

A Simultaneity of Conflicting Modes of Expression:

My Structural Aesthetic and Development in the Pieces

fl/vln, fifteen players, and POS BTR

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In September of 2006 I began work on a duo for flute and violin, and while I was not yet thinking about it in these terms, I was at the beginning of a new phase of structural development in my compositional work. What began as the desire for an *interruption/intervention* in the structure of *fl/vln* became the need to make two pieces into one in *fifteen players*, which grew into a constant revisiting of different modes of musical expression in *POS BTR*. These pieces are very different from each other structurally, but they all share a common thread: The coexistence of two fundamentally different types of musical material within the same piece. The paired use of quiet, slowly moving, and harmonically focused music with energetic, aggressive, *goal-oriented*¹ music has become an important element in my work from the initial conception of each piece. While the use of slow and fast material together within a piece is certainly not new, the type of *fast* and the type of *slow* that interest me are fundamentally different in their means of drama and required time-scale. For the purpose of this essay, I will refer to these two types of material as ‘A’ and ‘B’ (‘A’ for the fast/loud and ‘B’ for the slow/quiet). This is not meant to imply that one is primary or the other secondary, or that the use of the same letters implies a repetition of material. These letters are intended only to label modes of expression. Table 1 offers the proportional relationships between A and B material in the three pieces.

fl/vln

A	B
8:00	4:45

fifteen players

A	B
7:10	7:45

POS BTR

A	B	AB(C)
5:55	7:15	4:20

Table 1: Proportional relationships between A and B material.

¹ *Goal-oriented* refers to a form of musical development in which the material has a destination it is trying to reach. This is the opposite of *non-goal-oriented* music, in which the material is allowed to exist without exist without a need for typical movement or development.

The “AB(C)” in *POS BTR* refers to the final section of the piece in which the line between A and B is intentionally blurred. The actual structures of the pieces are not shown in this table, only the portions of ‘A’ and ‘B’ material that exists in each.

In these pieces, ‘A’ represents an energetic, often chaotic or aggressive, sometimes disjunct type of material that uses each active element to support one composite *line*. This material is often *goal-oriented*, making traditional use of energy and momentum to carry forward the drama. My ‘B’ material is not *goal-oriented* (except in *fifteen players*). It is possible for it to build toward something, but that is not the primary objective. This music is focused on what I call *careful harmony*, meaning carefully balanced sonorities often containing microtones and revolving/evolving around one or few pitches and their subtle inflections. This music tends to be slow and quiet in order to allow the harmonies to be heard and understood without strain. Creating music that relies on these two conflicting means of expression has proven to be a difficult psychological conflict and was my largest compositional concern during the work on these three pieces.

fl/vln (September-December 2006)

While working on *fl/vln*, I had two primary goals: The development of a global and persuasive trajectory with a sudden and perplexing intervention, and the exploration of a gradual shifting of relationship between two duo members. The large-scale trajectory of the piece explores a constant building of energy and intensity. The beginning is constrained, restricted to percussive pizzicato sounds from both instruments, the flute guiding the gestural energy while being punctuated by the violin (example 1).

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the piece *fl/vln*. It consists of two staves: Flute (fl.) and Violin (vln.). The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = c. 80$. The flute part starts with a *pizz* (pizzicato) marking and a dynamic of *mp*. The violin part starts with a *pizz sempre* marking and a dynamic of *mp*. The score is divided into four measures, each marked with a circled number (1, 2, 3, 4). Measure 1 has a dynamic of *mf*. Measure 2 has a dynamic of *mp*. Measure 3 has a dynamic of *mf* and a tempo change to *a tempo*. Measure 4 has a dynamic of *mf* and a tempo change to *a tempo*. The flute part has a marking *play pitches in any order* and a dynamic of *mf*. The violin part has a marking *que 'a tempo' once it has reached fastest possible speed* and a dynamic of *mf*. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Example 1: *fl/vln* – beginning

Through the first four sections of the piece, the register, dynamic level, gestural language, timbral relationships, and leadership roles between the two players gradually shift. A timeline of the piece indicating textural relationships and changing leadership roles is shown in table 2.

