Portfolio of Works: Text and Controlled Improvisation as a Vehicle for Musical Development

by

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in

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Abstract

This portfolio of works consists of three original compositions, each drawing from text and/or improvisation as a primary source of musical development. Instrumentation is for four performers or fewer, consisting of a saxophone quartet, open-instrumentation solo, and an organ and percussion duo.

The first work, *Duality,* stands apart from the other two in that it does not draw from the musicality of text to generate musical content. Instead, it draws its form from a musical conception of duality, two opposite musical ideas presented in full before they are mixed, matched, and morphed into one another. Controlled improvisation is employed as a means of musical development, offering previously established motifs as a basis for hectic and climactic improvisation.

The second work, *Pages for Solo Instrument,* is written entirely in text, yet forgoes any sort of written instruction. Instead, the text is written figuratively, hoping to draw the performer's attention to the rhythm, grammar, and punctuation as a means of generating musical ideas. Musical development is then explored through the manipulation of language and text, including the use of rhymes, changes in punctuation and grammar, and word painting.

The final work, *Syntax,* takes the same approach to text as used in *Pages* with a figurative source of controlled improvisation for the percussion part, while the organ part is traditionally notated. Through both notated music and text, I explore the concept of the phrase. Instead of using the minimalist presentation of text found in *Pages,* I utilize parameters like font size and various forms of visual distortion to assist in creating a sense of musical development in the text part.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents, Allan and Ilona Bevan, who have been the most musical influences on my life.

I also thank the faculty members here at the University of Alberta, particularly Mark Hannesson and Scott Smallwood, for their instruction and support.

As well, I thank Allison Balcetis and the Edmonton Saxophone Quartet, Mark Segger and Marnie Giesbrecht-Segger, whose performances brought these works to life.

Finally, I thank my other friends and members of the University of Alberta community and beyond who have been a part of this journey and the creation of this document, particularly Emily Casavant.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The evolution of a piece of music – its structure, form, and development – is my primary interest as a composer. Every work discussed in this document was first formulated by conceptualizing its destination and the path needed to get there.

Over the past two years, I have used controlled improvisation and text as a means of facilitating musical development. Many questions have arisen during this time. How can words translate to music without using overt instructions? How can I structure and develop text in a way that mimics musical development? In what situations does controlled improvisation find a place in the development of musical structured? How much freedom can I allow performers while maintaining the structural integrity of the work? How can I best communicate to performers the results that I wish to hear from their controlled improvisation? Most importantly, how can I explore these questions while maintaining an engaging composition?

While I end my degree with more questions than answers, this thesis represents the avenues of experimentation that I have taken as I have developed as a composer.

CHAPTER ONE

Duality

for saxophone quartet

Summary of Method

Duality for Saxophone Quartet is a musical conception of the almost myth-like concept of duality. *Duality* explores this in a musical context, consisting of an introduction, an A section, a B section (the musical 'opposite' of A), and a C section which combines the material of the previous two parts. I focused my efforts towards thinking of duality on a purely musical level, tailoring the idea to fit what a saxophone quartet can best produce. Physical movement is prescribed to the performers in an effort to add a representation of the work's duality that would be visually seen.

The first half of this duality, beginning at rehearsal letter A, is based entirely on two-note oscillations, with an improvised ebb and flow. Changes are gradual, the eighth note pulse is steady without silence; and the saxophone's ability to produce bisbigliando, timbral change by adding air to the sound, and dynamic control are explored. Complementing this is a physical rocking back and forth from the performers, visually coinciding with their independent crescendos and decrescendos, serving not only the audience, but assisting the performers in their task to crescendo out of sync with one another.

The second section, starting at letter E, consists primarily of short, unpredictable stabs of sound, organized in three-note figures. Physical movement from the performer is now violent and jerky, and the use of silence is prominent. The percussive capabilities of the saxophone are explored, from the use of key-clicks to slap-tongues.

Section C, starting at letter M, is written as the climactic coda of the work and combines musical elements from both halves of the duality. Rather than striving for a "middle ground" between the two, I wrote section C to combine previous material in a way that explores new musical territory. Both leaning back-and-forth and jerky movements are employed throughout. In this section, the four performers are often "split" in two to represent another layer of duality, whether it's three against one, or two against two. Finally, controlled improvisation is used to close the piece, in hopes of generating a climactic free-for-all mashup of previous motifs, the work's destination point that has been in the making since the first bar.

