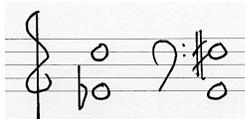


Much has been and continues to be written about the composers featured in today's program: on their personal lives, historical contexts, family trees, theologies, and impacts upon the continuum of Euro-American music. I write with the intent to address the idea of musical **form**. These composers all utilize form (or are subject to it). Grasping form will help tune our ears and minds as we move through today's vibrational offering. As I write, I will tap into the form of a free-flowing stream, bound by its terrain, slope, and recent rainfall.

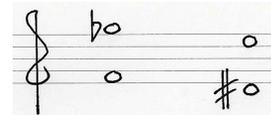
There are three ideas I wish to invoke before beginning officially: one is a maxim given to me by conductor and dear friend Ben Rous, who in turn heard it from his composition teacher Bernard Rands. Professor Rands said (I assume), "there are two forms in music: **ABA** and **AB**". To that, I would make a small addendum: **A** itself. So now we have in mind **ABA**, **AB**, and **A**. Another idea to keep in mind is J.W.V. Goethe's oft-referenced statement that "architecture is frozen music," as remembered by J.P. Eckermann in his recollection of conversations with the iconic thinker. Finally, there is a musical object, unique to the human (as opposed to avian or pure sine-wave) system of pitch temperament, and it is the Major 7th, which is equivalent in interval vector to the Minor 2nd, and therefore the Minor 9th as well. Here are those intervals:



Major 7ths



Minor 2nds



Minor 9ths

In high school, my guru Ted Howe referred to this interval as the "prime dissonance." This interval serves an indispensable role, unifying the composers' designs as we process through their respective pieces. It is a crucial object you might pick up in the pre-Baroque continental European version of musical Home Depot. Musical styles and philosophies both change, but pieces require construction, and this two-by-four appears in all of these different rooms, at key junctures.

Just as architectural ideas must eventually come up against the natural limitations and capabilities of materials, so do musical thoughts reconcile with instruments. There are costs and benefits to each choice: pianos convey dynamics through changes in finger pressure, but they only *simulate* sustained tones. Organs *simulate* dynamics through subtle changes in articulation¹ but they may sustain tones indefinitely without loss of volume. Harpsichords make perfect crystals out of pitches and rhythms, heard invariably as disconnected points of perfectly uniform emphasis.

Bach's *Passacaglia* relies on the organ's ability to stretch sound from here to there. The piece deploys one foundational building block — a two-unit-length sound followed by a one-unit-length sound. That building block first travels up in pitch-space before finding its way back down and through its starting note, landing an octave below that starting note. Perhaps a single dancer or acrobat or paintbrush draws this shape in your mind. Note the symmetry of duration: we spend half our time going up (from C ascending to G), and half our time going down (from G descending to the lowest C). And then we layer and layer, unfold and embellish, chop it up into little squares and tile the wall, squeeze it out of a tube — but always half the time up and half the time down, and always the same shape. When the shape hovers in the air, it does so in stark relief to maintain its gravitational function. When its chordal profile fully unravels, the sound turns into a long ribbon, easy for the ear to trace. It should be noted that our prime dissonance (the Home Depot lumber) appears at the point before the fall of each long phrase (measure 7 out of the 8). Until...

¹ And the brutish (albeit effective) method of opening and closing shutters.

Our building block, our singer's *cantus*, our dancer's combination is thrown upward onto a high, narrow platform! It now sits equally alongside two brother blocks, all of them growing and fighting for the lion's share of their parents' approval and land rights. Climbing over each other, somersaulting, vaulting, leaping, spinning, twirling, slapping each other down, picking each other up; we bear witness to a geometric wrestling of souls and desires. The brothers become cognizant, sensing the artistry in their feud, the tragic glory of performance and competition — they reach the apotheosis of clenched fury, fling themselves into the air, freeze at the apex...and land as one, balanced, unified.

Taken in totality, this piece has an **AB** form, with the **A** made up of 19 ever-reconstituted **As**, and the **B** made up of a big sweeping **ABA**, plus fireworks. Lest we get too caught up in this waxed rhapsody, let me remind you that the brothers are made of solid stuff, and the foundational brother block (from the first moments) enacts his virtuosic flight always connected to his true self, made in the image of his designer. Sometimes he hides within his brethren — according to Fred Nouwen, it is only through hiddenness that we may locate Adonai. The prime dissonance is everywhere, and when we fall from our partner's shoulder, its strong binds gently gather us up and bring us to where we need to be. Is the prime dissonance Adonai? Or is it His messengers? His ministers? His chosen emissaries?

Gordon Balch Nevin's *Will o' the Wisp* will function as today's *entremets*. A little coconut sorbet with a splash of Grand Marnier. The form is **ABA**. The notes I've just written should correspond with the song lengths for the first two pieces.

And now a short poem:

But what to do
with Buxtehude?

