F-(E); E-(D); D-(C); C-(B). It’s a pretty basic progression, but it also outlines—in descent (FEDCB)—the first five notes of the Locrian mode (BCDEFAB). More importantly, those five notes are the only possible pitches that could be used in trying to construct a musical motive from the letters in the name Chernoff: C – B (for the H) – E – D (for the R which could be interpreted as “Re” as in “Do Re Mi”) – and, finally (after the useless N and O), F and another F. So I reworked the material to make the sonic allusions to his name more prominent and audible. It’s definitely a flight of fancy of an extremely active imagination, so this movement is called “Quixotically.” My alterations to the second movement were not as drastic. Its climax is another sequenced melody which this time goes from an F major seventh to an Eb major seventh then to a Db major seventh and then cycles back again and again, getting faster and faster—it could be construed as a chromatic reimagining of that earlier diatonic FEDC(B) sequence. I’ve called it “Jejunely” since this music is undeniably naïve and simplistic, even though I think it is heartfelt and I’m unrepentant. The third movement, however, is an entirely new creation. The original consisted of several sequences of five ascending diatonic notes that slightly changed but not by much and with no clear intent. It seemed not completely thought out and unfinished. So I replaced it with yet another sequence of descending melodies, this time all possible descending permutations of the five notes contained in the “Chernoff motive” (FEDCB) in honor of Chernoff’s 1968 Ph. D. thesis which was called “The determination of all possible hexachord-generated, twelve-tone rows characterized by bisymmetric configurations of all the simple intervals.” Admittedly the resulting music is light years away from the rest of the piece and to pawn it off as music I could have written as a teenager would be a complete fabrication. Then again, it was Chernoff who pointed out to me that music history is something we must reinterpret for ourselves in each generation. There’s an additional musical metaphor contained in this music which also brings it up to date. For the first half, the two instruments are mostly in strict unison. But at the midpoint one disappears and never returns. I imagined the last time I ever saw Chernoff which was when he came to hear David Starobin perform solo guitar piece of mine a decade ago. Sadly, Chernoff will never hear any of my music ever again, including this music, the first piece I had written which was because of him and which has now become a piece for and about him. I realize this concept is somewhat esoteric, so I call it “Esoterically.” Finally, a superfast rondo—“Relentlessly”—which cycles through contrasting motives that explore different rhythmic relationships between the two instruments. I’ve spiced it up a bit in ways that remain true to the spirit of the original material but hopefully make it more exciting to play and to listen to. There’s one final descending sequence, too. None of it contains any conscious or unconscious reference to Chernoff’s name, but it is musically the most indebted to him since he’s the person who taught me what a rondo is and that it is typically the form used in the concluding movements of sonatas. I had actually originally called this composition a sonata. I recall showing Chernoff the original version back in 1979 and, although he was encouraging, he took me to task for calling it a sonata since I didn’t use “sonata form” for any of the movements. It’s *still* not a sonata, so now I’ve subtitled it *an Anti-Sonata in Memory of Lionel Chernoff*.

—Frank J. Oteri (April 2017)