Duality
For Saxophone Quartet

Performance Notes

Duality must be played with all players standing, one foot in front of the other. Physical movement plays a key role throughout the piece.

All movement described in the score is meant to feel intuitive to the performer and the music. When in doubt, move in a way that feels natural to the music.

Movement details:

"Leaning" - shift weight from one foot to the other. This is generally done in accordance with changes in dynamics, shifting weight to the front foot during a crescendo and the back foot during a decrescendo. No vertical displacement of the saxophone or bending at the waist is necessary.

"Jerky Movements" - any short, small, and sudden movement, preferably from the head/shoulders. The louder the dynamic, the more 'violent' the motion.

"Dips" - involves bending over while shifting weight to the front foot. The saxophone is displaced vertically.

Additional instructions for rehearsal letter "A"

Use of a stopwatch is necessary.

Modules written with the same pitch notated with 1s and 2s are to be played with alternating fingerings. Fingerings are left to the discrepancy of the performer but should result in a noticeable change in sound.

The first dynamic in any dynamic pair is the dynamic with which the performer begins that module.

With each crescendo, lean forward - with each decrescendo, lean backwards. All weight should be on the back foot when the quieter dynamic of the pair is reached. All weight should be on the front foot when the louder dynamic is reached.

Watch other performers carefully - avoid reaching the apex of the cresendo (the point at which performers re-articulate and have all weight on their front foot) at the same moment as the other performers.

The number of 8th notes provided in a module represents suggested slurs/phrase lengths before re-articulating;
   8 notes suggests very long phrases - 8 to 40 notes before a cresc./decresc. completes and there is a re-articulation.
   6 notes suggests long phrases - 6 to 30 notes before a cresc./decresc. completes and there is a re-articulation.
   4 notes suggests medium phrases - 4 to 20 notes before a cresc./decresc. completes and there is a re-articulation.
   2 notes suggests short phrases - 2 to 10 notes before a cresc./decresc. completes and there is a re-articulation.

Upon re-articulation, performers have the option to repeat their previous pitch/fingering, thus displacing their oscillation by an 8th note. This is to avoid extended "locking" of intervals between players.

Air is added and subtracted to the sound to create an airy tone in accordance to dynamics, gradually changing with cresc./decresc.;
   ppp = ~100% air
   pp = ~75% air
   p = ~50% air
   mp = ~25% air
   mf and above = 0% air

Legend

Indicates a throaty growl sound, not flutter-tongue.

X noteheads indicate key-clicks.

Square noteheads indicate indeterminate pitch.

Triangle noteheads denote slap-tongue articulation. Specific slap-tongue technique is given individually.

Numbering indicates alternating fingerings, as in bisbigliando.

Indicates improvisation. More specific instructions are given in the score and parts.

Below is a transcribed example of what material from letter A to E may look like when performed - for the sake of simplicity, only two players are used for this example passage.

Phrase length is varied, and excluding the beginning, tenutos/re-articulations never line up between the two players.

Noted with an asterisk, the second player in this example chooses around the halfway point to repeat the B natural upon re-articulation, as discussed in the performance notes. This changes the intervallic oscillation between the two players from parallel motion to contrary motion.

Score

Duality

For Saxophone Quartet

Brendan Bevan

*See Performance Notes for more details.
** Triangle noteheads denote a slap-tongue articulation

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♪ = 164 - all players leaning in accordance with their cresc./decresc.*

A

Soprano Sax

w/ airy tone throughout*

pp – mp Staying in tempo, cresc./decresc. between the 2 dynamics given ad. lib. Upon reaching either dynamic, rearticulate.*

Alto Sax

~25"

w/ airy tone throughout*

pp – mp Staying in tempo, cresc./decresc. between the 2 dynamics given ad. lib. Upon reaching either dynamic, rearticulate.*

Tenor Sax

~15"

w/ airy tone throughout*

~45"

pp – mp

Staying in tempo, cresc./decresc. between the 2 dynamics given ad. lib. Upon reaching either dynamic, rearticulate.*

Baritone Sax

~40"

w/ airy tone throughout*

pp – mp

Staying in tempo, cresc./decresc. between the 2 dynamics given ad. lib. Upon reaching either dynamic, rearticulate.*

~50"

~1' 20"

S. Sx.

pp – mp

~1' 30"

~1' 10"

A. Sx.

pp – mp

~1' 00"   ~1' 15"

~1' 40"

T. Sx.

pp – mp   *p – mf*

~1' 25"

~1' 45"

B. Sx.

p – mf

7

*See Performance Notes for more details.

