

new dark art portfolio

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new dark art is the name I have given to a book of tonal compositions and a theoretical treatise. The treatise provides the rhythmic, harmonic and conducting theory; and notational processes for the compositions. The theory is informed by European and Byzantine musical thinking from the medieval era and my personal practice in improvised music. This commentary describes my intentions and expectations for the work, and discusses a performance of the compositions; and is accompanied by the book of compositions, the treatise, a DVD and an audio CD.

Commentary

Medieval notation was thoroughly functional, and its visual aspects were necessary to the identity and process of the music in performance¹. The notation for *new dark art* aims for that same level of functionality and necessity, and has the following core aspects:

1. exact pitches/sonorities are notated using non-diastematic letter notation, with a maximum of two phrases per line;
2. punctuation and prosodic stress signs are used suggest rhythm; *and*
3. accent marks are used to suggest melodic contour.

By setting a maximum of two phrases per line, I am dividing the piece into sections visually to aid memorizing the pieces. The phrases also act as formulae to recall within each piece: thus any melodic improvisation comes only from the melodic material of the work and a set of idiomatic rules for melodic harmonization, adhering to the processes of medieval performance² but allowing for a contemporary context.

By using letter notation the pieces in *new dark art* I aim to weaken the suggestion of melodic contour and thus allow the performer to shape the melody independently; and although there is a sense of time that can be deduced from the phrase markings (shown by punctuation and called

1 Anna Maria Busse Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 77.

2 Wulf Arlt, 'The "Reconstruction" of Instrumental Music', in *Studies in the performance of late mediaeval music* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 75.

rhythmic signs), it is not precise. Keeping to a global sense of time is not as important as the length of the phrase itself and the silence that surrounds it, so each phrase can be performed at a pace that is idiomatically appropriate to each performer. In addition, for each phrase there is a set of pre-defined collections of intervals that a musician can use to harmonise a phrase: in the system these are called *tonal suggestions*. When these suggestions are allied to a rhythmic sign, this is called a *mode*, and the musician uses the mode to create variations of the single line.

The idea of the performer making choices is a key element to the work. But this raises conflicts with my desire to clearly hear the composition within the performance. My experience working with and listening to improvising musicians has shown me that a lot of music can be created from very little material, but that music is not always related to the material – sometimes to the point that in my opinion the original material cannot be heard. As a composer I want the material to matter: to be the primary resource for the musician, operating as a “sound stock” or *lexis*. The treatise is intended to provide a “grammar”, and thus weight, to the material, so that it is performed within set parameters; so any improvisation would always be in context to the written material. I wondered if this would cause issues with the groups I was using, as they comprised of musicians who were experienced at generating their own musical material (or using their own language) in the moment. Those issues were

1. would the improvisers feel like they were improvising, or *merely* (and the weight to this word is important) reading;
2. how much did this matter to them, and does *merely reading* diminish their roles;
3. would the improvisers see my work as composition, or would they feel like they had done most of the work;

4. how much did they want to use the lexis and grammar supplied, considering that they all would have personal ways of negotiating musical material; and
5. did the system make sense to them, and (if they tried) was it easy to retain the information from the score?

I also had a simpler question for myself: *would this sound any good to me when I heard the music performed outside of my head?* This had concerned me since the beginning of my research, and on a practical level, it was the most important aspect. I could see that the system made sense on a theoretical level, and happy that I was writing the music *to create music* as well as fulfil the aims of my project. But I was anxious about the results.

the session

I organised four saxophonists (two altos and two baritones) to play the whole book of compositions in a rehearsal studio in London³. This was the first time they had played any of my compositions – they all know me primarily as an improviser. The musicians had received the compositions and the treatise beforehand, and had done some work in attempting to learn the theory; however they had not been attempted to commit the songs to memory, relying on the score. I was able to record both the rehearsal sections and a more formalised performance of the work: and take photographs of their annotated scores.

An initial performance of the piece revealed how much idiomatic practice plays a part in interpretation of a piece.

³ *New Dark Art (Eb Sax Quartet)*, 2014 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZ9-0bCKJCI>> [accessed 15 August 2014].

figure 1

The image shows a musical score for four saxophones: Alto 1, Alto 2, Baritone 1, and Baritone 2. The score is written in a single system with four staves. Time markers are placed above the staves at 5.10s and 18.32s. The Alto 2 staff has a 'resolute' annotation under a note. The Baritone 1 staff has a '5' annotation under a group of notes. The score shows a melodic line in the Alto 1 staff and harmonic support from the other instruments.

