

Breakdown

Someone asked me to write a breakdown of one of my pieces: how it got inspired then assembled; how the samples, foley, and orchestra are mixed together, first in the studio and then on stage; how the music affects the physical theater, props, and sound design and vice versa, and the order in which all of that occurs to me. Piece to piece, that process varies. And as a composer, I feel my job isn't to break things down, but to create ambiguity, sweep away tailings, and airbrush obvious reference.

I also don't want to confuse the issue of how I construct a piece with how a viewer might take it in. Structures are chances to explode meaning, and let people explore contradictions. I feel successful when audience members approach me with wildly different takes on what they heard. But tension and ambiguity also have structures, so I can break that down here.

I think formally, and like to pack things densely, including associations. A piece might have running subtexts about sonar, Stanley Kubrick, or letting things fall, and sometimes I use technical restrictions, like the French writer's group OuliPo. Some techniques work as scaffolding or palimpsest, and are later rubbed out completely, left in partial ruins, or perhaps discovered as easter eggs by the listener.

Transcendental Etude #8 is part of an evening-length show, called Ten Transcendental Etudes—I write combinations of sound and theater, what some people loosely call "opera". Etude #8 was composed over three weeks in quarantine in Rome, in November 2020. The intensity of the period meant that I fumbled intuitionally onto many details.

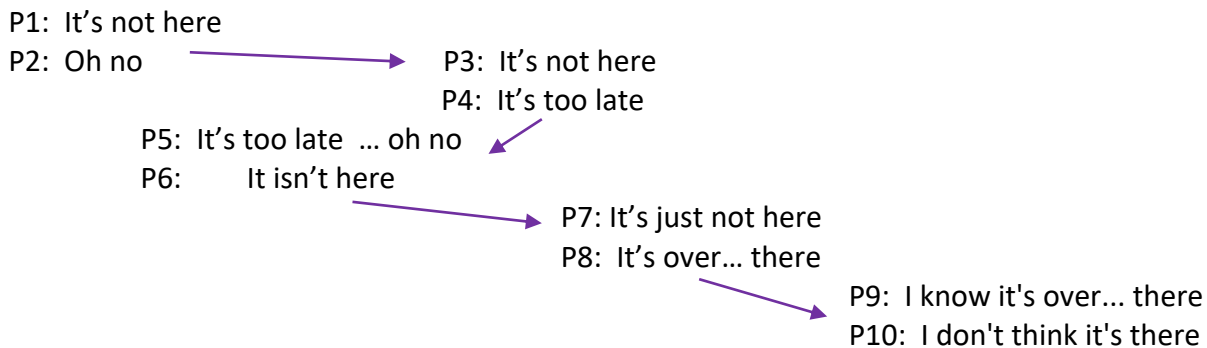
One tool that I used was lyrics.com. There, you type in a phrase such as "I see you," and you get an encyclopedia of songs with those lyrics. If you're lucky, a phrase will trawl up jazz standards, including dozens of covers from the 1950s and 1960s. So, you can start with a sample bank of people singing "I see you." I love that phrase, because it's specific but ambiguous. It might be playful, or a line from The Shining. It acknowledges another person, but to what end? Its tone is ambiguous, and there, finally, I feel that I can start creating something.

Each etude was inspired by a conversation with a friend about an "agon", a personal issue with which they struggle, yet eternally repeat, a Sisyphusian stone. One friend, a Methodist preacher, said that he had moved to new places throughout his life, but often felt the people or spirit in each new place had just departed. If he came into a new congregation, it was in the process of dying, and his job was to help it die. Lurking within this feeling of emotional hospice was perhaps a fear of missing out.