9

*All players arrive w/ all weight on front foot at the forte-piano simultaneously. Immediately shift weight to back foot, and resume the regular, out-of-sync rocking-back-and-forth between *pp* and *mp*.

*Performers freeze w/ tension during all silences and rests.

*x noteheads are key-clicks, denoting a pressing down of all keys (the Bb) followed by a loud release of all keys (the C#)

Jerky movement w/ each sfz
Resonant slap-tongues

Jerky movement w/ each sfz
Resonant slap-tongues

Jerky movement w/ each sfz
Resonant slap-tongues

Move freely/intuitively

Improvise w/ high intensity. Dynamics between mf and ff. Any and all articulations/extended techniques.
Put emphasis on 2-note oscillations and/or 3-note groupings. Maintain sense of pulse. Frantic and chaotic.

Move freely/intuitively

Improvise w/ high intensity. Dynamics between mf and ff. Any and all articulations/extended techniques.
Put emphasis on 2-note oscillations and/or 3-note groupings. Maintain sense of pulse. Frantic and chaotic.

Jerky movement w/ each sfz
Resonant slap-tongues

CHAPTER TWO

Pages

for solo instrument

Summary of Method

Pages for Solo Instrument marks my first experiment into the world of text-based scores. Each page is conceptualized to be a separate piece, and it is worth noting that on the recording, only the first three pages of the score are performed (these were chosen by the performer). Each page is constructed to explore a unique idea or theme, and can be played in any order with as many or as few pages as desired.

The physical page being two-dimensional, I assigned time to the longer, vertical axis, and register to the horizontal axis. This allowed for the structural control that I desired, and I experimented with various ways to mimic musical development via text alone. Examples of this include rhythmic consistency with a gradual succession of related word painting (as in the first page), foreshadowing future text fragments within different material (as in the second page), and use of rhyming patterns (as in the third page). Assigning the horizontal axis to register allowed for a degree of musical control while ensuring the piece still fit any instrumentation.

Given my focus on form and development, I chose to write for solo voice. Structural coherency might have been damaged if performers arrived at different parts of the page at different times. Prescribing exact timings would be artificial.

My visual presentation was purposefully as minimal as possible. The hope was to draw all attention to the words, letters, and symbols themselves, and to distance myself from the realm of graphic notation. This was not done out of dislike of graphic notation practice, but simply as an experiment into how much musical suggestion could be crammed into language alone.

Writing in this fashion was a somewhat "solitary" process. Despite researching many text scores and sound poets, I was unable to find any works which could provide a template for inspiration to draw upon or artists that had left traces to explore. I feel this work more strongly relates to graphic notation than text notation after all, given the abstract nature of its depiction.

Pages for Solo Instrument

Performance Notes

Pages for Solo Instrument explores the musicality of language; from its rhythm, to its word painting, to its grammar and more.

Each Page is its own separate piece and should be interpreted musically from top to bottom in the amount of time designated. The vertical placement of each idea is correspondent to time and the order of events. Horizontal spacing corresponds to the register in which the text is interpreted, with the left side of the page being low, and the right side being high.

Punctuation suggests how to "move" from one idea to the next. Think of it as if speaking out-loud; periods resolve and end an idea, commas denote a kind of continuation, a dash interrupts, and ellipses fade away.

Pay special attention to the form and structure of each page. Try to bring out the musical connections between different phrases; their meanings, their rhythms, and their punctuation.

White space does not necessary mean silence. It is space to develop an idea and lead it into the next.

A current

    of cloying nebulae...

          (drip... drip...)

               A ripple

            of muddied decadence...

                      (drip... drip...)