Above is an approximate transcription of the first eighteen seconds of a rehearsal of the first movement, called *the uns* (**track 1**). This corresponds to the following phrase (written at E \flat pitch): a b \flat a: a, b \flat \. Rhythmically the saxophones are united, even towards the end where the falling melody is essentially an improvisational indication. This uniformity was explained by referring to usual practice: “It’s years of being in [jazz saxophone] sections.” It was only after I said that they could phrase the line independently from each other that they began to do so: they had not seen this as an option for improvisation as I had hoped, but a compositional or arranging decision – something that had to be settled beforehand and connected with the form of the piece. There was evidence that the musicians were using the system to modify the harmony of the line. They stayed very close to the melodic line, choosing to harmonise predominantly at the end of a phrase. Table 1 shows the order of events related to each phrase, and gives an indication as to whether the harmony heard should happen at that point. Each interval is relative to the melody note, which in this case is the last note of each phrase.

Table 1

From (s)	To (s)	Phrase + harmonic events (type)	Is this supposed to happen?
0.00	8.14	c d ^b c:	
		<u>5.10' – 7.30'</u> baritones: melody note; altos: 5 th (resolute) + melody note	Yes
9.16	10.97	c,	
11.99	18.32	d ^b ↘	
21.03	28.33	a ^b c d ^b :	
		<u>24.72' – 28.33'</u> baritones: melody notes; altos: 5 th (resolute)	Yes
31.26	35.51	a ^b ,	
		<u>31.26' – 34.88'</u> baritones: tritone (vague) + melody; altos: greater 3 rd (medial) + lesser 2 nd (vague)	Yes
35.51	39.92	↗	
39.92	64.91	c b ^b c b ^b d ^b .	
		<u>55.67" – 63.04"</u> baritones: melody note + greater 2 nd (subtle); altos: greater 2 nd (subtle) + greater 7 th (subtle)	Yes
66.42	74.54	c d ^b c:	
		<u>66.42" – 70.54"</u> baritone: transposition of melody from instrumental pitch to concert	No. This had the effect of harmonising the line by a greater 6 th , which is medial.
		<u>70.54" – 74.54"</u> baritones: transposed melody note + 4 th – 5 th motion (resolute); altos: 5 th s (resolute)	No. The transposition error by the baritone creates a different harmony.
76.89	80.41	c,	
		<u>76.89" – 80.41"</u> baritones: lesser 2 nd (vague) + 5 th (?); altos: greater 3 rd (medial) + melody	Almost. The 5 th is not correct at this point.
81.08	90.47	d ^b ↘	
91.94	100.52	a ^b c d ^b :	
		<u>98.87 – 100.52</u> alto: 4 th (resolute)	Yes

Table 1 (cont.)

From (s)	To (s)	Phrase + harmonic events (type)	Is this supposed to happen?
102.34	106.63	a ^b ,	
		<u>103.1" – 106.63"</u> baritones: melody + lesser 2 nd (vague) altos: melody + greater 3 rd (medial)	Yes
107.54	121.11	↗ c b ^b c b ^b	
121.91	130.50	d ^b	
		<u>121.91" – 126.97"</u> baritones: lesser 6 th (medial) – melody motion + greater 7 th (subtle); altos: melody + lesser 6 th (medial)	Yes

From the table, we can see that the ensemble used the rules given for harmonisations (shown in brackets) for most of the performance. Where there is no predetermined harmonisation the quartet plays with a homophonic texture: the note sounded is the same for each instrument, but the register of each note varies. Within the context of medieval music, this rehearsal performance could be related to simple *organum* performance⁴, as each note is played against another at the same rate: but it is important to state that this form did not come from me as the composer, but the musicians' knowledge of playing in sections which they had recalled – that is to say, their idiomatic practice. They using their memories to structure the composition, which has a direct parallel to how medieval musicians could create unwritten compositions using the rules they had learned from tonaries and treatises⁵. This satisfied my intention to write music that was self-organising, enabling the performers to use their own idiomatic practice to realise the piece while retaining my original work.

The final performance of *the uns* (track 2) was markedly different to the first. The saxophonists phrased the line differently from each other, meaning that the perceived harmonies were formed not only from the suggestions but also the time at which each note within the line was played

⁴ Albert Seay, *Music in the Medieval World*, Prentice-Hall History of Music (Englewood Cliffs, N.J, 1965), p. 57.

⁵ Berger, p. 128.

relative to the other instruments.

figure 2

The musical score for figure 2 consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes staves for Alto 1, Alto 2, Bari 1, and Bari 2. Time markers are placed above the staves at 5.19s, 7.86s, and 12.39s. Annotations include 'resolute' for Alto 2, 'vague' and 'medial' for Bari 1, and 'resolute harmonisation' for Bari 2. The second system starts at 18.8s and includes staves for Alto 1, Alto 2, Bari 1, and Bari 2. The score shows various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

In the first eighteen seconds of the recording, Alto 1 has completed a cycle of the full song, whilst Alto 2 and the baritones are playing the phrase that begins with a rising melody (shown in the original score by ↗), albeit at different times. Alto 2 is slightly ahead of the baritones, which are playing at roughly the same speed and with less note density. This heterophonic texture can be related to the more melismatic *discantus* which is sung above the less dense *tenor*. The musicians played with the given material in various ways: for example, at 7.86", Baritone 1 uses the note options suggested by the harmonic mode to embellish the main melody note and create a new melodic fragment.