Structural Sections:	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Rehearsal #	0 - 10	10 - 15	15 - 27	27 - 32	Intervention 32 - 39	39 - end
Textural Relationships	Imitative	Contrasting	Contrasting	Imitative	Similar & Contrasting	Imitative
Duration	1:40	:55	3:00	:30	4:45	1:30
Leadership Roles	flute 0 - 14	trans 14-16	violin 16 - 26	both 26 - end		

TABLE 2: Primary Structural Elements of *fl/vln*

The initial climax begins at 27² after slightly over five minutes, approaching the midpoint of the piece. After straying from each other texturally, the players have met one another at the opposite end of this spectrum, playing long-tones beginning in unison and pulling at each other microtonally. These lines gain dynamic and rhythmic intensity until the peak and sudden cut to the intervention (example 2).

Example 2: *fl/vln* - first climax

My intent here was to develop a situation nearing a loss of control: a situation requiring relief. The intervention (example 3) represents a freezing of time in which sounds exist in a delicate and careful state having nothing in common with the assertive beginnings of the piece. The nature of this section is very similar to that of the ‘B’ music found in *fifteen players* and *POS BTR*. It focuses on sustained, regularly inflected, and relatively delicate events.

² In the place of measure numbers, these three scores use rehearsal numbers every 4-6 bars. These are what the numbers in the text refer to.

long-tones, but without the previous manner of alternation, and with notable distortion from the players (example 5).

♩ = c. 68
39 *ond.*

39 *fff sempre*
♩ = c. 68
fff sempre

Example 4: *fl/vln* – immediately following the *intervention*.

40 *più mosso*

40 *più mosso*

Example 5: *fl/vln* – nearing the end.⁵

The sounds used in these late moments represent the “end of the road” for the two players texturally and timbrally: they both began with clear and controlled pizzicati, strayed from one another, met at the long tones, then distorted them in a piercing register to finish the trajectory.

⁵ The various horizontal brackets above the violin part indicate different degrees of bow pressure. The double bracket calls for an intense tone with only slight distortion. The triple bracket calls for a heavily distorted tone with only shadings of the notated pitch.

fifteen players (January-June 2007, revised December 2007)

Like *fl/vln*, *fifteen players* contains two types of highly contrasting material: energetic, goal-oriented material with transitions and sub-sectional divisions and drone-based, microtonal material requiring a different use of time and development. The primary difference between this structure and that of *fl/vln* is that the active material at the beginning of *fifteen players* works toward the second half of the piece, offering subtle hints of what is to come. The intent is not for the audience to be aware of where they are being taken in the moment, but for the result (when achieved) to make sense on a subconscious level. In *fifteen players*, rather than intentionally placing unrelated materials alongside each other, the material is evolving so that once you have left a stage you cannot return. In addition to the overall structure of the piece, the 'B' material in *fifteen players* is distinct in comparison to *fl/vln* and *POS BTR* as it is slowly, but directly developing toward a new climax after the piece has shifted from 'A' to 'B'; this is a situation that does not exist in the other two pieces. As is the case in all three of these pieces, a fundamental difference between these two types of material is the level of harmonic concentration. The second half of *fifteen players* is initially focused on the pitch A and then shifts to G1. From 38 until 47, A3 constantly sounds (example 6). Any other pitch that appears during these four minutes is either a microtonal inflection of A, an overtone above it, or a subordinate set of symmetrical intervals above and below it (if a minor 6th appears above the A, a minor 6th must also appear below it within a few beats).

38 ♩ = c. 40 tranquil

39 s.l. senza vib. ord. s.l.

40 ord. s.l.

Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabasso

p sempre, *s.l. senza vib.*, *ord.*, *s.p.*

Gradually pull the string at the node then return to achieve quarter-tone bends. The bow should always be moving between the bridge and the finger board. The bow will occasionally move into a position which will cancel the harmonic. This is a desired effect and should not be avoided.

