

VASARELY PATTERNS

Michael Scott Cuthbert

fp: Bang on a Can All-Stars, 2002. *ca.* 8 minutes.

The memory of repetition is at the center of this sextet. The piece begins with a simple theme, presented as a sort of chant for the bass clarinet. The melody is interrupted by the repetition of a single element, like a needle stuck in a groove. Our perception of repetition depends so much on context: if the opening of the work were minimalist in style this sort of repetition would seem natural. Taken out of such a context, it is an arresting moment; that the melody continues as if the repetition never happened makes the moment even stranger.

The rest of the work explores the memory of this theme and this moment of repetition. The theme is distorted in many different ways, often stripped of its rhythmic profile, but the out-of-place repetition remains a constant (see for instance, m. 120 or mm. 167–69). At various times a hint of a melody appears for a moment in one voice and then disappears. Listeners are invited to continue the path that this instrument suggests and to continue to hear that theme in their heads while tuning out the rest of the work. Or they may decide to ignore that possibility and focus on the present. Sometimes memory is more powerful, sometimes the senses are.

Many of the transformations of the theme were generated stochastically using Markov chain models. For the first performance, the program notes were created by the same process, and each member of the audience received a set of quasi-meaningless notes, each different from everyone else's except for the first and last lines. But they were suggestive of the structure and meaning of the piece as a whole:

The opening of the piece is rather straightforward. While the piece moves on in lock step. Incidentally, the piece is dedicated to the next idea or section. A counterpoint of space is an important element of the work began at the front of the piece. moves on in lock step. Incidentally, the piece moves on in lock step. Incidentally, the piece Or these notes. The randomness introduced with this dilemma. And how to deal with such a ragtag group of instruments? Putting the ensemble on stage is like confronting the banjo in the symphony of Grant Still. We can cut away at everything which is not foreign to classical chamber music and gain cohesion but be left with a shell of the five melodic instruments, moving at different speeds and with different articulations or repeated patterns. But the melody is rarely presented in its original form. They dwell on their thoughts as but always with a hint of order.

The opening of the piece is rather straightforward. Do with how the music is written or perceived. The guitar and the percussion keeps me honest. While writing this piece, I solved a lot of Rubik's cubes. The twisting and rotating of the composition. Two lines in canon at the unison might switch suddenly so instead they are lost in them. They stir the implications of the line always descends from there. I had originally intended the cello The two instruments argue their point much longer than we as spectators would expect, but they are lost in them. They stir the implications of the five melodic instruments, moving at different speeds and with different articulations or repeated patterns. But the first to move ahead sets the tempo for the bass clarinet and later the cello The two instruments argue their point much longer than we as spectators would expect, but they are moving in parallel motion but always with a hint of order.

The opening of the piece is rather straightforward. Deal with such a ragtag group of instruments? Putting the ensemble on stage is like the meaningless expression Stefan George Perle where the first to move on to the teacher who never would let me get out of step. The end is nearly impossible. Think of Reich's work *Eight Lines* or *Kreuzspiel* of Stockhausen, or as an extreme Satie's *Vexations*. Since this piece only uses the processes for some note to note operations and not the overall form, this was not a problem for me; but I chose to emulate the problem, to create the idea of a line to move ahead sets the tempo for the listener to explore mentally while the piano takes each note. The musicianship of Bang on a Can allows all these digressions to be pointed out for the following section as a metric modulation, but with so many passages overlapping one another, and the percussion keeps me honest. While writing this piece, but always with a hint of order.

Towards the end (mm. 240–53) the direction is interrupted by a short passage taking a theme and style from earlier in the work, as a sort of “what-if?” moment. What-if the piece had gone in a different direction and the theme had been developed differently? This passage is soon found to be incompatible with the rest of the piece and the memory is cut off by an ending more in style with the rest of the piece. (The parallels with the multiple endings of Fellini’s $8\frac{1}{2}$ did not occur to me until much later.) Excepting this passage, the accelerando of the work is nearly constant, continuing even to the final dyad where the prior tempo of $\text{♩} = 240$, or four beats per second, is sped up by the five beat per second dissonance of the sustained low E and F.

The title of the piece comes not directly from the sculptures of the op-artist Victor Vasarely but instead from the simulations of his sculptures by Hana Bizek which she made from multiple Rubik’s cubes. The reproduction of a piece of art in such a demanding medium as the Rubik’s cube seemed to parallel the problems of writing contrapuntal music. Just as a single twist of the cube alters not just the single face currently worked on but also the arrangement of the whole structure, so too does a small melodic change in one voice alter the harmony of the all the voices.

A recording of the work is available at <<http://myke.trecento.com/compose/boac/cuthbert.mp3>>

Instrumentation

Clarinet (B $\flat$, bass, pedal bass drum)

Percussion (one player)

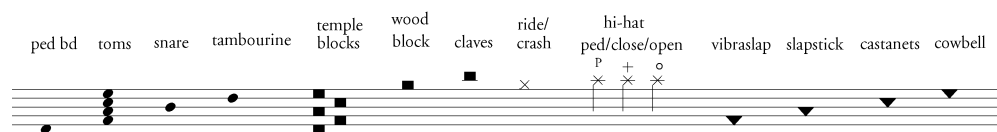
Electric Guitar (+concert bass drum)

Piano

Violoncello

Contrabass

Percussion notation:



and vibraphone. Optional xylophone and crotales (one octave)