                            A cascade

                        of crystalline purity...

2.5′

...stut..ter....ing......

...stut- ter- ing...

stam. mer- ing......

-stut. (Velv...ety)tering...(pe- dals...)

..stut(full of-)....ter(...gra)-ing...(ce......)

stam... mer. ing-

...st(so-)utt-(ar...)er- ing...

stut-(so...ar-)ter...ing

Stut- ter-(..soar)ing......!

Soaring!

Velvety pedals, in the air,
full of grace, prancing,
a sprightly aria, on the breeze,
beams of sun, blinding,

To new vistas,
new beginnings,
Beyond the horizon
beyond the heave-

stut...ter......ing..

..stut- ter...ing....

...st..ut...te.....ri.......ng.............

3.5'

Squawk!

Tick-tock, tick-tock,
running makes the click-clock.

Squueeeeaaaak...

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter,
nothing really mitter-matters.

...swoosh?

Ding-dong, ding-dong,
let's play ping-*SHRIEK!*

Splat.

1'

Pulsing   Red,

            Throbbing   Red,

                Seething   Red!

        Oh...

                            Stabs.
                                    Of Red.

        Stabs.
Of Black...

            Jabbing.
                                Thrusting!

                    SNARL, Oh...!

                Manic streaks of ochre

                    frenzied smears of crimson-

                            furor, furor furor furor, *furor*
                                    unbridled outbursts of bloodstained fervor, *OH-*

                    for God's SAKE!

                        2'

Why?

How?

What who and where?

Because, becau-

And. That. But. Or.

Though...

Going around and around and round, and round, and round,

going around, and round, ound n ound...

und...

Rap... Tap... Cap...

Nap. Map. Lap, slap, sap...

That, rat, bat, cat, fat, hat, pat, vat sat chat gnat stat-

black hack thack pack lack rack whack tack yakbackfracksack*trackcrackCLACKSHACKJACK!*

2'

Silver-flecked clarity,

Gold-laced recompense.

Coursing through,
a sun-kissed canyon,

Languishing under,
a moonlit canopy.

From the depths
of a dust-caked nightmare,

The claustrophobic clinging
of a long-lost dream...

Clarity

And

Recompense.

3'

ticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickClicktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktick

ClicktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickClicktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktick

tickticktickticktickClicktickticktickticktickFLICKtickticktickClicktickticktickticktickticktickticktickClicktickticktick

FLICK tick tick tick tick tick Click tick tick Click FLICK tick tick tick Click tick Click tick tick tick FLICK tick

tick tick Click tick FLICK! tick, tick, Click, tick, FLICK. tick. tick. tick. Click. tick. Click. tick. tick. FLICK-

taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptapSnaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptap

taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptapSnaptaptaptapSnaptaptaptap

SLAPtaptaptaptaptapSnaptaptaptaptaptaptapSnaptapSLAPtaptaptaptaptaptap

tap tap tap tap tap tap tap Snap tap tap tap SLAP tap tap tap Snap SLAP tap tap SLAP Snap tap Snap tap

tap tap Snap tap tap tap SLAP! tap, tap, tap, Snap, tap. tap. tap. tap. Snap. tap. tap. tap. SLAP-

clackclackclackclackclackclackclackclackWhackclackclackclackclackclackclackWhackclackclackWhack

clackclackclackclackCRACKclackclackclackclackclackclackclackWhackclackCRACKclackclackclackclackclack

clackCRACKclackclackWhackclackclackclackWhackCRACKclackclackclackclackclackWhackclackclackCRACK

CRACK clack clack Whack clack clack CRACK clack Whack clack clack clack clack Whack CRACK clack clack

Whack clack clack clack clack CRACK! clack, Whack, clack, clack, CRACK. clack. clack. Whack. clack. CRACK-

SLAPFLICKCRACKSLAPCRACKFLICKCRACKSLAPCRACKSLAPFLICKCRACKSLAPFLICKCRACKFLICKSLAP

Click Whack Snap Whack Click Whack Snap Click Snap Whack Click Whack Snap-

clack. tick. tap. tick. clack. tap. clack. tick. tap. clack.

clackclackclackclackclackclackclack...

taptaptaptaptaptaptaptap...

tickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktickticktick.............

