Alec Wilder's Sonata for Bass Trombone: An Arrangement for Chamber Winds and Rhythm Section

John Robert Hagan

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ALEC WILDER’S SONATA FOR BASS TROMBONE: AN ARRANGEMENT FOR CHAMBER WINDS AND RHYTHM SECTION

by

John Robert Hagan

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Major: Music

The University of Memphis
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Dedication

To my brilliant wife Sara, and our beautiful children Emaline and Benjamin, whose patience, love, and support made this possible.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Russ Schultz for his generosity in taking the time to share his experience with me.

Thank you to the members of my committee for serving as such great partners throughout this process: Dr. Albert Nguyen for making sure I kept artistry at the forefront of my work, Dr. Jack Cooper for dedicating so much time to making sure it sounded good, and Dr. Ken Kreitner for his consistent support through the writing of this document.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my teacher, mentor, and friend, Dr. John Mueller. You’ve been as much a part of my musical life as anyone, and I wouldn’t be the musician and educator I am today without your honest and consistent guidance. Thanks Doc, I couldn’t have done this without you.
Abstract

Twenty-first century trombonists are called upon to be versatile performers. Long gone are the days of stylistic specialization. And today, most professional trombonists can perform in settings ranging from symphony orchestras to jazz ensembles to other contemporary commercial music ensembles. But aside from brass quintets and homogenous ensembles, most chamber music ensembles, especially those with woodwinds, don’t include trombones. This arrangement of Alec Wilder’s *Sonata for Bass Trombone* not only expands the repertoire for solo bass trombone and chamber wind ensemble but does so in a way that draws connection to some of the composer’s most beloved works, the Octets of the 1930s and 40s.

The compositions of Alec Wilder hold a special place in American music of the twentieth century. While he was best known as a composer and lyricist of popular songs in the style of Broadway and the American songbook, much of his work exists in the liminal space between the commercial and the symphonic styles of the day. Wilder’s instrumental work is not easily categorized due to its combination of classical chamber ensemble sensibilities and lighter jazz-tinged rhythmic approaches. While it was never considered “serious” enough for the classical world or “jazzy” enough for the jazz world, it is hard to deny the impact that his work has had on American music of the twentieth century. Performed regularly during his life, Wilder’s work has become even more popular by instrumentalists in the forty-two years since his death and is a staple of student and professional recitals every year. In addition to his solo works for every wind instrument in the orchestra, Wilder was also a prolific composer of music for chamber winds. He wrote over twenty pieces for both the New York Brass Quintet and the New York Woodwind Quintet. He also composed for odd pairings of instruments like the duets for horn and bassoon; suites for tuba, vibraphone, piano, and drums; and his famous *Octets*. 
The reader will find biographical information about the life of the composer and his work, background on the *Octets* and the *Sonata for Bass Trombone*, a survey of previous recordings of the *Sonata*, and an analysis of the arrangement with comments about the orchestration.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose

I have always been interested in music that defies easy categorization. Composers who attempted to bridge the gap between the concert hall and commercial popularity have always been close to my heart. During my research into Johannes Brahms’s *Four Serious Songs* for an earlier recital, I came across a document written by a trombonist who arranged the accompaniment of that work for string orchestra. I found that project fascinating, but it wasn’t until I researched the work of Alec Wilder as part of my study of wind repertoire that the idea of doing a similar project with using Wilder’s works started to form.

I decided to orchestrate the piano accompaniment of Alec Wilder’s *Sonata for Bass Trombone* ¹ for a woodwind ensemble that mirrored the instrumentation of his octets. While not all of Wilder’s solo instrumental works share the “third stream” aesthetic of the octets, the *Sonata for Bass Trombone* shared a great deal of stylistic similarities. Each of its five movements are brief and require a decidedly light approach. The third movement is set as a jazz waltz, while the fifth is given the style marking “Swinging.”

When it came to a performer’s interpretation of his compositions, Wilder’s attitude varied. He could be a fierce critic to those he believed did his work a disservice. His ire was most frequently directed at singers of his popular songs. Once, after hearing a recording of *While We’re Young* sung by Jack Jones, he called a contact in California and insisted they give the singer the following message. “Tell him I just had the misfortune of hearing his recording of *While We’re Young*. Tell him if he had not known the song, he could have listened to the band, because they played it correctly. I understand he’s thinking of doing an album. If you get this

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message to him, that will probably do that in, and I shan’t care because I would like my songs treated with a little more respect than he showed.”

Not even the composer’s friends were safe from this type of brutal critique. Despite his deep affection for her as a friend and artist, after hearing Peggy Lee’s treatment of the same *While We’re Young*, he told her that “the next time you come to the bridge, she ought to jump off!”

It seems as if this meticulous approach softened in his later years, particularly when it came to his instrumental works. Gunther Schuller held that, in his attempts to complete works as quickly as possible, Wilder would leave many aspects like phrasing, dynamics, and articulation to the performer. He was almost invariably composing for someone specific, and almost always a friend. He felt confident that those he trusted would make decisions that would be musical and “in taste.”

After finding a video recording of the composer’s Suite No.1 *Effie for Tuba and Piano* arranged by William Stanton for tuba and woodwind quintet, I felt a similar project based on the *Sonata for Bass Trombone* would be appropriate.

**Process**

Once I decided to create an arrangement of the *Sonata for Bass Trombone*, my first concern was to decide on the instrumentation for the accompaniment. From the very first, I felt

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3 Ibid, 76.


that a woodwind ensemble would provide the agility of the piano and distinct contrast to the bass trombone’s tone quality. I knew that I would need more voices to orchestrate the piano part than a woodwind quintet could provide. I initially considered a clarinet choir because I believed its homogenous nature would be able to realize the piano’s timbre, but I eventually decided that ensemble would be limited in terms of tone color. While researching wind music of the twentieth century, I was introduced to the Octets of Alec Wilder. The Octets were composed for flute, oboe, B-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, and a rhythm section of bass, drums, and harpsichord. They were also written to have some of the woodwind performers play multiple instruments. This allowed for the occasional inclusion of piccolo, English horn, and a second clarinet. The image below is the first page of the score of *Jack, This is My Husband* (Octet VIII). See figure 1 below that Reed 1 includes B-flat clarinet and flute, while Reed 2 is English horn and oboe.

![Figure 1. Title page of the score for *Jack, This is My Husband* by Alec Wilder.](image)

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I was also struck by how similar in character the Octets were to the individual movements of the *Sonata for Bass Trombone*. Not only was the ensemble agile enough to manage the piano parts, but the combination of instruments provided opportunities for multiple consorts and other interesting pairings. I was hesitant that the harpsichord would be difficult to include, but as I became more familiar with the sound of the octets the more that I felt this would be a vital element in connecting the arrangement to the *Octets*.