Thinking of this, the phrase came to mind, "it's not here," without knowing what "it" or "here" was, and then the sympathetic response of a partner, singing "oh no":

P1: It's not here  P2: Oh no

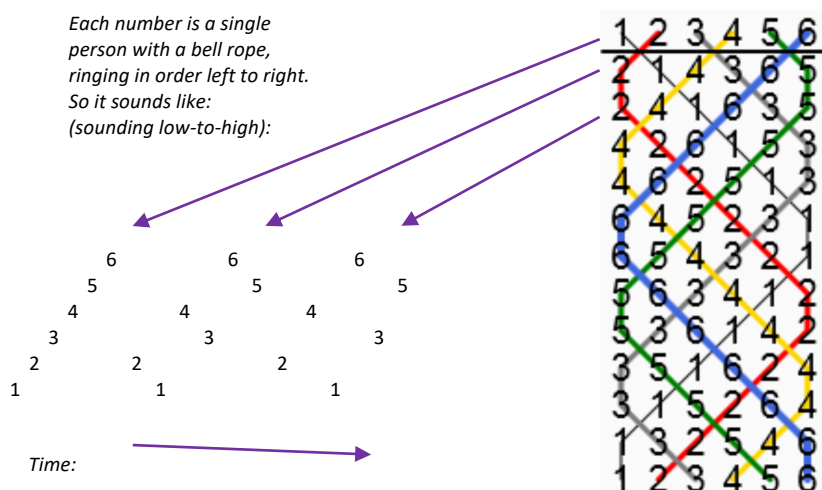
Something here was about pairs, their arrival and departure, and the entire piece, Transcendental Etudes, was in my mind about how one falls in and out of a relationship. So, with that phrase, I imagined how not just one person, but endless couples might sing in haiku-like couplets:



I'm inspired by Gertrude Stein's repetitions, and how their gradual emotional rub is at odds with a deceptive absence of meaning. This can also be heard as true of certain pop songs. I thought of Meisner's training techniques, where two actors parrot a meaningless line back and forth to each other, until the spirit to change enters them, and they flush with emotion. Textual repetition can resemble Sisyphean or compulsive behavior, which is enacting the same tics over and over with the hopes of transcendence.

So, I've got the idea of couples and couplets, each pushing an idea forward. The whole Transcendental Etudes only uses 6 performers, so how could I create a maximum of couples? Square dancing permutations, which knew from my childhood, came to mind, as well as the daisy-chained structure of Schnitzler's La Ronde. But another inspiration proved more helpful, British change ringing.

The peal of bells in a British church is part of a cult of permutation, in which 6-12 people, each with a bell on a rope, tug in shifting patterns. This "ringing through the changes" is a feat of physical endurance and can take up to 12 hours, much of which sounds like a "bloody great noise", as a Newcastle bystander once described it to me. Here's the first pattern that students often learn, Plain Bob Minor:



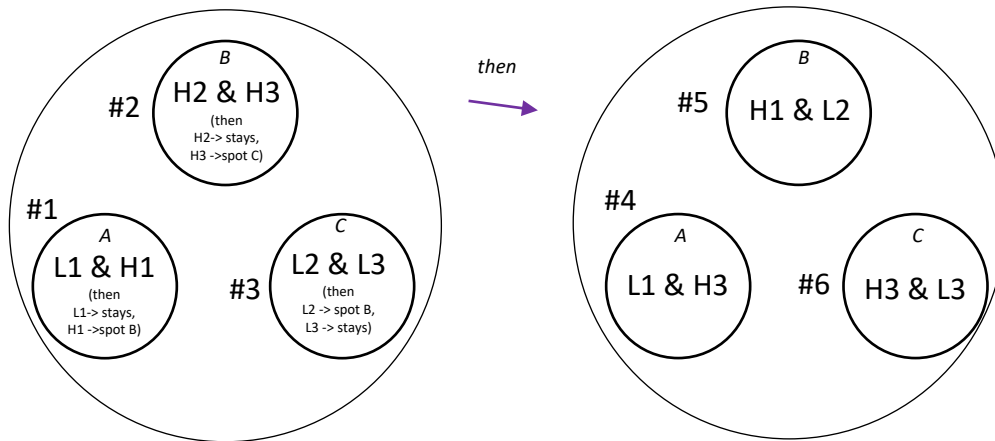
How could Plain Bob apply to partnering? Given that I am using 6 performers, I assigned the numbers 1 through 6 to the 3 high voices (H1-H3) and 3 low voices (L1-L3). I say “high and low” because there’s gendered ambiguity to who sings what in my pieces. Imitating samples requires a chameleon-like range that doesn’t easily map onto soprano, alto, tenor and bass. So:

