

NOEL DA COSTA'S *BLUE-TUNE VERSES**

by Patricia Spencer

An unknown gem with some hidden relations to *Syrinx* (Background for a Solo Series presentation, see October 22, 2020 Flute Happenings listing on p. 3 for details—Ed.)

In every era, we find musical gems that have been unjustly neglected. Such a work is Noel Da Costa's solo flute piece, *Blue-Tune Verses* (1997). Da Costa, a composer, violinist, and choral conductor, was born on December 24, 1929, in Lagos, Nigeria, of Jamaican parents who were missionaries for the Salvation Army. He graduated from Queens College and Columbia University and studied with Luigi Dallapiccola in Italy on a Fulbright. He taught at Rutgers University for more than 30 years. He has composed for a wide variety of vocal and instrumental combinations, and many reflect his knowledge of African, West Indian, and African American folk traditions, among them *Ceremony of Spirituals*, *Primal Rites*, and *Five Verses with Vamps*.

Da Costa's *Blue-Tune Verses* ranks with the best of the wonderful short solo flute works of the 20th century—Honegger, Ibert, Takemitsu's *Mei*, Carter's *Scrivo in vento*, and Jolivet's short single-movement *Incantation*. It even seems related to Debussy's *Syrinx*. The charm and strength of the Da Costa are subtle, lurking under the surface. But when the piece is finished, one senses that the world is different; something has happened.

Details! How can I support this claim? In rehearsal with the composer, prior to the premiere (in 2002), I mentioned in passing my intuitive sense of a relationship between his piece and the Debussy. He replied that he “would like to compare it with *Syrinx*,” but we then focused on finding the right tempos and other practical issues. I have since performed it a number of times, always with good response. Sadly, Da Costa, already ill at the time of the premiere, died later in the same year; so that first rehearsal was the only one I had with him.

Recently I decided to memorize the piece—and suddenly the relationship between it and *Syrinx* crystallized. In phrase after phrase, as I got to know the piece more closely, I found hidden instances and hints of the distinctive opening “cell” of *Syrinx* (the first four notes), most often with just three of the four notes, but clearly identifiable. The musical example is the first “verse” of the Da Costa, an 8-bar phrase, plus one bar of the introduction, with quotes marked with straight brackets, a retrograde in a diamond-line bracket, and re-ordered “cells” in hatched brackets (|||||).

The opening “cell” of *Syrinx* occurs seven times in this verse. The verse is repeated later in a kind of “recap” with different rhythms, a different mood—but with all the same little quotes of the cell. Another distinctive feature of *Syrinx* is the descending whole-tone scale at the end. In *Blue-Tune Verses*, Da Costa has one eight-bar verse in which a descending whole-tone scale occurs five times. And in two of these instances, including the first one, the final note of the scale is also the first note of a quote of the three-note “cell”



L to R: Noel Da Costa, Patricia Spencer, and Claude Debussy

— Quotes
◇ Retrograde
||||| Re-ordered cells

from the opening. So Da Costa is taking the distinctive ending of Debussy's work and combining it with a brief quote of the distinctive opening—meanwhile maintaining a laid-back, jazz feeling that is the predominant mood of the piece, sparked with exciting climaxes. I don't remember any flutists from the audiences who heard this telling me they heard references to *Syrinx*. There are more connections than one could cover in this brief article. Here is one more quick one.

One aspect of the “tonality” of *Syrinx* is a kind of B-flat “centricity.” B flat opens and closes the first phrase and rises to C flat in the second, only to fall back to B flat after the long upward reach of C flat—D flat—E flat. The next section, *Un peu mouvementé*, also centers on B flat, as does the return of the opening after the Rubato section. But at the very end, a shocking B natural initiates the descending whole-tone scale and never gets displaced by a B flat, so it leaves us hanging there with a new note.

In *Blue-Tune Verses*, the E is given a “centricity” role. All of the five verses, plus the coda, begin on E, and all the wholetone scales in the fourth verse begin on E. But the final note of the piece is E flat, leaving us with a feeling that something has changed, and we are in a different place. We can rejoice in Noel Da Costa's *Blue-Tune Verses*. Realizing only recently how masterfully Da Costa has handled his tribute to *Syrinx*, I feel remiss in not having studied it carefully before now, programmed it more often—and not having told you all about it long ago!

Patricia Spencer, a former president of the NYFC and founding member of the Da Capo Chamber Players, has played the premiere of Elliott Carter's flute concerto (NY), Karlheinz Stockhausen's Kathinkas Gesang als Luzifers Requiem (U.S.), and Shulamit Ran's Voices (world). She teaches flute and chamber music at Bard College/Conservatory and Hofstra University.