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FROM TEXT TO MUSIC
ABOUT MY STRING SEXTET *VID VARANDRA*

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Table of Contents:

<u>Introduction</u>	3
<u>Reconstruction of the Pre Compositional Process</u>	5
1.1 The Text	5
1.2 Formulating an Idea	8
1.3 The Final Idea	11
<u>Reconstruction of the Compositional Process</u>	12
2.1 Transcription of Reading	13
2.2 Building a Form	15
2.3 Deriving a Pitch Material	16
2.4 Composing	19
Section A – The Cosmic Section	19
Section B – The Human Section	22
The Development	24
The Scanning Process	24
The Coda	25
<u>After Word</u>	26
<u>Works Cited</u>	27

Introduction

The focus of this research will be on my string sextet Vid Varandra (*By Each Other*), composed in September 2000, and based on a poem by the Swedish poet Göran Sonnevi. However, to be able to place this work into a context, I will first sketch a very brief background – mentioning some traditional and modern ways of creating music from text.

To severely simplify music history, one might say that most traditional text related music (before World War II) has used poetry or drama as source, focusing almost entirely on the overall *meaning* of the text, generally highlighting certain phrases by some kind of madrigalization, and only sometimes including formal matters. The most obvious examples are *songs*, *choir music* and *opera*. Schubert's songs, for example, display several of these features. As for instrumental music inspired by text, the symphonic Poems and Programmatic Music from the latter 19th and early 20th century, by composers such as Richard Strauss and Jean Sibelius, serves as good examples. This music focuses mainly on the meaning of the text, too.

In more recent music (after World War II), the variety has increased considerably. Other types of text sources are used and there is a focus shift towards the formal aspects of the text. Some interesting examples are:

Giörgy Ligeti's Aventures (1962); a musical drama based on a nonsense text, thereby questioning the relevance of the words' meaning – instead focusing on the *sound of speech*.

Jan Sandström's Formant Mirrors (1983), explores the formants (the phenomenon in the harmonic spectrum that makes an o sound like an "o" and an i like an "i"), and uses this as a foundation for the music. Sandström writes in a letter to Brian Ferneyhough:

"In the first movement I use the text as a hidden force, just like you can use a curve of electrical voltage as a hidden force in electronic music. This "hidden force" can determine everything that happens in the music. You can see inversions, delays, and all the mirroring techniques one can think of. The result here may be a quasi heterophonic, perhaps very naïve and primitive, but peculiar and striking music. I'm for the moment very fond of this way of thinking. Often we can only see the different results of impulses, without knowing exactly which the impulses are, but just "discern" them. In many ways life is like this. This is also the idea of formal disposition; during the piece the text comes more and more "into hearing", and will end up with the soprano declaiming-singing it."¹

I think this quote displays a number of interesting thoughts, summarizing some of the more prominent ideas of the period.

Brian Ferneyhough's 4th String Quartet (1989-90) is a string quartet with an added vocal part. He writes: "In my **Fourth Quartet**, I set myself the task of examining, one more time, how, and if, the phenomenon of verbal language and the essentially processual nature of much recent musical composition could be coaxed into some kind of *Einklang*, some mutually illuminating co-existence."² These compositions by Ligeti, Sandström and Ferneyhough are not merely inspired by some text; rather they question and explore the phenomenon of language in one way or another.

Without even trying to place myself within any "-ism" or school of thought, I will now simply describe the birth and creation of my string sextet Vid Varandra.

¹ Jan Sandström, Private letter to Brian Ferneyhough 1983, copy of original letter.

² Brian Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1995), 155.

Reconstruction of the Pre Compositional Process

“ ‘We are not consciously aware of all the information our mind processes or of the causes of all the feelings we experience. But the conscious self uses these as data points to construct and maintain a coherent story’... The lesson we learn from studies of split-brain patients is that the self ... lies like crazy to create a coherent picture of something it does not understand in the slightest. We lie our way to the coherence and consistency we perceive in our behavior.’”³

This is an inevitable matter of fact that one has to take into consideration when dealing with reconstructions of any mental process. As much as I would want to explain how I really thought regarding a certain matter, I cannot be quite certain that this was really the case. The complex interaction between the conscious and the unconscious exists already in the actual composing process, but becomes even more obvious as I now will perform yet another process on top of the first (the *reconstruction*). To these confusing circumstances I can do nothing but say: - I’m sorry.