2.5'

CHAPTER THREE

Syntax

for organ and percussion

Summary of Method

Syntax is written for percussion and organ duo, with the percussion part being entirely in text in the same fashion as *Pages*, and the organ part being traditionally notated. By no means is it an improvised percussion concerto however – the percussion and organ parts are equally as important and were approached as if it was a standard duet.

My musical background with the organ is one rooted in the Church, and the idea of plainchant eventually led to me structuring the entire work around the concept of the phrase. In addition to each movement exploring a new variation on the phrase, each movement is, in turn, "phrased" differently. Movement one features a simple build from low to high intensity, movement two falls from high to low, movement three builds to the middle and fades away, four stays relatively flat throughout – and so on.

The percussion part, performed by Mark Segger, was the perfect medium to further explore text-based improvisation for a couple of reasons. Firstly, percussion is an incredibly diverse set of instruments and sounds, and I opted to leave all choices of particular instrumentation to Mark and to let the text be the only suggestion. With the majority of percussion instruments being unpitched, there was an exceptional degree of flexibility afforded, even while the organ part plays a passage that is strictly harmonic. Secondly, Mark is an experienced contemporary improviser and is familiar with percussion techniques that would be nothing but a frustration to attempt to conform to traditional notation.

Simultaneously exploring the same musical development through both text and notation was perhaps the backbone of this experiment. For example, the fourth movement, exploring augmented and extended phrase length, sees long-held and free-feeling chords in the organ part, while the text part features ellipses, repeated words, and extended ends of words ("canvassssss"). The text part differs from the minimalist presentation found in *Pages*, employing text size as a means of conveying dynamics, and featuring various sorts of chaotic distortions when words and text would not suffice on their own.

Syntax

For Organ and Open Percussion

Brendan Bevan

Program Notes

Syntax implores both traditional notation in the organ part, and a more improvisatory text notation in the percussion. The text in the percussion part is meant to be interpreted, often poetically, into music. The experience should be as intuitive as possible – font and word sizes correspond to approximate dynamics, and the vertical spacing of the text can be interpreted as pitch, as would notes on a staff.

Rhythms are left to the discretion of the percussionist, excluding movement II. However, ensure text events "arrive" correctly with the organ. For this reason, the full score is given to both players in place of parts.

Any and all percussion sounds and instruments, pitched and unpitched, are welcome - so long as enough variety can be made to fit the varying demands of the text.

This is NOT concerto. The percussionist is often meant to support the organ.

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Perc.

a frozen sermon,

jaded testament.

A dust-caked anthem,

Naught but cold

Org.

p Sw. (both hands)

Perc.

of sin...

and recompense.

Naught...

tttthhhhuuunnnndddEERRRRINNGGGG-

(Sw)

Org.

Add Trompete 8', Mixtur V to Gt.

Gt.

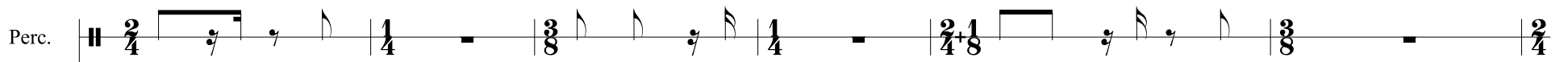**Gt.: Trompete 8', Mixtur V**
Sw.: Oktave 4', Querflöte 4', Offenflöte 8' (closed box)

II.