Ultimately, I also decided against using woodwind doubles in the arrangement. This decision was simultaneously practical and creative. Finding flutists who could also play B-flat clarinet would present a challenge that was solved simply by using two musicians. Creatively I felt that it was important to have a dedicated alto voice in both the double reed consort (English horn) and the clarinet consort (the second B-flat clarinet). This decision proved to be a wise one when attempting to orchestrate the dense piano voicings with the limited number of instruments.

I had never arranged a piece as extensive as this for woodwinds before, and I made some early mistakes in terms of instrument ranges. To remain as true to the piano accompaniment as possible, I created an early draft that voiced the woodwinds in the same octave as they would have been performed on the piano. This resulted in my flute and oboe written outside the best range of those instruments. Transposing the octaves of the piano part throughout the orchestration had the added benefit of spreading the voicings and avoiding the muddying of frequency ranges where the solo might be lost in the accompaniment.

Translating articulations from piano to woodwinds also required consideration. While the piano accompaniment does provide phrase markings, which I translated into connected melodic material, I was forced to make editorial decisions about articulation styles throughout the work. I
limited the number of articulation markings and ensured that their intention was consistent throughout the entire arrangement. Table 1 below details each of the articulation markings used and their precise intention.

Table 1. Chart with description of articulation markings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Articulation Marking</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accent</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>- Marked front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Full length</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Slight taper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcato</td>
<td>^</td>
<td>- Marked front</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Slight separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenuto</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>- Articulated front</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Full length</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- No taper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staccato</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>- Articulated front</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Extreme separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legato</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Connected</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Full length</td>
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One last area that required consideration is that of note length. The piano accompaniment made liberal use of whole notes that would be performed with a distinct decay. Whole notes performed by wind instruments would not naturally decay. While I initially attempted to recreate this effect with dynamic markings (i.e., decrescendo, or forte piano), a committee member questioned the intent of those markings. I altered the arrangement and incorporated a shorter note duration instead. This led to an orchestration that had greater clarity for both performers and audience.
Interpretation

Stylistic interpretation is of particular importance when performing the work of Alec Wilder. As stated earlier, his compositions don’t fit squarely into either the concert or the jazz camps. An artist who tries to perform this work a la Hindemith or Brahms will find their performance to be overly bombastic, while any attempt to slide and swing like Tommy Dorsey would come off as cartoonish. To perform Wilder in an appropriate way is to do so with a reserved dignity and an attention to nuance that eschews dramatic extremes. When performing eighth notes in a swing style, one must maintain the vocal quality of the singers of popular song in the 1940s and 50s like Tony Bennett or Peggy Lee as opposed to instrumentalists from the Count Basie Orchestra.
Chapter 2: Alec Wilder Biography

Family and Childhood

To understand Alec Wilder’s music, you must understand something of the man and the world from which he came. The Wilder family boasted deep roots in Rochester, New York, dating back to 1840, when his grandfather Samuel Wilder moved there from Massachusetts.\(^1\) Alec’s father, George, was a second son who followed his father into business as a banker and businessman. By all accounts, he was the model of a conservative community leader. He was charitably inclined toward arts organizations, even singing in the chorus of local music productions. George would die in 1909 at the age of forty-six, when Alec was just two years old. Never having known his father, Alec was resentful toward the type of life that he considered ruled by smug men overly concerned with bourgeois sensibilities. “I wanted no part of it . . . for my family was virtually littered with bankers, nor was I inclined to be friendly with the sons and daughters of the conventional family’s representative of my family’s world.”\(^2\)

Alec’s mother was Lillian Chew, of Geneva, New York. Before settling in upstate New York, her family had been part of society in New Orleans. Lillian had been raised in an extremely sheltered manner and was already thirty years old when she married. She was not prepared for the life she found herself living after her husband’s untimely death. Managing a household and raising young children on her own would prove to be overwhelming. Ultimately Lillian’s alcoholism would be a source of shame for Alec, and often he found himself keeping his own company. Making friends was made even more difficult by the family’s frequent moves, as Alec was sent to one private school after another before landing at the Collegiate School in

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\(^2\) Ibid, 10.
Manhattan where, in an ironic twist, he would be voted most likely to succeed by his classmates before graduating in 1924.

Wilder’s childhood wasn’t all struggle and isolation. It was during this time he would discover two of his lifelong passions. The first lasting love was traveling by railroad. Here he remembers a trip from Rochester to New York where the family would stay at the Algonquin Hotel, the place where he would feel most at home for the rest of his life:

We sat about the living room for a week on chairs with heavy dust covers draped over them, the green shade down, waiting for a cab to take us to the railroad station. We traveled to New York City on the Empire State Express. It had an open-end observation car, a dining room, coaches, and parlor cars. The parlor cars had large green armchairs which you could swivel around in a complete circle until you were told to stop.3

The other, far more important discovery for young Alec was his fascination with music. His older sister Helen had already introduced him to the songs of Jerome Kern, but it wasn’t until a summer holiday in Bay Head, New Jersey, that he was given an opportunity to make music himself. After convincing his mother to purchase a banjo for him, he spent his summer performing in a dance band with the children of the hotel workers in the resort town. Goddard Lieberson, President of Columbia Records for almost twenty years and classmate of Wilder’s at Eastman, would describe Wilder’s earliest music making this way:

We cannot, unfortunately, say that the young Wilder’s first musical interest amounted to a passionate devotion to Bach and Beethoven, since the instrument which he studied was a banjo. Luckily, his career as a banjoist was short-lived and in its professional aspect consisted only in playing for a few weddings in New Jersey. The banjo was soon deserted in favor of the more legitimate and slightly less percussive piano, an instrument which he now plays with more éclat than technique.4

3 Ibid, 11.
While on a trip to Italy, he dedicated himself to a more concerted effort on piano. He rented instruments and had them moved to his apartments so that he could spend time learning reductions of Wagner operas. Once he returned to New York, he tried his hand at writing simple tunes. In a pattern he would follow throughout his career, his close friend Carroll Dunn would convince him to compose a larger work for chorus and some sort of accompanying ensemble. These types of interactions would result in much of Wilder’s compositional output in the following years. He wrote music for his friends and acquaintances, and those works had a deep-rooted sense of intimacy. It can be argued that his compositions were at their best when he had a connection with the people performing his pieces. Wilder didn’t believe the composition to be very good—he was aware of all that he didn’t know yet—but he would take it and embark on his life’s work.

*The Eastman School*

Wilder moved home to Rochester in 1926 and began to settle, albeit slowly, into a study of music. He took his time acclimating to the social life at Eastman, where his wealth and charm eventually made it easy to make friends once he had decided upon doing so. He never formally enrolled formally as a student, but despite his registration status, Alec would become a fixture at Eastman and would attend classes and symposia as a visitor.

Wilder would take private instruction with Herbert Inch, who introduced the young composer to contrapuntal music for the first time. These lessons would prove to be a watershed experience and would influence his work for the remainder of his life. Wilder was so impressed with the lesson in counterpoint, and his love for Johann Sebastian Bach so great, that he professed to Inch:
Without the strength of interdependent lines, the musical building may collapse. Such a statement from a beginner may sound sententious but I want you to be certain that it is no casual impulse that brought me to study with you. And though I hear less and less counterpoint in contemporary music, I wish always to keep it an integral part of any music I write.  