1.1 The Text

Never will I forget the first time I heard Göran Sonnevi read from his collection Klangernas bok to an audience in Luleå, northern Sweden. I had at that time read some of his poetry, but never quite “gotten into” it. Hearing him read was an intense experience, which functioned as a key to my appreciation and understanding of his poetry. I find it hard to explain specifically what it was that attracted me, but it could have something to do with the following:

Göran Sonnevi only reads publicly when he feels he can do it personally satisfying, honestly and sincere. When later asking him if he would like to read this poem

³ Tor Nørretranders, *The User Illusion* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), 283

by the first performance of my piece, he answered that I would have to ask him again, closer to the actual date. He told me about a period long time ago when he read too much publicly. It made him feel like an actor, distancing him from his work, and making him feel terrible. Nowadays he only reads when he really wants to. Moreover, he stutters, and the only time he does not, is when he reads his poetry, although his voice is rather strained. These circumstances explain at least partially why the reading had such an effect on me. It felt vital and of great magnitude.

About one year later, after having read through that particular collection countless times, I decided I wanted to turn this into music, somehow. Typically, I ended up picking the one poem I had the clearest *audible* memory of – the first poem in Klangernas bok, except for the *prologos*.

In my rough translation:

Allt är i sin början Snabbt växer
den kosmiska arkitekturen, medan vi
ser in i stjärnornas mörker
Vi står i denna födelse Till

vad? Vi vet inte vad vi är för slags
varelser Formerna som rör sig inne i intet
kan vi inte se Men det är därifrån
vi kommer Så rör vi vid varandra

ytterligt frammande Matriserna rör också
vid varandra, förintade Så ser
vi oss som individer Ohjälpligt

förlorade? Vi blöder mot
varandra Men motståndslöst kommer
ditt ansiktes finhet, i sina drag⁴

All is in its opening Fast grows
the cosmic architecture, while we
see into the darkness of the stars
We are standing in this birth To

what? We do not know what kind of
creatures we are The forms moving inside nothingness
we cannot see Though it is from there
we come Then we touch each other

utterly unfamiliar The matrixes do
also touch each other, annihilated Thus we see
ourselves as individuals Helplessly

lost? We bleed against each other
Though without resistance comes the fineness
of your face, in its shapes

⁴ Göran Sonnevi, *Klangernas bok* (Uddevalla: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1998), 11.

The structure of this poem is a *broken sonnet*, by which I mean that it has the shape of a sonnet (14 rows (4,4,3,3), generally 10-11 syllables per row), but the sentences float freely on top of this grid, so that a phrase can start and end in any location of a row. Furthermore, the meter is handled freely, and there are neither rhymes nor punctuations.

The meaning of a poem is always dangerous to claim to “know”, but let me just point out what I, personally, find interesting. To me, this poem is trying to place *us*, that is, *human kind*, into a larger context. Two images are set up, one macro-perspective image (the universe), and one micro-perspective image (us). By zooming back and forth between these, the writer suggests there is a connection between the two. The idea of having a micro universe corresponding to a macro universe is old, and it was a large part of ancient Greek philosophy. However, I have seldom seen it illustrated with such clarity.

The macro cosmos is hidden to us, maybe *because* we are product of it; like a brain scientist trying to understand the human brain, using his own one as his instrument of research, or a cat chasing its own tail – in the poem: “the shapes moving inside nothingness we cannot see, though it is from there we come”

The image of *us* contains mainly warm, human elements with emphasis on a collective experience. “we touch each other”, “we bleed against each other” The image of the universe on the other hand, is described in a cold, more scientific way. As a reader you bounce between these strong opponents, causing an enormous emotional effect, as the similarities eventually get almost scarily obvious.

Note that in my translation, I have tried to convey the meaning , the syntax as well as the structure. Naturally, I had to make compromises, and the translated poem is nowhere near the original regarding ambiguity or finesse.