When we think about J.S. Bach, everyone gets a little exegetical. Sort of like Christianity itself, even those who do not partake of its enveloping grace have heard of it. So, even those who do not recognize Bach by name or sound still have an inkling that he's out there. Knowledgeable types can't help condescending when they talk about Bach's imprint on all musics, including popular styles from Tin Pan Alley to Pit Bull. "Everything comes out of Bach," those people will say, "whether 'people' know it or not." There may be truth there, but not where we assume it to be. Buxtehude is true, too. "Too true," the *toutrous* mutter.

Buxtehude's preaching is largely out-of-control: big, flamboyant, and gripping. He greets you with an outstretched palm, pulls you into his winter cloak, and just when you think you're getting into the buggy for a country tour, you are flung out of the other side and into the waiting arms of another Buxtehude, now muttering spitfire, keen on conveying the day's message and the numinous power of the Word. You give yourself up again to this calculated rhetoric and begin walking alongside him. Night falls abruptly. When you look to your right, he is gone! "Dietrich? Dietrich?", you call into the chilly night. A falcon swoops down, its massive wings grazing your frigid nose. "Drat that bird!", you cry out. The great bird retorts emphatically, for it is Buxtehude! You have become a field mouse — he picks you up with his mighty beak and launches you into the shrouded night. You land on a rocky shoreline, bouncing this way and that as broken chords wash around you in a tidal spray. This seems like yet another transient state (why are we in 3/4?, you wonder), but you remain here the longest and become accustomed to the rhythm of the waves and the etched clarity of the rocks.

You have been to all of these places before, because you are in fact Bach being given a lesson. But is this one teacher? One sermon? One lesson? Had he no other way to convey these matters besides this fever dream? Perhaps, as Bach, one day you will consolidate his madness. Buxtehude can be

serene, patient, and orderly. But here he wears the kind of shorts and comfortable shoes that they had in north Germany during the late 17th century, and he runs wild. When a piece processes like this – **ABCDEFGHIJ...** – then the form is **AB**.

Like the sculptor or cathedral artist, the musical ego, separate from the ego-less servant self, emerged very slowly. Liturgy, text, psalm tones, and a scrutinized set of musical functions bound the sacred musician. During this state of affairs (which persists), chant melodies nevertheless comprised a sanctified repository onto which musicians applied compositional devices and styles. Here, de Grigny's raw matter is the chant *Ave Maris Stella* (Hail, Star of the Sea), which our *schola* sings². The organ plays in alternation with the voices. Therefore, de Grigny is able to discretize the various musical ideas for each verse response. To apply our metaphor, his estate consists solely of outbuildings of contrasting style and temperament – tiny house movements, if you will. In each house, though, prime dissonances are brought to bear as thematic links or structural supports. They connect each outbuilding to one another, and the compound itself to the surrounding geography – a core grammatical logic informing the *lingua franca* of continental composers. Scholars should never play favorites. Fortunately, I am not much of a scholar, so here is my favorite verse and its translation (the second verse, sung today by the women's voices):

Sumens illud Ave Gabriélis ore / Funda nos in pace / Mutans Hevae nomen.

Receiving that Ave from the mouth of Gabriel / Establish us in peace /
Changing Eve's name.

Janet and I will demonstrate the idea which inspires the next piece. The premise is this: in Western music, we divide musical spaces into pulsed cell blocks, each cell called a measure. Each measure contains a number — and only that number — of pulses. Assuming a time before Western music became hegemonic, there were (and continue to be) all sorts of musics that flaunted such restrained rhythmic identity. Some Ghanaian musics present multiple pulse divisions in *co-presence*. This is often referred to as polymeter. Instead of a unit of time being divided into three or four or five pulses, there may be three, four, and five pulses in simultaneity. Think of how the number twelve can be divided equally into groups of two, three, four, or six. This is what we will show through our pulsed division of the bell part for *agbekor*, an *Ewe* war commemoration dance (although this bell part itself appears in many different drum-dances).

activated progression number six has an **AB** form, but we experience neither **A** nor **B**. Instead, this piece aspires to abstract the journey from **A** to **B**. About fourteen years ago, my younger brother Evan and I walked from a breakfast place in Decatur, Sweet Tomato's, to the house I lived in then, one of 70 or so identically-designed houses in a fabricated subdivision with the evocative name of "Kensington Parc"³. We passed through Decatur square and Scottdale, alongside Your Dekalb Farmer's Market and a steel fabricator called "STEEL, LLC," eventually entering this part of Avondale Estates. We discussed the psychical utility of annual-ness. Meaning, on a cut tree trunk, points on rings are most closely proximal to those points that are one year away (as opposed to 5 or 6 months away). There is something about longitudinal spans that encourages us to remember and analyze our selves, loved ones, and societies, more consciously than we might in the short term. I do

² My children have a book we read at night entitled *Stella, Star of the Sea*; bears little relation to the chant text.