His studies in piano and composition with Edward Royce were important to his development, but less impactful than those with Inch. Alec wished for structure without the imposition of unbreakable rules in his composing.

He was thrilled by the study of music and by the students he met, but these feelings did not extend to the administrators. Howard Hanson ran the music program with the authority one gains through skill and vision. He would have an enormous impact on American music education, and his work in charge of the Eastman School would have no small part in it. It seems as if Wilder saw much of his father (or who he imagined his father to have been) in Howard Hanson. Wilder was far more interested in making music that had personal meaning because of its association with people that performed it to ever fall completely in line with Hanson’s devotion to large-scale symphonic works that idealized conservative nineteenth-century romanticism. He would eventually have a falling out with Hanson that came about after the premiere of Wilder’s *Symphonic Piece* in 1929. Hanson turned around to recognize the student composer, but Wilder was blocks away, drinking in a speakeasy. To his credit, Hanson seemed not to hold a grudge and spoke highly of Wilder in later interviews.

It was the relationships he made with the student musicians that would have the greatest effect on Wilder’s future career. Accounts of his wit and charm are almost as numerous as those of his being tall and handsome. He was also generous, likely to a fault. Eastman administrators bore witness to his paying of fellow student’s tuition, and there’s even an account of his having

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5 Ibid, 32.
bought out the contents of a grocery store for a newlywed couple struggling with bills. Concerns over money and the making of a living were the farthest things from Alec’s mind at Eastman. He recognized his privilege when describing his thoughts on the business of music and creating it as a profession.

Music, its sounds, rhythms, patterns and unverbal implications, directions and secret affirmations had always fascinated me. The more I heard, the more I learned, the more dedicated I became to trying to speak its language. Of course, the fact that I had enough money to experiment without the need to make a living from it was probably the principal reason I went on with it. Those who knew that it was to be their means of survival, now that I look back, I should have held in higher esteem than I did. For had I had to suffer the drudgery of teaching what I loved, I’d have stopped loving it. This was true, of course, of many who took it up simply as a way of making a living. Indeed, it is that type of education in music today that is its single worst influence.⁶

Many of the young musicians he counted as friends in Rochester would go on to have significant careers in music themselves. In addition to Goddard Lieberson, the horn player John Barrows, oboist Mitch Miller, and clarinetist Jimmy Carroll were to play vital roles in some of the most important moments in Alec Wilder’s life.

*Tin Pan Alley, Frank Sinatra, and the Algonquin Hotel*

The 1930s found Wilder back in New York City making a go writing popular songs. He was struggling to gain traction at the Tin Pan Alley publishing houses not from a lack of talent, but primarily because he refused to engage in the type of self-promotion required of songwriters who had yet to break through. He also found that he disliked the type of people he was encountering. Cynical publishers and shameless songwriters shilling their work left him unimpressed with the world in which he was working.

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⁶ Ibid, 30.
Introduced by Jimmy Carroll from Eastman, Wilder found work as an arranger for radio programs and became the staff arranger for the *Ford Hour* on CBS. Even though it was steady work, and well compensated, Wilder had a difficult time managing the expectations of the position and soon left. The event would prove an important step though because the experience he gained in arranging instrumental music would prepare him for an important milestone in his career.

Another friend from Eastman, oboist Mitch Miller, was responsible for helping Wilder to get hired by Brunswick Records to produce his well-known Octets. While these pieces weren’t overwhelmingly successful commercially, they would gain the composer widespread acclaim and critical appreciation for the rest of his life.

A Brunswick Records Producer, and fine musician himself, Morty Paltiz is credited by Wilder for his introduction to Frank Sinatra after the singer discovered Wilder’s music backstage at the Paramount Theater. Palitz would prove to be an important conduit for many of the relationships that shaped the career of the composer.

It was Morty Palitz who introduced me to Frank Sinatra when he was recording with Harry James, Peggy Lee after he found her and taken Benny Goodman to hear her and hire her. Lena Horne, Dick Haynes, Jack Jenney, Kay Thompson, Percy Faith, Andre Kostelantz, Mabel Mercer, Cy Walter – God knows how many people I met during these years, but please note; they still represented the pulse of the popular song world.7

7 Ibid, 66.
Sinatra was so enamored of the composer’s work, and so intent that it be heard, that he agreed to conduct the pieces on an album. After seeing an early proof of the album cover, Sinatra called the president of Columbia records and demanded that Wilder receive equal billing.\(^{8}\)

The good fortune regarding his instrumental composing would finally make its way into his writing of popular songs as well. In the 1940s, he composed what are generally considered his three most famous tunes: *It’s So Peaceful Here in the Country*, *I’ll Be Around*, and *While We’re Young*. He was finally selling his songs and achieving a modicum of success as a composer.

However, his success failed to have much of an effect on his lifestyle. He refused to purchase anything that wouldn’t fit into his suitcase and had an aversion to anything as burdensome as a mortgage or even a lease. Often throughout the rest of his life, he would call the Algonquin Hotel in New York City his home.

I have been, if such a phrase doesn’t sound too old-fashioned, a son of the house, and I’m sure I have taken advantage of the fact. Also, I have been around long enough to have assumed the protective coloration of the lobby furniture, a condition that pleases me, for many of the pieces have about them an air of dignity. And the bellmen humor me by paging me with a code name of their own creation.\(^{9}\)

Friends of Wilder’s from this time would describe his frequent drunkenness. Martin Russ, son of an old friend from Rochester, would describe the personality change that could accompany his drinking in much the same way that Alec described his mother’s. “His face

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\(^{9}\) Stone, *In Spite of Himself*, 64.
became like a study in evil, as though he had suddenly been possessed by a demon.”10 Much like
the Algonquin, alcohol would remain one of the few constants in Wilder’s life.

*Opera and Film Music*

In the 1950s, Wilder would spend time composing operatic works with Arnold
Sundgaard. Sundgaard had been Kurt Weill’s librettist and had a professional relationship with
the German composer until Weill’s death in 1950. Publisher G. Schirmer contacted Sundgaard
about creating a series of operatic works intended to be performed by amateurs. Sundgaard chose
Alec Wilder, and their collaboration began. The work appealed to Wilder as the productions
were intended to be performed by students and amateurs purely for enjoyment, and not to make
money. The productions would fall short despite lofty expectations however, at least in part due
to Wilder’s inexperience. Sungaard said, “He seemed so pleased to have words to work with that
he skimmed through the pages to see where the music would fit. Once he almost wrote music for
a stage direction.”11

An opportunity to write music for the film *Daddy Long Legs* led to Wilder spending time
in Hollywood, California. He was put up in a relatively secluded guest house that overlooked the
Pacific Ocean, and the location helped him write the score very quickly. He didn’t enjoy the west
coast, and when the production was delayed, he chose to return to New York instead of staying
and continue to be paid to wait.