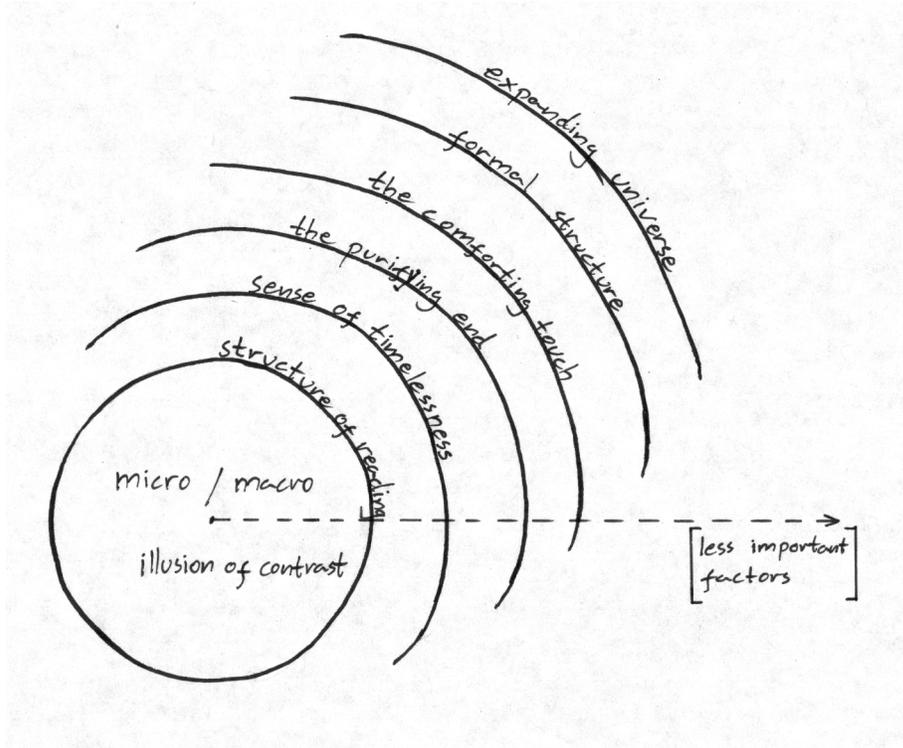
1.2 Formulating an Idea

The first thing I do, when writing music based upon something outside of the music itself (i.e. text), is to ask myself what I consider the main meaning or essence of this particular source to be. The purpose of doing this is to clarify my thoughts, to focus; simplify by eliminating everything but the core.

Once the core is defined, I re-add the removed qualities that I find particularly attractive, one by one, arranging them in a hierarchy based upon their significance to my reading of the work. One might say that I filter the text through myself. In this particular case I found the main essence to be the micro-macro relationship, with its *illusion of contrast*, meaning that the set up opponents are merely different perspectives of the same matter.

After re-adding some other qualities, I ended up with the following image, showing the ingredients of the poem, arranged in order of importance.

(Fig.1)



As illustrated, I did not find the formal structure of the poem very important, which may be surprising. It would of course have been possible to build a musical form based upon the row disposition, the amount of syllables and so forth. However, to me, the broken sonnet form did not contribute to any further understanding, *except for how it affected the reading*; hence, it was not important for my interpretation.

One might question this whole procedure. First of all, what gives me the right to interpret, to “filter the poem through myself”? Secondly, is it acceptable to construct a hierarchy of the ingredients in a poem, and why is the essence so sacred?

Regarding the interpretation, the only reasonable answer I can come up with is “What else could I possibly do?” The only way of truthfully working with a text is by making it one’s own. However, I do believe that the interpretation must come from the

text itself; hence, I do not like the idea of enforcing some other idea (e.g. a musical one) *upon* the text. To me, that is *textual abuse* - using the text for other than its own purposes, perhaps entirely against the intention of the writer.

As for the hierarchy of ingredients, I state that it must be something in the human mind, or perhaps in the culture, that makes us look for the core in everything, ranking different phenomenon as more or less important.” It would of course be possible to do otherwise, but that does not come natural to me. Besides, due to ambiguity, several essences can be found in a text, all equally relevant to the person finding them.

What it all comes down to is a question of intention. Do I *believe* I have found the essence of this text? Do I believe I can contribute to something related to the text by turning it into music? Do I have an artistic reason for doing what I am doing? If not, do something else.

The first musical idea I came up with was to actually have the poet read the text (either live or on tape), and having a choir picking up his phrases; imitating and enlarging him. This would get both the meaning of, and his reading of the text across, and at the same time be a clear illustration of the micro-macro connection. However, since I did not have an opportunity to write for choir at that time, this idea exists only in my sketchbook. Besides, there was something else concerning me. I was afraid it might be understood in an ironic way, with the choir making fun of the poet, and this was the last thing I wanted. After a short attempt to set it for solo voice and small chamber ensemble, I realized that the proportions of the text required a larger, more homogenous setting. At this time I received a commission by The Stockholm String Sextet.