In this movement, the rhythm of the percussion part is prescribed. Exact rhythmic precision in either part is not necessary, but be as precise as possible.
Choose percussion sounds for each rehearsal letter from the list in square brackets. Approximate dynamics are notated rather than conveyed through font size.
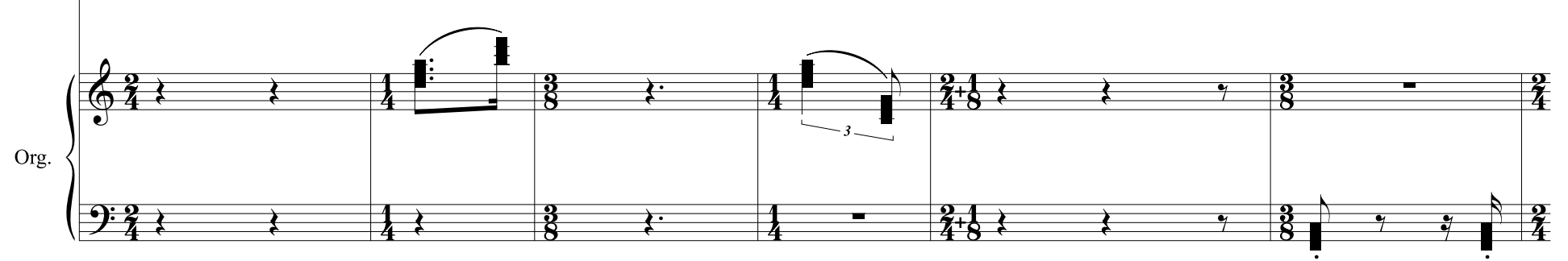
* Filled blocks denote random clusters of at least 4 notes roughly within the range written.
**Unfilled blocks denote a dyad of 2 random pitches at least a perfect 4th apart, roughly within the range written.
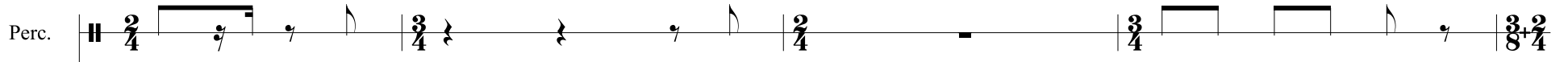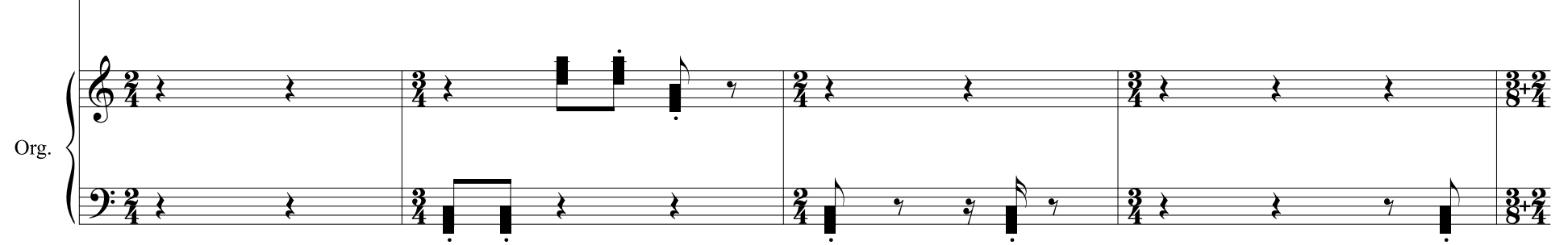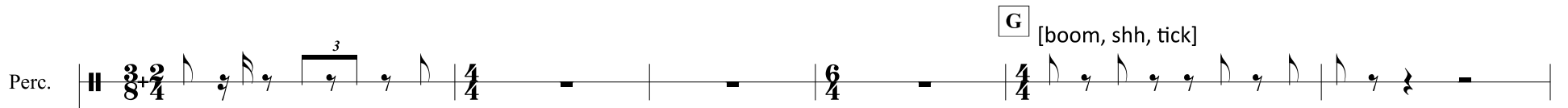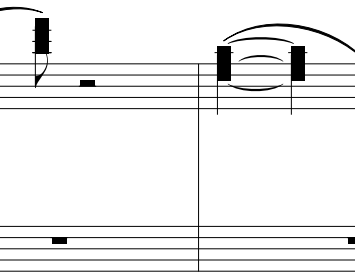
56