*Rock and Roll and New Instrumental Works*

The rise of Rock and Roll in late 1950s and early 1960s would prove to be difficult for
Alec Wilder. He resented not only the popularity of new music he felt to be inferior, but also the

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10 Ibid, 65.

11 Ibid, 95.
musicians who were performing the work. He describes how these artists hadn’t earned the fortune or accolades that came their way.

The rock group has just played something on a TV show that is a dreadful insult to music, with lyrics that virtually exhort the kids to turn on with some drug. Following the usual hysterical audience response, the smiling “host” holds up his hands and says, “Wasn’t that really super? And would you believe that these boys started to play the guitar only three weeks ago?” Three weeks ago – and they’re already earning $500 a week each! Well, it’s a familiar story in an age that’s been conditioned to instant everything.12

The changing landscape of popular music led Wilder to explore his interest in instrumental works intended for the concert stage. As with his earlier compositional bents, his work was spurred on by the relationships he had with different musicians. It was through John Barrows, the horn player he’d known since Eastman, that he began to compose for the members of the New York Brass Quintet and the New York Woodwind Quintet. He wrote extensively for horn, presumably with Barrows in mind. He wrote the Sonata for Trombone (1961) for John Swallow and Effie Suite for Tuba and Piano (1960) for Harvey Phillips. He composed sonatas for clarinet (1963), trumpet (for Joe Wilder in 1963), alto saxophone (1960), viola (1965), as well as more than a dozen works for brass and woodwind quintet. Wilder was also producing works for instruments, like Sonata for Euphonium (1969) and Sonata for Bass Trombone (1969), whose solo voices had yet to find widespread acceptance. His interest in composing for less represented instruments began when Harvey Phillips told him that his Sonata for Tuba and Piano (1959) was only the third such work written specifically for tuba.

The 1960s also saw Wilder more fully embracing his “third stream” sensibilities. Gunther Schuller coined the term “third stream” in a 1957 lecture at Brandeis University to describe what

12 Ibid, 108.
he considered to be an entirely new genre of music that blended aspects of American jazz and Western European Classical music.\textsuperscript{13} Schuller had become part of Wilder’s circle and performed horn on the 1951 Columbia Records recording of Wilder’s \textit{Jazz Suite} for four horns and rhythm section (including harpsichord). The two shared an ideological, if not stylistic, taste in music composition. Schuller was an adherent of 12-tone technique, which was a style that Wilder did not appreciate. However, author Phillip Lambert believes that Wilder was “fully committed to the movement’s celebration of a wide array of cultural forces and influences, and he surely watched with amusement as beliefs he had held for decades began to find a vibrant currency.”\textsuperscript{14}

Wilder would find himself a frequent guest at schools of music across the country in the 1960s, including back in Rochester at the Eastman School and a semester spent as composer-in-residence at The University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1968. He composed several short pieces for student musicians: \textit{Twelve Duets for Horn and Bassoon} (1967), \textit{Twenty-Two Duets for Two Horns} (1968), \textit{Seven Duets for Horn and Bassoon} (1969), and \textit{Ten Duets for Two Tubas} (1970). These pieces were not only for the students for whom he wrote them, but they also served as exercises in compositional techniques for himself.

An important, yet often overlooked, aspect of Wilder’s “third stream” work were his \textit{Entertainments} for wind ensemble. \textit{Entertainment No. 1} (1960) was written for Frederick Fennell and the Eastman Wind Ensemble. The work incorporates many of aspects of typical “third stream” music like jazz-tinged harmonies in syncopated rhythm and melodies performed in straight rhythm or without heavily swung eighth notes set against contrapuntal compositional...


\textsuperscript{14} Philip Lambert, \textit{Alec Wilder} (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 80.
techniques. Wilder described his feelings about writing for the ensemble in a 1971 radio interview.

I heard Dr. Fennell and the Eastman School. I heard the Eastman Woodwind [sic] Ensemble, and I heard them either rehearsing or playing a perfectly marvelous piece by Persichetti. I think it was the Wind Symphony. I was so stoned by the sounds that came out of that group that I thought the idea terrified me, because of all the keys in which you’d have to write. I’d never written for baritone horn; I’d never written for a lot of those instruments. The idea of working with such an enormous amalgam of sounds really petrified me. But I was compelled to do it because of the richness of it all. Dr. Fennell had been a friend of mine for many years, so I went ahead and wrote a five-movement piece for him and had a lot of fun with it.\(^\text{15}\)

**American Popular Song and the Final Years**

In 1972, Oxford University Press published *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*. Begun in 1967, it stands today as the single greatest record of the great American songbook. Writing with James Maher, Wilder provides a comprehensive examination of over five hundred songs and references to three hundred more. Maher believes that Wilder examined 17,000 of the 300,000 songs submitted for copyright between 1900 and 1950.\(^\text{16}\) Acclaimed writer and educator William Zinsser described Wilder’s work by saying “It’s an immensely hard kind of writing, combining a scholar’s precision with an artist’s wonder, and in bringing it off Wilder is both learner and teacher.”\(^\text{17}\)

Alec Wilder’s instrumental output was prolific in the final two decades of his life. Frequently he would simply give his music to the intended performers,\(^\text{18}\) without thought for

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\(^\text{15}\) Ibid, 74.

\(^\text{16}\) Stone, *In Spite of Himself*, 159.

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid, 168.

payment of any kind, often having hired professional copyists at his own expense.\textsuperscript{19} While great attention had been given to his popular songs by the commercial publishers, they failed to give his instrumental compositions the same treatment. In 1964, Harvey Phillips helped Wilder to found Wilder Music, Inc. in New York, and took on the monumental process of having the composer’s work published and catalogued. Phillips did his best to fulfill the orders that happened to come in for copies of Wilder’s works, but at this time was managing a full-time career as a performer and faculty member at Indiana University.

Both Wilder and Phillips were thankful when Gunther Schuller intervened in 1976 and Schuller’s Margun Music took over Wilder’s entire catalogue. The two composers had grown closer over the years, and Schuller believed that Wilder’s music was too important to be left unperformed. Schuller would spend several of the following years searching, and finding, unpublished copies of Wilder’s music (even after Alec’s death).