1 = L1 2 = H1 3 = H2 4 = H3 5 = L2 6 = L3

couple 1: L1 & H1 couple 2: H2 & H3 couple 3: L2 & L3
couple 4: L1 & H3 couple 5: H1 & L2 couple 6: H3 & L3

I then tweaked the hell out of this couplet structure as the piece went on, sometimes abandoning it. Analysis of Cage, or Schoenberg, shows how they adapted or sometimes ditched their techniques when those methods didn’t get them where they needed to go.

Often staging and choreography comes to me early on. It struck me that this change ringing structure had advantages. Imagine a piece made of 5-second vignettes, each with a new couple, and the lights go out between each one, creating a crisp visual frame. It would be hard to do this with a single spotlight on stage, as you’d see people moving to and from their mark. But if you use three spots going on and off, people sashay to their new spot and there’s no down time. The music allows about 5 seconds to walk 15 feet, a median trot. I try this out, at home, on a floor with the circles marked out, and it works. #1 to #6 represent the timed order in which the spots come on, in spaces A, B, and C



This will eventually be put on a rotating circular stage, which will cause problems for lighting discrete washes. However, it will have the beauty of looking like a giant reel-to-reel tape recorder.

So, this is a start. I should mention my method of working over the past decade. I create a studio maquette, a recorded bed of samples and instruments, which is composed before anything. I then work with performers, who imitate the samples vocally, in lock-step with a physical score. I create these gestures first while I’m composing in the studio, and then in collaboration with the performers. I tweak the sound design and lighting, once we’re in the performance space, but ideas about stage design all begins with this recorded pastiche of tunes.

Using this method, I now have about 1-2 minutes of the sampled maquette, and this coupling structure. Where to go? These singing couples seem so aimless!

At some point, it struck me that this piece sounded like a march, even a bolero. I've structured pieces on Ravel's Bolero before, because it yields a lot. Ravel wrote: "I've written only one masterpiece—Bolero. Unfortunately, there is no music in it." That's a sly sidestepping comment, reminiscent of Warhol, that belies the piece's richness, especially in its melody. As a mash-up artist, how can Bolero serve me? It's got a profiled beat and tune. I can hang other samples on it like tinsel, or eat it from the inside out like a parasitic wasp.

The snaking Bolero melody also can be stretched, lopped, and reharmonized without arousing suspicion. I like to shred familiar music for the listener, it's a tactic to tangibly orchestrate memory. In dream states, sequences of events or melodies lapse by quicker than in real life, so I try this. I like to make people think that I do nothing in my music, that I'm a lazy sampler. Seamless melodic surgery then can serve as a kind of gaslighting.

Then, I stumbled on a famous French song, "Et Maintenant?" ("And now?") based on Bolero. A quick search yielded that it had been translated into about 8-10 different languages, mostly European (I found most of them, including Czech and Japanese, though couldn't find the one in Turkish). The process of learning languages has always figured large in my pieces. Given that this piece was about people conversing, but perhaps not talking to each other, I started to imagine a piece in which, like Bolero, an orchestra blooms, but with each new instrument being a language. Perhaps a multilingual chorus of people not quite hearing each other:

H1: Che posso fare (*what can I do?*)
H2: I guess.... (*shrugs*)


H1: che ne farò? (*what will I do?*)
H2: I don't care.

Some of these lyrics occurred spontaneously, as the samples suggested them, or as the piece progressed. Etude #8 was written later in the overall Etudes, so there's cumulative sampling—where previous samples from Etudes #1-7 reappear and ferment into new phrases.