1.3 The Final Idea

As I was preparing the string sextet, I came to think about the choir idea described in 1.2. For some reason I then came up with the rather strange idea of treating the sextet as a choir - letting the instruments “sing” the transcribed phrases of Sonnevi’s reading, thereby avoiding the risk of ironical comprehension. This on the other hand, created new difficulties. Since the meaning of the text was no longer to be heard, I had to express it in some other way. What I finally ended up with was letting the text influence the music level by level.

TEXT

Main meaning (essence)

Partial meaning (meaning of separate lines)

Detail meaning (Sound of voice)

MUSIC

Main meaning (structure / form)

Partial meaning (character of themes)

Detail meaning (pitch material, rhythms)

This scheme consists of several assumptions; the first one being that the main meaning of music is the structure. Is this true?

-No, of course it isn’t. The meaning of any piece of art cannot be reduced to either its structure or something else, since all parameters are interconnected. If we compare this interconnectedness to a web, the meaning would be the spider – the cause and controller of the web, and yet separated from it. This is being said with the assumption that meaning exists. The question of what it means to *mean*? I hereby leave open.

However, what we usually mean by *meaning* is that we recognize a *structure* or a *pattern*, which unifies and holds the separate ingredients together. I suppose it was this meaning of *meaning* I had in mind, when transforming the textual essence into a musical

structure. My connection of the remaining levels, the partial and detail meaning in text and music, was intuitive, although I think they make sense logically, too.

At this point I realized a problem. The reason for the poet to read the way he does is to a large extent found in the meaning of the words or phrases. When performing it instrumentally, this sense-making factor disappears, and left is only *an unexplained structure*. The question is whether this structure is relevant despite this? Although my answer was obviously yes, I still think it is an interesting question. The ultimate problem is whether the structure of language has a meaning *in itself*. I think it has – a musical meaning.

In this manner I was able to get across meaning on different levels simultaneously. Furthermore, I decided that all the substance in the piece should be derived from the sound of the voice, thereby being able to create *the illusion of contrast* by having basically the same material played in entirely different ways. This will be further explained in section 2.

Reconstruction of the Compositional Process

To summarize, what I in first hand wanted to get across was:

The micro-macro relationship, with its illusion of contrast
 The structure of his reading
 The sense of timelessness
 The comforting touch
 The purifying ending

The other, less important qualities such as the formal structure of the poem, I did not take into conscious consideration, relying on that they would enter subconsciously.

2.1 Transcription of Reading

Obviously, the poet does not read his text as if it were music, but there is nevertheless a strong musical touch to it. Phrasing, rhythmical patterns and even melodic elements creates a floating musical structure. When transcribing the voice into musical symbols, I had to force this into a strict notated language, by making some assumptions and setting up some limitations.

First of all I needed to find tempo and meter. Practically, I did this by recording his voice into a sequencer program, add a metronome, and then search for a tempo and meter that would cohere throughout the entire poem. I realized that the tempo was basically the same all the way ($\downarrow = 102.22$), but that the longer rests between the phrases made it come somewhat off beat. My solution to this was to move entire phrases slightly in some direction, thereby getting them in time. After this, I altered the meter to make it feel as natural as possible - as if it was going to be sung.

The next step was to determine the rhythms and the pitches. By slowing down the reading speed (without changing the pitch), I was able to do this by ear. I decided that a reasonable limitation was to, regarding rhythms, use 1/32 – notes as the shortest value and, regarding pitches, to use no smaller intervals than quarter-tones. Figure 2 shows a part of the transcription.

(Fig.2)

Handwritten musical score for a voice piece, featuring a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/4 time signature. The score consists of seven staves of music with Swedish lyrics underneath. The lyrics are: "A-ll — t ä — r i s-i-n bö — rj-a — n s-n — a — bb-t v-ä-x — e-r den ko-s — mi-s — ka a-r-ki — te — k-tv — re — n me — da — n vi s-e — r i — n i stj — ä — nor-na-s mä — r-ke — r v-i s — ta — r i de — m-a f — ö — del — s — e". The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings like "x" and "f". There are also some annotations like "=102,22" and "()" above the first staff.

