Smoke & Mirrors

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“Smoke & Mirrors” is a thirty-four-measure melody arranged for a standard big band: five saxophones, four trumpets, four trombones, piano, guitar, bass, and drum kit. This original melody is first presented after a brief introduction. A sixty-four-measure solo section comes next, followed by a thirty-two-measure sax soli. Once again the initial melody is re-established followed by a small outro. This piece is meant to gradually evolve from a small combo sound to a seventeen piece big band sound. Mainly, that goal is achieved through density of texture within the horns.

In the introduction the bass walks quarter-notes for three measures before the entire band enters, in measure 4, with synchronized accents on the offbeats with descending dominant chords. The next four measures that follow contain one chord per measure: the tonic is in measure five, the V chord is in measure six, and a diminished vii chord is in measure seven. Those measures are intended to feature the drummer; the drummer is allotted drum fills through the second half of the introduction.

The section that follows the introduction is the first head (the main melodic content for the piece). It is a variation of the standard thirty-two-measure AABA form. The form of this head is AABC. Although the usual length of each lettered section is eight-measures, this C section is ten measures long. Harmonically speaking, the A section moves from the i chord to the iv chord and back, then from the i chord to a tritone substitute chord. This tritone substitute chord often fluctuates between a dominant with a suspended fourth and a normally-voiced dominant chord.

Melodically, the first A section of the head is given to the alto and baritone saxophones. The effect for the first A section is to resemble a jazz combo instead of an
entire big band. To introduce a change in tone color, the next A section is given to the
tenor saxophones and trumpets one and two. This second A section includes
backgrounds by the trombones, increasing the momentum of the piece. Aside from the
trombone backgrounds, these melodic passages are composed with octaves and
unisons. The B section follows with stark contrast. Although it is still in the domain of
octaves and unisons, the bulk of the ensemble (including brass, bass, guitar, and piano)
play the melody together. The drummer responds to the melodic content of the B
section with drum fills. Upon entering the C section, standard-four part harmony is used
for the saxophone section. Once again the trombones play a background figure, or pad.

The next section of the composition is reserved for two soloists. The chord
changes for this solo section resemble that of the head, yet they are slightly altered to
make them more enjoyable to solo over. For instance, the previous thirty-four-measure
form is rounded down to the usual thirty-two. Halfway through the solo section the
trombones enter with a background figure. The last eight-measures include a
saxophone background or a trumpet background (depending on which soloist is playing
at the time).

A sax soli follows the aforementioned solo section. This section is based on the
altered chord changes (and form) of the solo section. The saxophones are once again
written in a four-part block harmonization. The melody written for alto one has a plethora
of rhythmic activity and an adventurous melodic contour. The rhythm section continues
to swing and comp. However, there are a few breaks in the rhythm section that highlight
the rhythmic activity in the woodwinds. Then the sax soli ends with a firm, accented staccato note, after which the drummer fills for two measures to lead into the last head.

The last head has a more dense texture than the rest of the piece. The trumpets and trombones take the melody together: the trumpets are in four-part block harmonization and the trombones are in open position while the saxes provide a counter melody. This texture is employed for both of the A sections. Once the B section comes around, the same texture from the first head is used (with the minor addition of sax backgrounds). This is meant to provide continuity to the piece.

In the grand scheme of “Smoke & Mirrors” there is a general evolution from a jazz combo sound to a big band sound. This effect is culminated with the C section of the last head. The texture for these ten measures includes all of the horns playing together in rhythmic unison. The various wind sections are harmonized using block and open position techniques.

The piece ends with a five-measure outro. This outro parallels the introduction, once again featuring the drummer; culminating with a drum fill under a fermata. Then the piece concludes with a final cadence resolving to a dissonant minor-major ninth chord.
Backgrounds both times