Example 6: Beginning of second half of *fifteen players*, strings

The sound of this section is entirely different from what has come before, but it is not unanticipated. The two halves of the piece have two very different structural identities. The first half works its way through three distinct sections, making use of transitions and traditional gestures while the second half is one gradual evolution towards the final climax. Everything is based on drones and the slow harmonic shift from A3 to G1. The structure of the second half is hinted at in a nearly identical way during the middle section of the first half. At 20, the strings have arrived at the first unison of the piece on B5 (example 7). This section unfolds in a very similar manner to the section that begins at 38, beginning with a perfect unison, then pulling itself apart through microtonal inflection towards the introduction of a foreign element (the chorale seen in example 8). This new element creates the possibility for the ensemble to move away from the previous pitch restriction and develop into a richer sonority (example 9).

Example 7: fifteen players anticipation material.

Example 8: fifteen players – chorale.

The musical score is divided into two systems, 23 and 24. The first system includes Flutes 1 and 2, Clarinet in A, Bassoon, Trombone, Tuba, Percussion 1 and 2, and Piano. The second system includes Violins I and II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score shows a complex texture with various dynamics and articulations.

System 23:

- Fl. 1:** *p*, *mp*, *p*
- Fl. 2:** *p*, *pp*, *mp*, *mp*
- Cl. in A:** *p*, *mp*, *mp*, *pp*
- Bsn:** *p*, *mp*, *p*, *p*, *pp*, *p sempre*
- Tbn:** *mp*, *pp*, *p*, *pp*
- Perc. 1:** *mf*, *p*, *mf*
- Perc. 2:** *mf*
- Pno:** *p*, *pp*, *mf*

System 24:

- Vln. I:** *f*, *pp*, *mp*, *pp*, *f*
- Vln. II:** *f*, *pp*, *p*, *mp*, *f*
- Vla:** *f*, *mp*, *pp*, *mf*
- Vcl:** *f*, *f*, *pp*, *pp*
- Cs:** *f*, *pp*

Articulations and dynamics include *s.p.*, *ord.*, *s.t.*, *poco vib.*, and *H*.

Example 9: fifteen players – texture growing out of the chorale.

Once available, the new register is filled by the ensemble, which begins to develop through individual swells into the first climax. When looked at in this way, the connection between this moment and the second half of the piece is clear. 38 begins with another ensemble unison (A3), which is sustained for slightly more than thirty seconds before the gradual microtonal pulling-apart (as is seen in example 6). This texture grows, and more ensemble members join through the use of the previously mentioned symmetrical intervallic relationships. This material builds and is stretched out over the next three minutes, with the texture constantly evolving in timbral complexity. It is after these three minutes that the foreign element is finally introduced (occurring after forty-five seconds in the similar situation from the first half): Two sets of pitches unrelated to the rest of the ensemble played by the piano (example 10, rehearsal 45).

Example 10: fifteen players – second half - point of transition.

The introduction of this higher register and the use of pitches outside of the prevailing system invite the ensemble to unfold into richer sonorities, and to expand the overall ensemble ambitus. It does not happen here in the same way it did before, but the principal is the same. The most important element, the element that allows the transition to take place, is the new use of the high register in the whole ensemble, which gradually shifts into specific overtones above A3 (which is still present).

While this is happening, overtones above G1 are also introduced, creating harmonic interference in the upper register and drawing the ear away from the actual bass movement from A3 to G1 (example 11). This spectral shift, generated by the bass note is the key element of the second half of the piece, and it is at this point that the ensemble builds to the second climax which ends the piece.

Table 3 displays the full structure of *fifteen players*. Looking at sections II and IV, you can compare the proportional relationship between the second half and its small-scale version offered in the first half.

First Half (7:10)									
Section	I	I-1	I-2	trans	II	chorale	trans	III	climax
Rehearsal #	0 - 11	11 - 13	13 - 17	17 - 20	20 - 22	22 - 27	27 - 30	30 - 35	35 - 38
Duration	1:40	:20	:25	:25	:45	1:25	1:10	:40	:30

Second Half (7:45)				
Section	IV	trans	climax	climax result
Rehearsal #	38 - 45	45 - 51	51 - 53	53 - end
Duration	3:00	2:15	:30	2:00

Table 3: *fifteen players* – Structure

The manner arrival at the second half of *fifteen players* shares common ground with the methods used both in *fl/vln* and in *POS BTR*. As in *fl/vln*, the change is abrupt and appears at the peak of a climactic moment, but as is slightly more common in *POS BTR*, there is some preparation during the approach to the moment of change. Throughout the whole section preceding this change, the whole ensemble is focusing on gestures that are either on A or are revolving around it. In the last bar of the chaos (seen in example 6), the contrabass and violoncello leave their roles to settle on the A3 that remains when the rest of the ensemble is cut away.