In the second half of the 1970s, Wilder seemed to struggle with his feelings of being ignored by the serious music establishment in New York. Gunther Schuller believed that this was less an issue of the establishment ignoring Wilder, and more one of Wilder ignoring the establishment, since he failed to compose in the styles that would have provided them the opportunity to take notice of him. His lack of large-scale symphonic output can be attributed to two separate but related issues. First, he was by all accounts intimidated by the scope and implications of composing for symphony orchestra and other “serious” genres. Composer Warren Benson held that this was ultimately a fear of failure, and not because he wasn’t interested in the forms.\textsuperscript{20} But more important than concern for his ability was the fact that

\textsuperscript{19} Stone, \textit{In Spite of Himself}, 185.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 209.
writing for large orchestras failed to provide him with the same fulfillment as writing for
performers with whom he had a relationship. His music never fails to provide listeners with a
sense of intimacy precisely because he felt a connection with the performers he had in mind
while composing that music.\textsuperscript{21}

Alec Wilder died on Christmas Eve in 1980 but would continue to compose until the very
end of his life. His final two songs, \textit{A Long Night}, and \textit{South to a Warmer Place} were written
with songwriter and pianist Loonis McGlohon early in the year. They were both recorded by
Frank Sinatra but wouldn’t be released until after the composer’s death. A church cantata called
\textit{Mountain Boy}, about the Christ child being raised in Appalachia, premiered in October of 1980,
and it would be his last composition.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 210.
Chapter 3: The Wilder Octets

In the mid-1930s, Mitch Miller had performed a series of concerts and recitals with Yella Pessl, a well-known harpsichordist at the time. Through Miller, Pessl had asked Alec Wilder to arrange a jazz version of a concert piece for her to perform on a proposed film project. Wilder, having no experience with the harpsichord at all, was brought to her apartment to study the instrument and was immediately taken with its sound.1

Sometime later, after a night of heavy drinking, Wilder was to perform at an audition for an executive of Brunswick Records named Joe Higgins. A very hungover Wilder was ostensibly carried into the rehearsal by Mitch Miller and performed very poorly. Higgins asked Wilder if he could compose instrumental works for a small jazz ensemble like those written and performed by Raymond Scott. Wilder replied that he could.

Hung over as I was, my head splitting, my lips parched, I managed somehow to speak convincingly of my ability to write as well as Scott. When asked what instruments I would use, naturally I thought first of the oboe, Mitchell’s instrument. Then I added flute, bassoon, clarinet, bass clarinet – all woodwinds – and, suddenly, I recalled the marvelous sounds the harpsichord made. So, I added that. Later, I added bass and drums for rhythm. Thus, haphazardly, I arrived at an Octet.2

Wilder composed a test piece and put together an ensemble of musicians who knew Miller from the CBS radio orchestra to perform it for some decision makers at Brunswick Records, including Morty Palitz. The record executives approved of the piece and set up a recording session for more pieces for the same instrumentation, and they were recorded on December 19, 1938. The musicians on the recording include Mitch Miller (oboe and English

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1 Ibid, 55.
2 Ibid, 56.
horn), Jimmy Carroll (clarinet), Eddie Powell (flute and clarinet), Harold Goltzer (bassoon),
Toots Mondello (bass clarinet), Walter Gross (harpsichord), Frank Carrol (bass), and Gary Gus
(drums). While the first recording session included four pieces, Wilder composed more that
would be recorded over multiple sessions between March 1939 and August 1940. They would all
be released as The Alec Wilder Octet. The first two of these sessions will be covered at length.

The titles of the compositions were as unusual as the sound. They weren’t intended to be
descriptive or programmatic at all, just lighthearted and fun. Some were inside jokes between
Wilder and his friends. *Sea Fugue, Mama* was a play on the line “sea food, mama” from *Hold
Tight, Hold Tight* by the Andrews Sisters; *The Children Met the Train* was named by singer Kay
Thompson; *It’s Silk Feel It* was named by the composer’s Rochester friend Sam Richlin. Other
titles like *Neurotic Goldfish, Amorous Poltergeist, Jack, This is My Husband, A Debutante’s
Diary, His First Long Pants*, and *Her Old Man Was Suspicious* were simply colorful and
sometimes even provocative.

The octets were composed in a way that defied stylistic categorization. The harmonic and
rhythmic devices typically associated with jazz being performed by instrumentation that had
been typically associated with classical music was a relatively new sound in the late 1930s and early 40s. Wilder started with orchestration. The timbre of both the flute and clarinet were
frequently heard performing both styles of music, so they could be used liberally in whatever
manner the composer might choose. The oboe, English horn, and bassoon were associated solely
with the concert hall, so their use should be relegated to more metrically even rhythms. Wilder

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named this issue the “tough problem of the unswinging double reed.” Another aspect of orchestration Wilder dealt with was the harpsichord. He was entranced by its sound and said that it was the “most colorful and properly percussive background for attemptedly swinging legit woodwinds.” He frequently employed it as a middle ground between the softer single and harsher double reed consorts.

The first four octets recorded were *A Debutante’s Diary, Concerning Etchings, A Little Girl Grows Up*, and *Neurotic Goldfish*. If one views music as a continuum from classical to jazz, the octets from the first recording session tend to fall into four distinct categories. *Concerning Etchings* tends to fall on the jazz side of the spectrum, while *A Little Girl Grows Up* lands closer to the classical side. *Neurotic Goldfish* is harder to place on our imaginary chart: its form pits the two consorts playing off each other in a back-and-forth manner that places it in both the jazz and classical camps simultaneously. The original octet that Wilder wrote for the Brunswick executives was *A Debutante’s Diary*, and it was the first to appear on the album. This piece tends to stay in the center of the jazz-to-classical scale through some ingenious compositional devices. While the harpsichord mimics the stride technique of early jazz piano players, the oboe is given a soaring melody. The tempo is bright enough that the jazz style is executed more by the syncopated rhythms than an attempt to play the eighth notes in a swing style.

The second batch of octets, recorded in March 1939, included *Walking Home in Spring, It’s Silk, Feel It, She’ll Be Seven in May, Such a Tender Night, and Sea Fugue, Mama*. The first three are clearly jazz-oriented, and the fourth has the same back-and-forth as the *Neurotic*

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7 Ibid.

Goldfish. The fifth is the only one from this group to embrace the center line like A Debutante’s Diary. Its form is a strict fugue, but its melodic material comes directly from the Andrew Sisters’ song for which it’s named set against stride rhythm section like that of A Debutante’s Diary. The ten octets from the remaining recording session in December 1938 were all the centrist variety. Long flowing melodies against traditional jazz styled rhythm sections prevail throughout.

Wilder described the lack of enthusiasm for the octet recordings at the time of their release. “When the records came out, they were gunned down by the jazz boys because they had a classical flavor, and they were gunned down by the classical boys because they had a jazz flavor.”9 Years later, Wilder held that he had received compliments from several well-known musicians including Dave Brubeck and Igor Stravinsky.10 Acclaimed pianist and radio host Marian McPartland professed to loving the octet records as a young musician in England.11 Even Frank Sinatra thought enough of the works to lend his name and considerable clout with record executives to an album of Wilder’s instrumental works in 1946. This event alone helped Wilder gain appreciation of his work and be taken seriously as a composer of classical music.

In his later years, Wilder would deride the octets as being part of a distant and irrelevant past. He felt that people focused on the octets at the expense of the instrumental works he had composed in the interim.12 Whether or not he approved of the attention, it’s impossible to deny the effect that the Octets had on his career.