So now I'm fluently composing, I'm a few minutes in, and I check in with my body and choreography. It strikes me at one point the performers have to acknowledge each other. Perhaps "it's not here" refers to the empty light wash they see on the floor, but something else is coming up short in their relationship. Eventually I will choreograph this in gestures that take their focus up to each other. I sketch out a vague blocking, with a taxonomy of foci that might be helpful later:

LD= look down  LO = look out  LP = look at the other person *crossfaded loosely across 6-8 couplets*

One couplet in particular seems to signal their focus on each other:

L3: Wait now! I've found you  H3: I don't care

(silence, then:)

H1 and H2 rotate, facing each other, a la bolero

At this point, the partners do-si-do silently around each other, looking but not touching, as before a gunfight, and the mashed-up Bolero enters.

Now, I'm making choices on the fly, just listening, and beta-testing it on my voice, in order to keep the flow conversational. Tempos are flying freely. I go back and relayer the beginning with the bolero snare rhythm, but in fits and starts, and with tempo changes that relate tangentially to what I know of Javanese gamelan. To help, I chart out the tempos:

♩=90 ♩=97 ♩=120

0:00 :45 1:50

...plus roller-coaster-like swerves in tempo in the snare drum:

slow-> fast-> slow

I notate the full score later for performers, though some collaborators don't read music, so learning by ear is fine.

It's about a week into composing, and at some point, I create a harmonic map, to create consistency. I like to take harmonic ideas from the original samples and metastasize them into subtly unsettling backgrounds—think of the too-neon wash behind Warhol's silkscreen of Liz Taylor. The hope is that the audience thinks I'm doing nothing with these samples.

The original "bolero" has a C drone throughout, with a brief oompah from V to I, but the song "Et Maintenant?" descends in fifths. I love this, because descending fifths, while being the basis of stock moves such as the rhythm changes and turnarounds, Falling Leaves and Killing Me Softly, can have the effect of a barber pole. Descending and ascending fifths are the DNA of sequences in the Baroque period, and sometimes do go on forever in that music.

I decide that fifths are one harmonic structure, but I will extend them by making *sus* chords, stacked or nestled fifths—so-called quintal or quartal harmony, as one hears in Thelonious Monk and Paul Hindemith. I'll use this effect 3 minutes in, where the music seems to lose steam and get lost:

I don't know I I don't care

I don't think I don't care

The bass line here descends in 5ths, and all the pitches coagulate into this final, punched-out piano chord

this section is like the musical definition of a "breakdown", a softer interlude where individual instruments can be heard.

I also liked the idea of fifths snowballing at the climax of the piece, tumbling down an Escherian staircase, when two people jumble all the words so far, and a hostile tussle emerges around mishearing the other:

L1: What now?

L2: What?

L1: What?

L2: What?

L1: What?

L2: Well what?

circle of fifths

This circle of fifths is an analogy for the rotating circular stage in the Etudes; it's a record player that can't slow down. There's a thrust of course—the fifths ensure that—but when do these people, or this bolero, ever stop?

When the mash-up gets dense, I often lighten the harmonies and let the samples take over. I add simple, loud, two-part harmonies—here, with timpani and piano—to both settle and unseat the samples, and misdirect the ear, something like the thin-nibbed lines of a caricaturist. Other harmonies appear. I use clusters, dominant ninths, and a kind of mashed pandiatonicism to make the samples hazier. I like reharmonizing familiar samples with notes a major third or tritone away, creating duplicitous or polytonal effects. The Bolero melody get constant retreatment, and many of the harmonies consist of a kind of slow-cooked Debussy, whose preludes are a conscious model for these Etudes.

The fifths also remind me of one of Olivier Messiaen's modes of limited transposition:



Two fifths a tritone apart (the "diabolus in musica"—the devil's interval) are also the basis of Holst's Mars, the Bringer of War, composed a decade before Bolero:



My sampling of Holst's Mars (Etude #8 goes temporarily into 5 meter) adds another association—John Williams lifted this music for Star Wars. So, many people who have heard this etude say I've stolen the Darth Vader theme. I enjoy this misunderstanding.