POS BTR (September 2007 – February 2008)

POS BTR, for tenor saxophone and piano, is my third attempt to build a structure based on the use of drastically conflicting material. While *fl/vln* offers its ‘B’ material as an unrelated interruption and *fifteen players* takes the material and systematically develops it, POS BTR insists of its ‘B’ material by returning to it repeatedly and eventually blurring the boundaries between ‘A’ and ‘B’. In this respect, it has more in common with *fl/vln* than with *fifteen players*, but key elements are derived from both. During the first six sections of POS BTR there is seemingly no relationship between the ‘A’ and the ‘B’ material (similar to the relationship of the two protagonists in *fl/vln*), and it is not until the final section of the piece that the relationship between the two is introduced and blurred. The material is recontextualized by placing familiar gestures into opposing situations. The parallel between this and *fifteen players* is small but important. The foreshadowing aspect during its first half can be compared to the way in which material from one category appears in the other here.

The first six sections of POS BTR are a steady, and proportionally similar back-and-forth between A and B (table 4). The ‘A’ sections are directional and rhythmically driven, as is the case with ‘A’ material from each of these three pieces.

Section	I	II	III	IV	V	V-1
Type	A	B	A	B	A	A
Rehearsal #	0 - 10	10 - 17	17 - 26	26 - 31	31 - 34	34 - 40
Duration	1:40	2:45	2:05	2:30	:40	1:30
Section	VI	trans	VII			
Type	B	AB(C)	AB(C)			
Rehearsal #	40 - 44	44 - 49	49 - end			
Duration	2:00	1:15	3:05			

Table 4: POS BTR – Structure

Each return to ‘A’ finds the material in a more developed state than when it was last heard, as was the case after the interruption in *fl/vln*. Sections I and III are more closely related to each other than V or VII are. They focus on and use similar gestures, but by the midpoint of III, the

saxophone has come within a whole-step of its full range for the piece, and from this point, ‘A’ sections rely mostly on the reuse and exaggeration of previously used gestures (examples 12-14). Some manipulations are clear while others simply focus on the stretching and repeated use of important pitches. The argument could be made that these moments are simultaneous manipulations of ‘A’ and ‘B’.

Example 12: POS BTR beginning

Example 13: Manipulations of opening material (spots from sections III and VII, respectively)

Example 14: Exaggerated material from section 3.

As is the case of I and III, the material used in II and IV (example 15) is closely related, but appears transformed in VI and VII: Through rhythmically stretched intervals and the extension of sonorities important in VI (example 16), and through a faster tempo in VII (example 17).

Example 15: Relationship between II and IV

Example 16: Use of exaggeration in VI

Example 17: 'B' transformed by tempo in VII (dotted-quarter = 72)

As can be seen in these examples, there is one fundamental difference between this piece and the previous two. *fifteen players* ties 'A' and 'B' together through the careful preparation of 'B' under the surface of 'A' and *fl/vln* makes no effort to connect the two, while *POS BTR* creates a connection not through preparation, but through insistence and recontextualization.

The three pieces discussed here all involve structures reliant on conflicting materials; a combination of fast music with little harmonic concentration, and slowly moving music whose primary intent is carefully considered harmonic situations. Though this premise exists in each piece, my structural approach has been quite different. Chronologically, the idea first appeared as an entirely unrelated *interruption/intervention* amidst the primary material. It then became the desired arrival point through carefully masked transitions and unmasked hints, and, lastly, it became part of an ever-shifting structure between slow and fast material, materials whose relationship to one another remains unclear until the last moments of the piece and is not even completely explained then. These have been my attempts thus far at the combination of two unrelated modes of musical expression. Such structures have become important to my compositional language and are likely to remain so until they lose the capacity to excite. I am unwilling to accept the idea that one must choose between these modes of expression in any given composition due to their necessity for radically different time-scales or for different ways of listening within a piece. It is possible for conflicting material to be used in the context of a single piece or a single movement without the label of collage. It is possible for the elements to belong together.