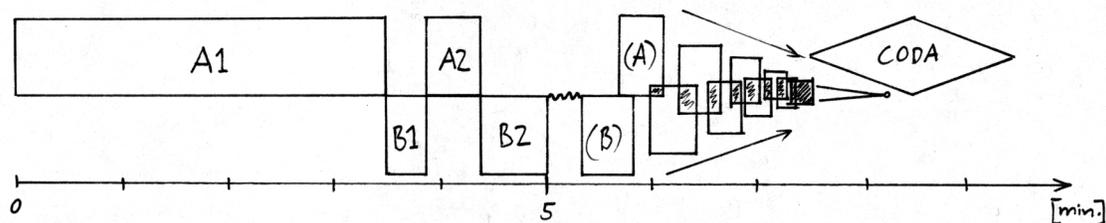
I want to emphasize that this was only a first step, a way of *approaching* the voice structure. At this point, I did not know exactly how I was going to use the material. Furthermore, the transcription process was founded on my *comprehension* of the reading, and should definitely not be seen upon as an objective description.

2.2 Building a Form

As mentioned above, the form should in some way illustrate the main meaning (essence) of the poem (the micro-macro connection with its illusion of contrast). To be able to convey this clearly, I decided to do it in two steps – first show the two items separately (the *cosmos* (A), and the *we* (B)), and then pushing them gradually into one another. When they eventually meet (climax), the point is made and the journey over. At this point I introduce the purifying end of the poem, as a musical coda.

The resemblance to traditional forms is apparent – first an exposition (repeated presentation of the two themes), followed by a development that leads up to a climax, which is resolved by a coda. In order to make the exposition interesting I varied the length of the two sections A and B, so that the second A (A2) was considerably shorter than the first (A1), but the second B (B2) longer than the first (B1). One could say that they already at this point begin to approach each other – in length. The structure is shown in figure 3.

(Fig.3)



Measure numbers in the score:

Exposition:

A1 – meas.1 to 37; B1 – meas.38 to 43; A2 – meas.44 to 54; B2 – meas.55 to 69
(Transition meas.70 to 77)

Development: meas.78 to 109

Climax: meas.110

Coda: fades in between meas.111 and 122, in focus from meas. 123 to the end.

2.3 Deriving a Musical Material

After having explored different possibilities of using the transcribed substance, I decided that I was only going to use the first stanza, to avoid an overflow of material. To be able to create the illusion of contrast, I needed to come up with ways of varying this material, in a way that made it possible to *gradually* morph between the outcomes.

The ways in which I did this was by changing *tempo* and *amount of accuracy*. This schematic illustration shows these principles.

(Fig.4)



As I see it, the original cell (1) is the natural, original shape, while the transformation, or imperfect mirroring, turns it more and more into a musical language that we are used to, traditionally (3). Indeed, this is how we comprehend the outside world – by simplifying and turning complex events into schematic figures. The connection to the poem is obvious. *The symbols moving inside nothingness* are the original cells, and *we* are the different reflections, the transformations of the material.

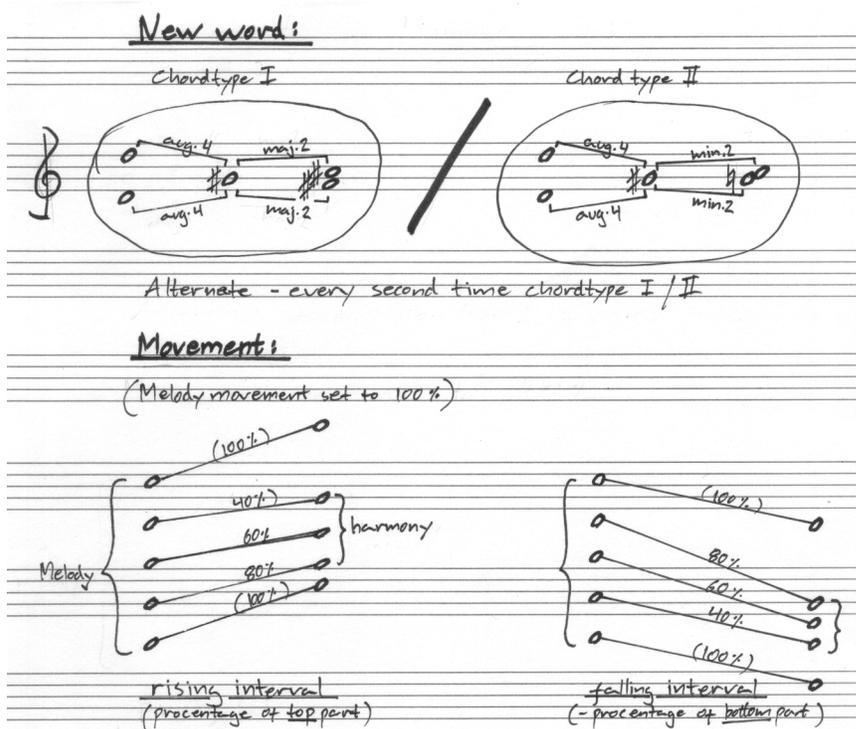
The next step was to enlarge these cells, by adding “harmony”. Still determined to use only material from the reading, I constructed a weird kind of block harmonization.