At this point in the piece, about 4 minutes in, when it's clear these couples are at literal war, it seemed too intense, so I crosscut it a bit with Javier Solis's slower and hopeful mariachi version of "What Now?": "¿Por Qué Me Dejas?"

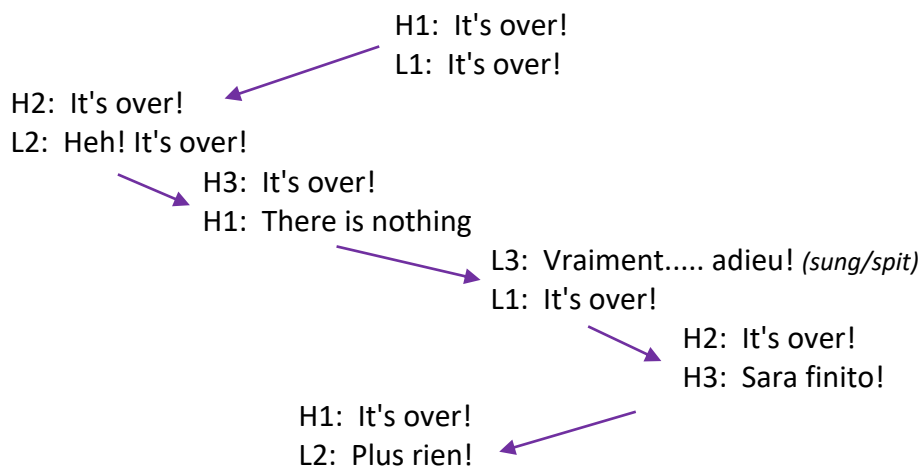
And for the first time in the piece, the couple is dancing.

It seems to me the moments of greatest strife in a relationship can also have the most freedom, as punch-drunkenness may result in new behaviors, and a tenderness admixed with hostility.

At this point, I am moving a lot, dancing out parts at home to make sure timings work. But I'm not blocking, just putting a physical note here and there in the score. As the piece gets dense and layered, I realize that I may need to reallocate parts. I have not thought about change-ringing patterns for a while, it's too much to calculate. I also realized that the range of voices, high or low, create problems for any exact pattern. I appreciate the approach of theater directors such as Richard Foreman or the Wooster Group, who often take an overarching text then re-allocate lines later. This seems like a necessary evil of non-narrative physical theater and contrapuntal writing.

So, I'm about 5 minutes in. It's clear that these couples are not communicating in the way that they should. But they do try, and those notes of hostility and tenderness just keep ramping up. How could this Bolero end? The writer Carolyn Abbate has said that Bolero can only end by derailing—there's that odd transcendent modulation at the end to E. The idea that Bolero jumps the tracks appeals to the mechanical metaphors that motivate my music. I sometimes think of staging and sampling as a Disney ride—"It's a Small World" is one of the few mechanical experiences in the world organized by song. I love the analogy of a roller coaster, whose use of gravity and increasingly tighter curves give the misperception of speed while potential energy bottoms out. Ravel's father was a designer of early fairground rides, one of which fatally crashed.

I hesitate to create a piece with a climax, especially 2/3rds of the way through—it's a cliché. But I follow that impulse here, perhaps because I avoid it elsewhere. These couples are going to an obvious place, with all this strife. The Transcendental Etudes are about getting beyond a certain relationship, and while these couples are breaking down, they are headed for a break-up:



"It's Over" is the chorus hook to "Et Maintenant" in English: "What now, my love? Now that it's over?" I try to be a proper composer and use most of the samples, using the chicken down to the bones. This realization—it's over!-- comes with the Bolero modulation of a major third, except my piece uses that modulation twice, and I background the samples with a manicured version of the Ravel. Two modulations by a major third forms an augmented chord, which can sound like a train whistle. It's also the chord that grounds Debussy's first Prelude, the Danseuses de Delphes:

The diagram shows three elements connected by purple arrows:

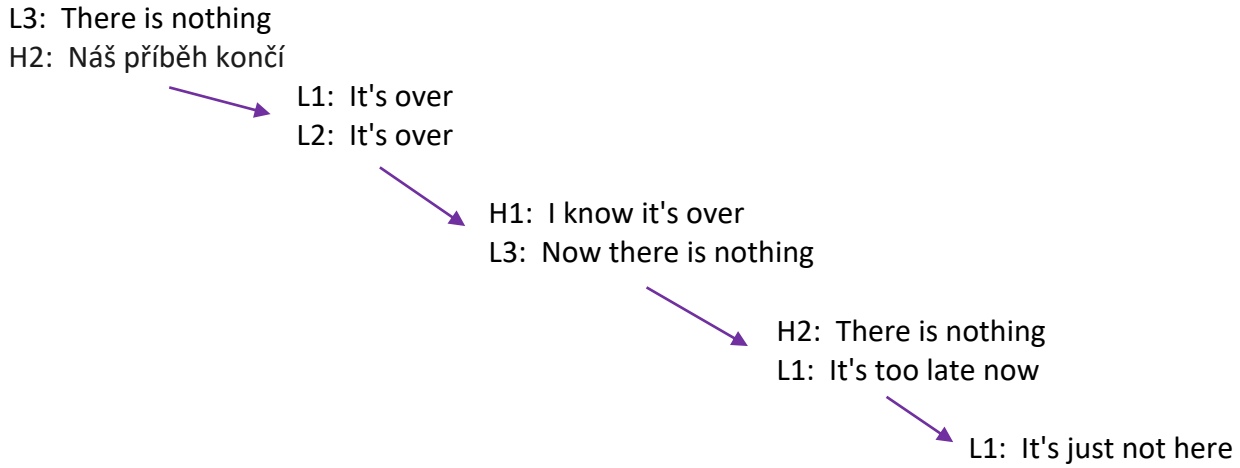
- Augmented Chord:** A treble clef with a sharp sign and a chord of three notes (F#, A, C).
- Debussy Prelude #1:** A piano score for 'Delphic Dancers' showing a piano (p) dynamic and two augmented chords (aug) in the right hand.
- Delphic Dancers:** A photograph of three white statues of women in classical dress, representing the 'delphic dancers' mentioned in the text.

Text annotations include: "aug(mented) chord", "based on", and "the delphic dancers are in a triad and symmetric, like the augmented chord".

It is also a core unifying sonority of all of the Transcendental Etudes.

The realization—almost relief—that "it's over" can refer to couples but also to the listener's relationship to the impending coda. It's meta, but I hope wryly so. I want this feeling that "it's over" to be restated with less and less energy, which is an exercise in tetchy patchworking of a

dozen samples. The phrase eventually morph to new phrases, such as “there is nothing”, then to the first phrase of the etude:



“It’s just not here” ends on a dominant chord, implying perhaps hope but also a sense that this whole damned piece could happen again. The ending of the piece came to me, maybe too cute, but it also ends with the question of the original song:

“What now?” then:

M2 *exeunt*
good - bye _____

M3 *exeunt*
F1 wanders around spot, looking for something
good - bye

It’s rigged so that the next piece, Etude #9, begins with a reaction to that single person, who is left alone, wandering the stage. As the evening-length Etudes go on, they are daisy-chained in staging.

* * *

A post-script on choreography. I sample and create the maquette while thinking and grunting through the physical theater of the piece, which I will eventually direct with live performers. Sometimes I have to design the stage before the music, in order to figure out distances and timings, and I get friends and collaborators to test it out. Here, I had to pre-think lighting, but the design elsewhere involves seesaws, speakers, or other props. Some pieces have intricate physical canons, which I chart out later in this book, but other pieces are more open-ended in choreography. Etude #8 is one of these freer pieces. It gives a lot of leeway to the performers and director because the material is conversational, like a conventional play.