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10 Stone, In Spite of Himself, 58.
11 Ibid, 134.
Chapter 4: Sonata for Bass Trombone

Douglas Yeo, former bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, wrote in his 1990 article for the International Trombone Association Journal called The Alec Wilder Bass Trombone Sonata: An Update,

The origins of the Wilder Sonata have always been something of a mystery. There is no definite date of composition on the manuscript. In my research for my review, I discovered that both Alan Raph, and Tom Everett claimed to have given the premiere performance of the piece. George Roberts got into the picture as well, reportedly inspiring Wilder to write the work. However, new information I have received shows that all of the above is incorrect, so, for now at least, here is the story.1

The story that was relayed to Mr. Yeo is that a trombonist named Russ Schultz was a student of Emory Remington at the Eastman School in the spring of 1968. Wilder was in town for a performance of his Sonata for Tuba with the Eastman/Rochester Philharmonic because he had done the orchestration. The two men, Remington and Wilder, sat in the hall around lunch time when the topic of a bass trombone sonata was discussed. Remington asked when Wilder would write one, and the composer responded that he had been considering that very thing. Remington told Wilder that if he would write it, Russ Schultz would perform it on his undergraduate recital the following spring. Wilder agreed to complete and deliver it to Mr. Schultz by the start of the fall semester in 1968.

The piece did not, in fact, arrive by September of 1968. Schultz describes conversations with Wilder in October and again in November where the composer insisted the piece was at the copyist and would be ready to deliver at any time. Ultimately the work was delivered (and signed) by Wilder two weeks before the scheduled recital in March 1969. With Remington’s

help, Schultz did his best to prepare the Sonata for performance, but after the recital he wanted to continue to work on the piece and send Wilder a recording of a more polished performance. Wilder ended up receiving a recording of the original recital instead and took the young trombonist to task over his playing. Remington stepped in to defend his student and told Wilder something like “if you’d written a better piece, he would’ve played it well.” Schultz provided Yeo with a copy of his signed score as evidence of his having given the premiere performance on March 24, 1969.²

Alan Raph claimed to have premiered the work on November 8, 1969, with piano, bass, and drums accompanying at the approval of the composer according to the trombonist.³ This was followed shortly after by Tom Everett’s performance with the original piano accompaniment on January 19, 1970. But some ambiguity about the Sonata’s origin remains. In an interview given by Jonathan Yeager in 2006, George Roberts claims that the work was written for him and describes his role in the composition’s creation.

Yes, but I don’t know – at the time, I wasn’t really into that style of thing, and I remember Jim Clapp, and a bunch of others at Conn and stuff that wanted him to do something like that for me, which he did. I ran over it once, I think, but I never really played it. I wasn’t really that hot to do that. I’m more into a different thing, and I really wanted to pay attention to that. So, I didn’t really push around too much with Alec Wilder’s piece. It was wonderful that he would do that for me, I think – just fabulous, but a different kind of player should play this. Not me.⁴

² Ibid.


The most likely path to reconciling these disparate accounts is to assume that they are all true. Wilder had always traveled extensively and was known for his penchant for making friends with musicians. In 1969, three of the four trombonists in question were living in New York state. Russ Schultz was a student at Eastman, Alan Raph was a professional trombonist living in New York City, and Thomas Everett was a high school band director in Batavia and trombonist with the Genesee Symphony Orchestra in Genesee, NY. Douglas Yeo asserts that Wilder spent significant time in California in the 1960s, and would certainly have heard George Roberts’s playing, either on recordings or in person.5

The Sonata for Bass Trombone is a five-movement work with piano accompaniment. Each of the movements is independent and none of the material is carried throughout. None of the movements are given proper titles, but the first and last are marked “Energetically” and “Swinging” respectively. Each of the movements is relatively brief, and the entire work lasts only around fifteen minutes. It is reminiscent of the octets in a few significant ways. One could view each movement in the same type of framework with which the octets were described. Structurally they live in the classical world, while harmonically and rhythmically they have persistent jazz influences. Additionally, they exist on a spectrum from mostly classical to mostly jazz. Further exploration of the individual movements will follow in later chapters.

Other than the original composition Wilder kept in a wire-bound manuscript book, there are three extant editions of the sonata. The first edition was created by Wilder’s copyist, Stanley Webb, Jr., included at least three copies. Two were given to Alan Raph and Thomas Everett by Harvey Phillips, and the third was most likely the one signed by Wilder himself and given to

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Russ Schultz. The second edition was created in 1976 by Gunther Schuller, using the Stanley Webb Jr. copy as its source material, after Wilder Music Inc was absorbed by Margun Music. Schuller explains that the primary motivation for this edition was to get it published and printed as quickly as possible, despite errors in the copy, because Wilder believed it would be a popular seller.⁶ This edition would include a dedication to the International Trombone Association (ITA) that Yeo believed to have been of Everett and Schuller’s invention.⁷

The third edition of the sonata, Margun and Schuller’s second, was created in 1981 and bears the ITA dedication as well. This version was heavily edited by Schuller, and the details of those changes was painstakingly laid out by Yeo in the October 1984 *International Trombone Association Journal*. Schuller’s editing is mostly centered on the aspects of dynamics and phrasing, as well as adding a significant number of expressive elements. Schuller supported his decisions by holding that Wilder often wrote quickly and left many details to the performer.⁸

For the purposes of this project, the 1981 Margun Music edition served as the primary source material. The phrase markings and expressive elements were significant aids in the decision-making process involved in orchestrating the work for woodwinds. Ultimately, Schuller’s example served as great inspiration for this arrangement.

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Chapter 5: Movement I *Energetically*

If each of the five movements of the *Sonata for Bass Trombone* was placed on the continuum applied to the *Octets* previously described in this document, the first movement lies squarely on the classical end, while remaining four edge closer to the jazz side. This is typical of Wilder’s work of the 1960s. Philip Lambert describes this phenomenon in his biography of the composer, “It comes as no surprise to find styles in these works falling anywhere on the spectrum, for brief passages or for entire movements and through any conceivable means, from instrumental shadings to melodic inflections to hybrid harmonies and rhythms.”¹

Movement I is marked *Energetically* and given the tempo of Quarter Note = 144bpm. This movement is the epitome Wilder’s contrapuntal style. The melodic material is based on an eighth-note motif that constantly repeats and shifts voices throughout the movement. The melodic material is highly chromatic, and constantly shifts through key centers. It opens with an eighth-note motif in the trombone that is passed back and forth between the solo and the piano regularly throughout the movement. Melodic statements by the solo vary in length from short, two-measure bursts to longer meandering runs of quarter and eighth notes. The harmonic rhythm is brisk, even frenetic, at times and frequent changes and irregular meters create an off-kilter sense of pulse. The solo and accompaniment line up vertically at m. 62 to announce the end of the movement, which is punctuated with a fall in the trombone from a sustained E above the bass clef to the E two octaves below.