Even though each musician was meant to be phrasing independently, they still manage to arrive at the beginning of the melody from 1'43". The ensemble also picked moments to improvise more

freely, such as between 2'23" and 2'32" where the two altos play chromatic lines referencing modern jazz saxophone language. The baritones also begin improvising at around 2'29". They all start to play a rising motif up to 2'35", where we hear a widely spaced chord ranging from a low *a* from Baritone 2 to a high *c* in Alto 1, and they are all roughly in the same place in the melody (*c b \flat c b \flat d \flat*). After this, the altos and Baritone 2 play through the melody at a slightly faster rate, leaving Baritone 1 to close the piece.

The second section, *why we don't know why* (**track 3**), is started by the baritone. The saxophones phrase at about the same rate until 1'16" where there is a slight pause; the altos then play the line faster and all members of the ensemble embellish and fragment the line. This activity settles down at 1'58" where they all play the final *e \flat* of the main melody. There is a visual cue from Alto 1, and they all move to the "recitative" part of the composition. The altos decide to move back to the main melody at 2'42" but the baritones repeat with the recitative section. The altos move back to the recitative at 3'44", which the ensemble plays through twice before finishing the piece.

jura (**track 4**) begins with the full ensemble, phrasing roughly together up to 33". They begin to move apart very slightly from each other after this until 1'40" where the two altos and Baritone 1 play a widely spaced chord (*c* in the baritone, *a* in Alto 1 and a high *c* with harmonics in Alto 2). Baritone 2 then plays the main melody at a faster rate while the other saxophones improvise and fragment the line. Then at 2'19" they all play (and correctly harmonise) the last two notes of the main melody, take a short pause, and then at 2'22" move to the final section, using the homophonic texture, but with harmonisations as suggested by the mode, and improvised alterations in timbre.

conkers (**track 5**) was written with four loosely related melodies. The ensemble was given instructions to arrange a form beforehand. They chose to play through the melodies once (from the start to 1'06"); then improvise around the first two lines for a few cycles (to 3'29") before all

moving to and cycling the third; after which they would go to the fourth (from around 4'41"). The improvisations from all four players from 3'29" is fragmented and thematic, relating strongly to the first two melodies. For the cycling of the third melody, Alto 1 and then Alto 2 add embellishments to the main melody while the other three play the melody notes or suggested harmonisations, creating a *discantus-tenor* texture. One of the baritones moves to the fourth melody earlier than the others, from 4'32", but then by 5'03" they all come together, ornamenting the fourth melody until 6'18" where the group simply cycles and harmonises the melody until the end.

The last piece, *dare not speak* (**track 6**), begins slowly with the saxophones playing the main melody with a simple *organum* texture. They move straight to the recitative section at 41", and then cycle around this, using the repeated notes indicated in the notation as a thematic device in their extemporisations. Baritone 2 then leads the group back to the main melody at 2'12", and the group plays through again. As they reach the recitative again at 2'53", the baritones make use of the repeated note motif, varying the percussiveness and timbre.

observations

As the musicians worked on the pieces, they had various realisations and observations that had an impact on the performance of the work. The letter notation did not raise many questions, but it was noted that as the ensemble were unused to reading music written in this way, they played everything slower than they might have done. One musician remarked, "You didn't ask us to, but we played everything in a stately manner." The positioning of the modes at the top-right of the page was less helpful than I thought: "If I'm reading it, I need that nearer the punctuation. I mean, it's clear, but it's not where I need it if I'm reading." The musicians annotated their scores to reflect this need.

figure 3: score for jura, annotated by alto saxophonist Tom Ward

Figure 3 shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "jura" by Corey Mwamba (2014). The score is annotated with various musical notations and handwritten notes. The title "jura" is at the top left. Below it, the text "{sm... mr. v: m; am,} drunken, dark" is written. The main notation consists of two lines of notes: the first line is "g̃ d̄, ė ḃ d̄ c̄; d̄ c̄#; f# f̄." and the second line is "f, ḃ f# : d̄ ā." There are several annotations: "melody" with an arrow pointing to the first line, "am" and "mr" above notes, "recit. + final" above the second line, and "SM" above the final note. A circled note "repeats on many occasions" is at the bottom. The page number "7" is at the bottom right.

I was surprised that there were not more questions, but in fact the ensemble found the music easy to read once they became accustomed to it: "I was expecting this to be a roast [slang for *difficult*], but when we got into it, it wasn't too bad. It's just remembering things."