(Fig.5)

The image shows a musical score for the Swedish phrase "Allt ärr i sin börja". It consists of six staves of music. The top staff is a treble clef, and the bottom staff is a bass clef. The music is written in a style that suggests a specific harmonic or melodic rule being applied. Below the staves, the lyrics "A — ll — ä — r — r — i — s — i — n — b — ö — r — j — a" are written, with hyphens under each letter to indicate syllable placement.

The top part is one original cell (octave transposed), the lowest doubling an octave below. The remaining four parts follows the original melody shape, but only to a certain extent. These are the harmonization “rules”:

(Fig.6)



With every new word, I “reset” the harmony to either chord type 1 or 2. After that I let the harmony parts follow the melody shape to a certain percentage (rounded off to the closest quarter-tone). These percentage rates decrease throughout the harmonization – from 80/60/40 to 60/40/20 to 40/20/0 to 20/0/0 to 0/0/0 percent. (Note that fig.5 does not quite cohere with these rules, since it is an older sketch. The basic principle is still there)

One might from these descriptions get the impression that I do not care about how it actually sounds. This is not the case. The very reason for choosing a certain model or structure is as good as always based upon audible factors. The argument “it sounded good” is however strongly subjective and unconscious, and therefore not very interesting in this kind of analysis (although it is probably the only *really* true reason for most choices). As I now move on to the actual composing process, there will be considerably more of the intuitive element.

This is how I usually work. After first trying out some musical substance, I formulate an idea with a strong structure. Finally I give this structure life, by making cracks in it, following it *lagom*, a Swedish word for *neither too much nor too little* or *to a reasonable extent*.

2.4 Composing

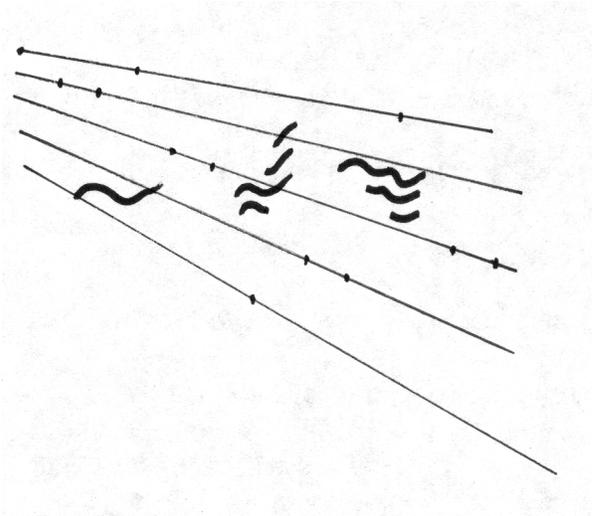
As the actual composing process is very complex, I will not be able to explain every event in detail, but merely select some of the episodes that I find central.

Section A – The Cosmic section

The main layer (or theme) in section A consists basically of the original reading transcription with its harmonization, but it is *sculptured*, meaning that the number of parts alter organically. I performed this by first writing all the parts out (as in figure 5), then erasing until I had an interesting (graphical) shape. I wanted this layer to resemble the real voice as much as possible, regarding phrasing, articulation and so forth. This resulted in a quite complicated musical structure. Due to this, I lowered the tempo from 102.22 to approximately 76, to make it possible to convey these micro nuances.