This movement is distinct from the rest of the work in that it more closely resembles the composer’s *Sonata for Trombone* from 1961², specifically the third movement, than any of the

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¹ Lambert, *Alec Wilder*, 79.

Octets. The two compositions have a great deal in common. They have identical tempi (quarter note = 144bpm), and both begin in simple quintuple meter. They also share similar trends in melodic phrasing, interspersing shorter fragments with longer, weaving, highly chromatic passages. The figures below provide a side-by-side look at the two compositions.

Figure 2. Movement III mm. 1-31 of Sonata for Trombone by Alec Wilder.
An early editorial change I made was to change the marked tempo quarter note = 144 bpm. I came to this decision after hearing Donald Knaub’s recording of the work, made while the trombonist was the trombone professor at the Eastman School of Music. Knaub’s performance of the first movement was slower than marked at approximately quarter note = 132 bpm. This was
particularly influential because Alec Wilder was present for the recording and turned pages for pianist Barry Snyder. Wilder told Knaub “Don, I write the notes, you play the music.”

The orchestration of this movement required a similar approach to the woodwind writing as the Octets. Part of the success of the Octets was Wilder’s attention to utilizing the single-reed vs. double-reed consorts, which was a pattern I emulated with the arrangement for woodwinds. Another consideration was the density of the voicings in the accompaniment. The piano score for the Sonata for Bass Trombone frequently used very close voicings, as seen in Figure 4 below.

![Figure 4. Sonata for Bass Trombone piano score, mm.1-2.](image)

If voiced in a similar way, the woodwinds would not have been in their strongest registers, and the accompanying material may have come off as muddled. I began with the single reed consort paired with flute, and proceeded to spread the voicings out to allow them to sound in their most effective registers. See figure 5 below for an example.

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As the opening eighth-note motif appears repeatedly throughout the accompaniment, it was not only important to ensure it was heard clearly through the texture, but also that it was employed by different members of the ensemble. Figures 6 and 7 below show examples of the primary melodic motif occurring in different voices throughout the movement; first between the B-flat clarinet and the bass trombone, then passed from the bassoon to the oboe.
Figure 7. *Sonata for Bass Trombone*, arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. I, mm. 32-33.

Figure 8 below shows a melodic moment in the piano accompaniment scored in relatively close voicing. Figure 9 is the realization of that moment for the woodwind ensemble. The voicing is much more open, providing space for the melodic fragment to be prominent in the texture, but for the flute to perform it in a range that allows for its best characteristic timbre.

Figure 8. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* piano score. Mvt. I, mm. 24-25.
In composing the *Octets*, Wilder used the harpsichord to provide color and percussive
front end to the woodwind entrances.⁴ Here, I focused more on using the harpsichord to outline
the contrapuntal aspects of the accompaniment, as well as provide a “colorful and percussive”
quality to the harmonic underpinning. Figure 10 below is an example of the former, while Figure
11 is the latter.

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Movement I concludes with a slight change from the Gunther Schuller edition of the Sonata for Bass Trombone used as the basis for this project. Mm. 61-62 in the original piano score has an ascending eighth-note line that is handed off to the soloist in a smooth and connected fashion, followed by a half-step figure in unison with the bass trombone (and an octave above in the pianist’s right hand). This can be seen in Figure 12 below.
To create a more conclusive end of the movement, I altered the articulation of the eighth-note figure and added all the voices of the accompanying ensemble in octaves. This can be seen in figure 13 below.
Chapter 6: Movement II

The second movement is slow and listless. Set in simple quadruple meter throughout, it is reminiscent of a lazy ballad sung by one of the crooners with whom Wilder had spent so much of his life. It is more homophonic than any of the other movements and begins with a repeated eighth-note motive in the accompaniment that is followed by the same figure in the solo bass trombone. This primary melodic figure features liberal use of glissandi by the trombone that creates a vocal quality. In terms of the classical to jazz scale, this movement is of the hybrid variety described earlier. Its melody-dominated texture and jazz-styled melodic content suggest more jazz ballad than lyrical classicism. Figure 14 below depicts the homophonic texture typical of the movement.

![Figure 14. Sonata for Bass Trombone piano score. Mvt. II, mm. 5-6.](image)

While the texture is decidedly homophonic, there are passages where the lines between soloist and accompaniment are far more blurred than is typical of a traditional sonata. This lends a chamber music quality to this movement that presented unique opportunities in the orchestration. Figure 15 shows how this effect was orchestrated for the single reed consort in m. 24 with bass trombone providing a pedal point in support of the ensemble.
The double reed consort was also given melodic material with the soloist in support. Figure 16 below shows the soloist providing underpinning for the repeated eighth-note figure in the double reeds and flute beginning at m. 28.
Figure 17 below shows how the end of the movement returns to the contrapuntal style of the first movement.

Figure 17. *Sonata for Bass Trombone*, arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. II, mm. 46-52.
Chapter 7: Movement III

Movement III is a return to the strict contrapuntal writing Wilder used in the first movement, but with a more song-like approach. After a brief introduction that previews most of the thematic material present in the movement, the work sets off in a three-part fugue. This movement is another hybrid on the classical to jazz spectrum because of its blending of fugue form with jazz waltz style. The *Octet* that this movement most closely resembles is *Octet XII, Sea Fugue, Mama.* While not a waltz, this piece incorporated fugue elements set against a jazz rhythm section.

The original was set in compound duple meter—not an ideal meter for a jazz waltz—so my arrangement changed the movement to a waltz in simple triple meter. In terms of orchestration, I intentionally set the accompanying fugue melodies in the oboe and bassoon. Wilder would frequently use these instruments melodically for their association with classical style, set against underpinning in a jazz style. Figure 18 below displays the initial entrances of the fugue melody in bass trombone, bassoon, then oboe respectively beginning in m. 23.

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Another characteristic I emulated from *Sea Fugue, Mama* for this movement was the use of the accompanying woodwinds in close voicings the way one would with a big band saxophone section. Figure 19 below shows the way Wilder scored this with Reeds 3, 4, and 5 beginning in m. 44.

I recreated that effect in the woodwind orchestration beginning in m. 64, shown in figure 20 below.

Figure 19. Wilder’s *Sea Fugue, Mama* (Octet XII), mm. 42-47.

Figure 20. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. III, mm. 55-61.
A contrapuntal texture returns in m. 128. Seen in figure 21, the accompaniment is handed off from the upper double reeds and flute consort to the clarinets and oboe in m. 137 before the final entrance of the fugue in m. 151.

Figure 21. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. III, mm. 128-145.

All three of the fugue voices (bass trombone, oboe, and bassoon) join for one last statement of the melody in octaves at m. 171 seen in figure 22 below.

Figure 22. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. III, mm. 164-182.
One last element of the orchestration requiring mention is the voicings of the non-fugue accompaniment. Since the bass trombone is scored in its middle register, the voicings needed to be spread significantly to prevent the soloist from being buried by the accompaniment. Figure 23 below displays the orchestration spread out in mm. 109-123 to leave room for the soloist.

