

Notes on the compositions

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Helen's Necklace (2005) was composed for a Shadow Theatre (Edmonton) production of Helen Frechette's acclaimed play of the same name. This play, which takes place in post-war Beirut, concerns a Canadian playwright's realization of the meaning of suffering and loss. In this piece, I reinterpret traditional Middle Eastern melodic and rhythmic materials. Middle Eastern music tends to be heterophonic; harmonic implications are often implied but rarely stated overtly or completely. Metric music exploits repetition to bring out new implications.

In many older pieces—especially in the Ottoman tradition—lengthy metric cycles fit melodic contours, so that an entire melody comprises one extended “measure”. Rather than force-fit my melody into an existing cycle, I observed its contours, then through-composed a 63 beat metric cycle (divided as 15+14+14+13+7) to fit.

In this arrangement, the wistful melody is rendered on oud (fretless lute), nay (reed flute), two violins (the violin has been a standard voice in ME music for over a century), and double bass. It is repeated three times, undergoing variation and expansion throughout. In the final repetition, the tempo drops sharply as the piano enters center stage with lush tone clusters, rendering the melody's multiple harmonic implications explicit.

Besides the score and its accompanying recording, I am providing also a more traditional interpretation for Arab music ensemble, and a third version used in the play (featuring myself on the nay).

Spacings (2007) was inspired by an unusual rhythmic division of an ordinary 4/4 bar, comprising 16 pulses. Grouped as 3+3+3+3+3+4, one feels oneself temporarily to be in a compound meter, before the final “4” brings back the square reality of 4/4, though always with considerable ambiguity, since the location of the downbeat is continually obscured by syncopation. This 4/4 is in turn multiplied by four: A central four-fold theme, modelled on the traditional 48-beat Shona mbira compositional form of Zimbabwe (four bars of 12/8), uses minimal melodic changes to mark each “side” of an extended melodic square. Two pianos subtly move in and out of phase, emphasizing contrasting perspectives of the theme, modified by shifting, inversion, and retrograde. The two flutes add a lyrical surface in an Arab cast.

BaAka Soundings (2000) was composed for a University of Alberta Drama department production of *The Ik*, by Colin Turnbull; directed by Heather Fitzsimmons, and performed at Edmonton's Walterdale Playhouse. In his widely known work, *The Forest People*, anthropologist Turnbull romanticized the Central African “pygmies”, supposedly untouched by modern life and living in a utopian egalitarian society. In *The Ik*, by contrast, he portrays a Sudanese tribe whose humanity has been utterly destroyed by British colonialism. The two ethnographic images are extreme inverses of one another, yet similar, like a photograph and its negative. At the start of the play I wanted to invoke Turnbull's vision of the BaAka's Eden-like state, against which he constructs the “fallen” Ik. The piece is based on aleatoric recombination of polyrhythmic cells inspired by the vocal hockets of the BaAka people (also known as “pygmies”) of Central African Republic. A set of rules, realized as a network diagram, constrain the space of possible cell sequences. In performance the piece relied on quasi-random sequences of vocalist choices to move from one cell to another. For the notated version, I generated these choices randomly using a statistical programming language (called R) to generate pitch codes in an intermediary typographical music notation language (abc), then composed additional vocal and percussion lines.