Once this was done, I added a quarter-note pulse-layer and a falling glissando-layer as background. All three layers are separated through dynamic, rhythmic and timbre dissimilarities. Figure 7 shows the schematic principle of section A, and figure 8 an example from the score.

(Fig.7)



(Fig.8)

The image shows a musical score for piano, oriented vertically. The score consists of several staves of music. At the top, the word "Relaxed" is written in a bold, sans-serif font. A large, hand-drawn oval encircles a section of the score, with the handwritten label "Crescendo-layer" written above it. To the left of the score, the handwritten label "Pulse-layer" is written vertically. To the right, the handwritten label "Scriptured theme" is written vertically. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "mp" (mezzo-piano) and "f" (forte). There are also some markings like "x. tasto" and "pont. (voic.)". The overall appearance is that of a handwritten musical manuscript or a score with extensive annotations.

The intention of all this was to create a feeling of uncertainty, to hide the phrases in dim air, "the forms moving inside nothingness we cannot see". The background layers contributed furthermore strongly to the sense of timelessness. In A2, I simply removed the two background layers and replaced them with two sustained notes, forming a perfect fifth. I call this *frozen time*.

Section B – The Human Section

Figure 9 shows section B1. In the first measure (38), violin 1 has a severe outburst (*molto agitato*), but eventually calms down (*meno agitato*). This has to do with *the comforting touch*, human rage and its forgiveness.

(Fig.9)

Agitato, Piu MOSSO
ord. \approx 86-92

38
ord. molto espress. e agitato
su] G
x. pont.
Very fast trem.
non vibrato without any kind of expression

39
su] G
x. pont.
Very fast trem.
non vibrato without any kind of expression

40
x. pont.
Very fast trem.
non vibrato without any kind of expression

41
x. pont.
Very fast trem.
non vibrato without any kind of expression

42
x. pont.
Very fast trem.
non vibrato without any kind of expression

meno agitato

11

The vl.1-theme is really a simplification of the original transcription of the first phrase, as discussed in 2.3 (see fig.4, line 2). However, this basic cell is extended with ornaments (actually a scale consisting of all the notes that are *not* represented in the theme). In the next measure (39), the same theme (ignoring the ornaments) is slightly stretched in time () and in measure 40 even more () thereby contributing to the decreasing intensity and the sense of forgiveness. The chord played by the rest of the ensemble consists of the pitches in the theme. B2 has the same principle, although it is extended.

The Development

As discussed in 2.2, the point of the development is to push A and B gradually into one another. To illustrate this clearly, I set up two layers – vl.1 and vlc.2 playing the slower and simplified B, and the others playing A. Furthermore, I decided to keep A still, and over time change B towards A, regarding tempo and articulation. The focus of the music changes back and forth between A and B, but since B has eventually developed into A, the *illusion of contrast* is resolved.

Parallel to this process, there is a build-up in rhythm, eventually leading to a section with only 1/32 notes (measure 106). This build-up is merely intended as a tension-increasing factor, leading towards the climax.

The Scanning Process

To really stretch the idea of timelessness (which I found rather central in the poem, see fig.1), I invented a method, which I will refer to as *the scanning process*. This means that I take an already composed section – scan it with my eyes from left to right,

to this gentle face, which eventually occupies the entire image. The words “without resistance” are central, and indeed, the coda comes without resistance too, as a contrast to B1 and B2, where there is a force and rage involved. Technically the coda consists of the simplified B-theme, played in six different tempos simultaneously.

After Word

As I now have gone through the process of writing Vid Varandra a second time, I realize that there are several ideas that I would like to develop further, for example the scanning process. This is very typical. As one writes a piece, one constructs a small temporary universe with thousands of ideas and structures. Generally these ideas are then abandoned in favor of some new universe, constructed in the next piece. However, one or two things might remain, and eventually one builds a more solid universe – though it will never become quite perfect.

Furthermore, there is one thing that never ceases to fascinate me, and this is the fact that no matter what I start off with, it always ends up with *my music*. Even though I in this piece derived both the pitch material and the form from something outside of me, the result is still deeply personal, and contains a number of typical Willert-features. This frontier between the outer and the inner forms an interesting and inspiring surrounding, where winds are blowing and nothing is really certain. I believe it is a good place to be – halfway home.

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