³The house's owner, and my house-mate, was Albert Pendleton, former collegiate wrestler and now orthopedic surgeon. Probably not in attendance today.

not remember the meal we ate beforehand nor the football game we probably watched when we got home (the Michael Vick years). Just the walk. **A to B.**

I do not know what will happen during the improvisation.

Hymns are not formless; they cycle musically and change lyrically with each repetition, and they cycle in seasonal-liturgical occurrence and relevance. We change as people, but the hymns do not. Do they?

Ah, St. Anne. That is the name for the hymn-tune that we just sang, and the melodic fragment that Bach so lovingly treats in his fugue. A French, sonata-like overture, precedes an epic triptych fugue: a solemn chorale; a Hardy Boys-esque chase through the mean waterways of Bayport; and the immense sea battle and coronation. Having already written in excess, you can interpolate herefrom.

Sometimes the glittering stream you walk by ends up emptying into a disappointing, fetid pool next to a small office park. But people are working inside that office park. Just like I need to go accompany the youth choir, and the bellows of the organ need attention, and you have Sunday evening chores to attend to — homework for the young, housework and emails for the older.

* * *

I wish to thank Bryan Black, Judy Jones, Brenda Brent, Nancy Hodges, Kim Castle, and Cassie Register: collectively, they make up the teachers in the Music Department of Marietta First United Methodist. They are avid music-lovers and music-makers, to the expense of their own health and sanity, it must be noted. The choirs here – adults, youth, my 1st and 2nd graders, the orchestra, and handbells – all make my musical life here a rewarding one indeed. The clergy here: Dr. Sam, and Revs. Lori, Elaine and Brian, care about their work and their colleagues and show it daily and mindfully. The facilities staff – Tony, Earl, Jane, Teisha, Stan, and Maria, Jerry and Wanda and Rodney – all of them care about this place, enabling a safe and spotless space to create and gesture towards the immanent. Erin, Michelle, Karen, Millie, Mary, Forrest, and Becky work tirelessly to make a machine this complex and subtle glide along as if no rough wind could ever buffet us. Beth Dawson welcomes everyone to this church — the joyous, the bereaved, and the staff. Karen B., Jessica, and Kelly inspire our youngest and adolescent members and us in turn. Susan, Phyllis, Cindy, Doug, and Sherry keep us nourished and in good spirits. Jimmy Kirkley archives everything we do with digital precision, lights our sacred spaces, amplifies our voices, assures that the message is heard. It is a remarkable team, from every perspective, filling every need that it knows.

Dolly Purvis turned pages today. She also designed the poster, put together the program, and designs and completes every single service bulletin. She holds up our website, composes press releases, photographs and paints images for and of this church. She makes videos that showcase who we are and what we do, videos that compel people to take a closer look and listen. *And* she can comment intelligently on organ registration and offer impassioned historical tellings of the various feats of Agnes Scott College alumna. How many Communications Directors do that?

Finally, Jay and Corky from Jay Mitchell & Associates have been the conservators of this organ for many decades. They do so *gratis*. They do so with expertise, taste, and artful discretion. They are kind, funny, and compassionate people. The *zymbelstern*, which I will deploy but once today, was given to this church by Jay in honor of his mother. Jay and Corky are here today, lest the organ suffer an esteem (or steam) problem, but also to support the mission and legacy of this fine instrument, as it sonifies the spiritual aspirations of this community of believers and doers. Doxis and praxis. Word and action. Sound and text. Contradiction in company. Thank you, J and C, for your work, and to Marietta First United Methodist Church for making music a part of its greater ministry.

Brian Parks, organ
MA, FAGO
Music Associate/Organist
Marietta First United Methodist Church

Passacaglia and Thema Fugatum (BWV 582) J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Will o' the Wisp, a Scherzo-Toccatina G.B. Nevin (1892-1943)

Toccatina in d (BuxWV 155) D. Buxtehude (1637-1707)

brief explanation of Ghanaian polymeter

Janet Simone Parks, *gankogui* and *axatse*
Brian Parks, *axatse*

activated progression number six (2009) B. Parks (b. 1980)

Ave Maris Stella N. de Grigny (1672-1703)

- Plein Jeu

- Fugue à 5

- Duo

- Dialogue sur les Grand Jeux

Schola: Bryan Black, Gurdon Counts, Frank Harris, Judy Jones, Brenda Rhodes, Susan White

improvisation on an audience-submitted theme*

†O God our Help in Ages Past Hymnal 117

Prelude and Fugue in Eb, "St. Anne" (BWV 551/2) J.S. Bach

Kindly wait to applaud until the conclusion of the concert.

*As you enter, please submit a tune or melodic fragment or song title into the bowl near the chancel steps. Find someone with a nametag if unsure how to indicate the music you wish to submit.

†Please stand as you are able. Sing with abandon.

The pipe organ is from the Reuter Organ Company of Lawrence, Kansas. It is their Opus 1517, designed in 1965 and installed shortly thereafter. It is under the stewardship of Jay Mitchell & Associates.