The group noted that the appearance of octaves and especially unisons in the harmony was striking. On *jura* and *conkers* we talked about using the tonal suggestions through a whole phrase rather than just at the end, as in the first run-through of *the uns*. Although this "worked" to my ears on *jura*, it did not work as well on *conkers* where we hear this at the beginning.

Compositionally, *conkers* has a different character to the other pieces, as it has four sections that can be arranged. It is also an older (conventional, folk-like) song of mine, but adjusted to the new system as a test. We had many run-throughs of this, but I think the group struggled more with this one initially, and perhaps it is an indication that I need to more carefully consider how to adjust older melodies to the new system.

There were also conversations about when to play and when not to play: although this is

something they would feel comfortable doing spontaneously in totally improvised music (and they would just do it with no prior discussion), they felt that this was a different situation – they were performing a composition. As the session progressed, the spoken language of the ensemble had changed: they used interval ordinals like *the third* or *the sixth* less, in favour of the system’s language instead; and the terms *major* and *minor* (which are redundant in this system) were used less frequently.

I asked the musicians whether they each felt they were “improvising” or “reading”. One musician clearly thought and said they were improvising, even though they were paying close attention to the score. Another countered that were in fact reading: “everything was coming from the score”. Then the discussion focussed on the idea of interpretation of the melody.

Within written music performance, there is a value placed not just on the accuracy of the performer in reading the musical text, but also the manner and nuance with which the music is performed⁶, which relate to rhythm, timbre, and ability in melodic embellishment. These nuances (called *interpretation*) can affect a listener’s perception of whether a music performance is “accurate” or not. The different techniques of improvisation are usually connected to a practice of spontaneous composition⁷, where “new” music is created⁸; but in a case where the techniques are employed using elements solely from a musical text (or collection of texts), it could be argued that this is a form of interpretation. No “new” music is created, but instead there is a reconfiguration of the text. So an improvising musician moves between states of creation and reconfiguration through layers of rhythm, melody and harmony. In the recordings the musicians are *collectively reconfiguring* the music, each one drawing solely from the given melody, applying their own rhythmic sense to the line and paraphrasing it melodically and harmonically. The layering of the

6 Stanley Boorman, ‘The Musical Text’, in *Rethinking music*, ed. by Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

7 ‘Improvisation’, ed. by Barry Kernfeld, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (Macmillan, 1994), pp. 554–63.

8 Here I am using the word “new” as a short-hand for that which has not been pre-composed in relation to a current or future performance. In an entirely dogmatic sense, nothing any improviser does is “new” as their vocabularies and vernaculars are created from what they have heard or learned.

different voices yields different textures and harmonies, which the group react to. The choices they make shape the pieces within the moment, so the musicians are creating new forms spontaneously from and bound to the existing musical text – creating the equivalent of the medieval trope and also performing *contrafactum*.⁹

a continuation of attempts

In my initial proposal for this project I was concerned that the music should not sound like (or be a pastiche of) medieval music, or be a blend of medieval music with “jazz”. The idea was to make use of the ideas around the *organising of improvisation within composition* of that period: not to use that era’s improvisational language. Although there are elements within the performance of the pieces that can be related to medieval music such as the formation of organum textures and the self-organising nature of the themes in performance, the music sounds contemporary. In this I feel I have succeeded and am encouraged to develop the music further.

The combination of the notation and the theoretical system provides the musician with defined choices for interpretation of a melody. This replicates the process of the medieval musician composing counterpoint spontaneously by recalling the rules and formulae for melodic concordance from memory. The notation used is related to notation systems from the tenth century, but is not identical to them; and each element of the new notation is functional to the music being performed. Although the music produced always contained surprises for me as the composer, I could still clearly identify my original melodic, harmonic and rhythmic ideas within a performance. I feel I have created a firm base from which I can produce more music by expanding on and refining the system. I think more work can be done around ideas of the simple organum and *discantus-tenor* textures, and utilising these either within directing an ensemble or as prescribed form. Based on the annotations made by the ensemble, I have to consider how I notate the harmonic modes and see if there is a way of writing them that is easier to remember. I think if

9 Seay.

the musicians are given more time to remember the pieces, they can perform them at different tempos and create more variation between the pieces.

I was unable to test whether the pieces were easy to recall, but I will be able to test this after my studies as I have a couple of performances scheduled for the new work in Derby and London.

CD Track listing

- 1) *the uns* (1st rehearsal)
- 2) *the uns* (final performance)
- 3) *why we don't know why*
- 4) *jura*
- 5) *conkers*
- 6) *dare not speak*

Tom Ward, Chris Williams – alto saxophone; Cath Roberts, Colin Webster – baritone saxophone

Recorded 3rd August 2014, London.

References

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