![Figure 23. Sonata for Bass Trombone arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. III, mm. 109-127.](image)

Movement III is another example of the soloist and accompaniment sharing the limelight. This, coupled with the orchestration for a woodwind ensemble, allows the work to be performed as more of a chamber piece than simply a solo work for bass trombone.
Chapter 8: Movement IV

The fourth is the shortest movement of the *Sonata for Bass Trombone*. As was the third movement, it is fugue in G minor set in compound duple meter. The fourth is another slow movement, plaintive and ponderous, with the fugue beginning from the outset. When considering its place on the spectrum, it presents a challenge in terms of categorization. Lambert would likely place it in the hybrid box along with *A Debutante’s Diary* and *Sea Fugue, Mama*. While it is formally classical, the triplet-based rhythms and ballad-like style of the melody harken to the composer’s popular song writing.

In orchestrating this movement, I made the decision early that I wanted to utilize the clarinet choir. It wasn’t a sonority that I had used extensively in the arrangement, and the homogenous nature of that consort is suited to the character of the movement. Figure 24 shows how the fugue is set against the woodwind choir at the outset of the movement after the initial statement by the soloist.

![Figure 24. Sonata for Bass Trombone arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. IV, mm. 1-13.](image)

Shown in figure 25, a secondary section from mm. 26-33 is more homophonic. The melody is in the bass trombone solo with block chords supported by an ostinato in the bass clef.
I scored this section for clarinet choir as well but with the addition of flute at the top of the chordal accompaniment and the bass clarinet providing the ostinato. Figure 26 shows how this section is orchestrated in the arrangement for woodwinds.

The movement ends with a return of the contrapuntal style of the opening. After the fuller orchestration of the homophonic section, I thinned the texture and spread the voicings out to create more space. Figure 27 below shows the arrangement of the end of this movement.
Figure 27. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. IV, mm. 41-end.
Chapter 9: Movement V Swinging

Of the five movements of the Sonata, the fifth is the most overtly “jazz” influenced. It is also the only one of the five that Lambert would have characterized as a “dialogue”\(^1\) between the classical and the jazz elements. The general form is A-B-A-B-A where the A sections are in a jazz style (swung eighth notes, jazz harmony, etc.) followed by the lyrical B sections which are decidedly more classical in style. This back-and-forth from jazz to classical style is accentuated by the harpsichord, bass, and drums serving as a rhythm section as they would in a big band.

The movement opens with a swung eighth-note melody in the bass trombone, followed by an eighth-note triplet motive. The composition is primarily contrapuntal, with the two melodic fragments occurring repeatedly throughout. This can be seen below in figure 28.

![Figure 28. Sonata for Bass Trombone. Mvt. V, mm. 1-6.](image)

I made the decision to begin this movement with an inversion of Wilder’s use of the consorts. I began the swinging section with the double reed instruments and flute because their

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timbre would provide a little more edge to the sound of the accompaniment, and I wanted to save the softer sound of the clarinets for the more lyrical B theme. Figure 29 below shows the opening A section scored for the double reeds and flute, while Figure 30 shows the initial B theme arranged for clarinets beginning in m. 20.

Figure 29. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. V, mm. 1-9.

Figure 30. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. V, mm. 20-31.
The final A theme returns at m. 59 in the solo bass trombone. This theme is repeated in a loose fugal style first by the bassoon, then English horn, then by the oboe, before the entire ensemble enters to close the work. Figures 31-33 show this in the arrangement.

Figure 31. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. V, mm. 59-61.

Figure 32. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. IV, mm. 62-59.
Figure 33. *Sonata for Bass Trombone* arranged for chamber winds and rhythm section. Mvt. V, mm. 72-end.
Chapter 10: Conclusion

Alec Wilder was one of the most eclectic and prolific composers of the twentieth century, and it’s hard to deny the indelible mark he left on American music. His solo and chamber compositions are a still a staple of the repertoire for student and professional instrumentalists even forty years after his death.

Wilder’s work had an intimate quality because making music was about the relationships with the musicians who performed his work. While he was known to disagree with singers’ performances of his work, he was on record as having given wide latitude to instrumentalists’ interpretation. Trombonists performing Wilder’s work should be aware of the stylistic idiosyncrasies and appropriate interpretation of his compositions.

This arrangement is not only a chance for trombonists to perform a standard piece of the repertoire in a way new to audiences, but an opportunity for the performer to collaborate as part of a unique chamber ensemble. This type of arranging project is possible with many of the composer’s pieces. While not all his solo instrumental works have the same inherent association with his earlier octets, many of his solo works could be expanded for strings, brass ensemble, big band, or simply rhythm section.

Trombonists shouldn’t limit themselves to the two works written explicitly for the trombone. There are many of Wilder’s works for singers and other instruments that could be performed beautifully on the trombone and would be a welcome addition to the repertoire.
Bibliography


Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

Movement I

Alec Wilder
arr. John Hagan

Energetically $\frac{1}{4} = 132$

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Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

2

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

Bb Cl. 1

Bb Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

Perc.
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

Perc.

58
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

Bb Cl. 1

Bb Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

Perc.
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

Perc.

mp
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

Movement II

Alec Wilder
arr. John Hagan

\( \text{\textcopyright2022} \)
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

Bb Cl. 1

Bb Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

72
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.  

Fl.  

Ob.  

E. Hn.  

B♭ Cl. 1  

B♭ Cl. 2  

B. Cl.  

Bsn.  

D.B.  

Hpschd.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

Movement III

Jazz Waltz  $\frac{3}{4}$ = 76

Bass Trombone

Flute

Oboe

English Horn

Clarinet in B♭ 1

Clarinet in B♭ 2

Bass Clarinet

Bassoon

Double Bass

Harpischord

Drum Set

Brushes

©2022

Alec Wilder
arr. John Hagan
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

D. S.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

D. S.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.  
Fl.  
Ob.  
E. Hn.  
B♭ Cl. 1  
B♭ Cl. 2  
B. Cl.  
Bsn.  
D.B.  
Hpschd.  
D. S.
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

D. S.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

D. S.
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

Bb Cl. 1

Bb Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

D. S.

22
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

Perc.

pp
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

Perc.

Triangle

Sus. Cymbal
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

110

110
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

Perc.

Sus. Cymbal
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

Movement V

Alec Wilder
arr. John Hagan

Swinging $\frac{4}{4} = 116$

Bass Trombone

Flute

Oboe

English Horn

Clarinet in B♭ 1

Clarinet in B♭ 2

Bass Clarinet

Bassoon

Double Bass

Harpischord

Drum Set

©2022
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

Bb Cl. 1

Bb Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

D. S.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section
Sonata for Bass Trombone,
Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section

B. Tbn.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn.

D.B.

Hpschd.

D. S.
Sonata for Bass Trombone, Chamber Winds, and Rhythm Section