II

G [boom, shh, tick]
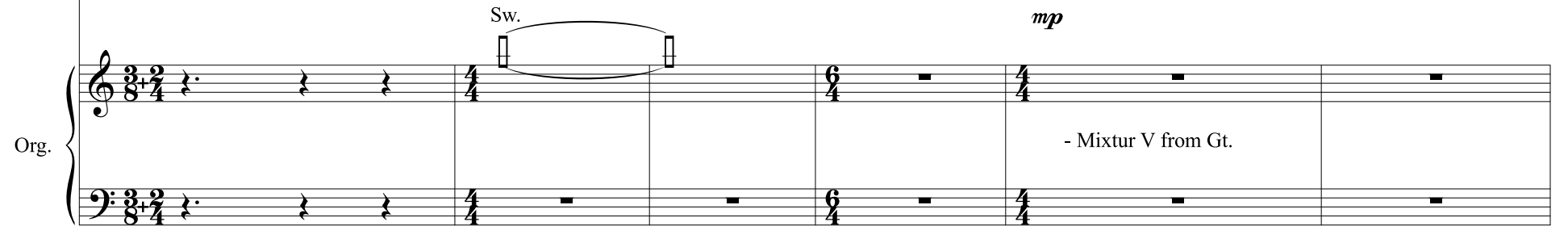
Sw.

mp

- Mixtur V from Gt.
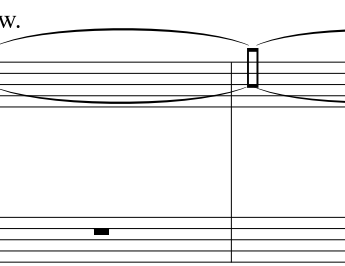
58
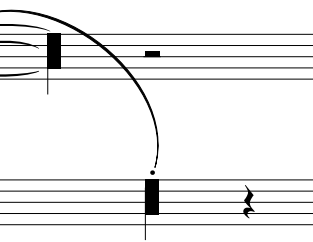
III.

Sw.: Oktave 4', Querflöte 4', Offenflöte 8'

Each staff line is ~ 15 seconds. Complete this movement in ~45 seconds.

Percussion

...veringquiveringquiveringquiveringquiveringqui....

....derings..hudde.ringshudde.ringshud..derings..hudderi..ngshu.d...

...utt-ering...st-utte-r-ing..stutteri..ngstut-terin-gst...utte-ringst...

Sw.

Organ

cresc. and decresc. from box fully closed to fully open throughout

Perc.

...meringshimmeringshimmeringshimmeringshi....

...underingthundering**THUNDERING**thunderingth...

....mblingrumblingrumblingrumblingrumblingrumblingru...

Org.

Perc.

...meringshimmeringshimmeringshimmeringshi....

....derings..hudde.ringshudde.ringshud..derings..hudderi..ngshu.d...

...utt-ering...st-utte-r-ing..stutteri..ngstut-terin-gst...utte-

Org.

IV.

Sw.: Querflöte 4', Tremulant (closed box)
Ped.: Oktave 8' + 4', Gedacktbass 8', Subbass 16'
Treat each system line as ~40 seconds. Complete movement in ~2 minutes

L

Percussion

pulsing, throbbing, SEETHING, throbbing, pulsing

tickticktickticktickticktickticktickclickclickclickclickclickclickclickflickflickflickflickflickflickflickclickclickclickclickclickclickclicktickticktickticktickticktickticktickSNAPtickticktick

Organ

Perc.

fragments, ripples, cascades, remnants,

vestiges, silhouttes... PushandPull GiveandTake

taptaptaptapSnapSnapSnapSLAPSLAPSnapSnapSnaptaptaptaptSnapSLAPSnaptapSnapSLAPSnapSnaptaptaptapSnapSLAP

Perc.

PushandPull GiveandTake Ebb and OH, FOR GOD'S-- SAKE!!

tickticktickBOOM.

Org.

63

Sw.: Oktave 4', Offenflöte 8', Querflöte 4', Schwebung 8' (open box)
Gt.: Trompete 8', Mixtur V
Positif.: Praestant 4', Rohrflöte 4', Gedakt 8'
Ped.: Oktave 4' + 8', Gedaktbass 8', Subbass 16'

VI.

M ♩ = 68

(Echoes of cold...)

(Reflections of midnight...)

Percussion

Organ

Sw.

Gt.

Positif.

N

Perc.

Naught but   ssssssssstrokesssssssss...   upon a   jaded testament,

Org.

Positif.

Positif.

Sw.

PAINT. THE. NEBUL-

OH, R U S FOR GODS

Perc.

(ripples of, cascades of, waterfalls of-)

round and round, round.... around

Org.

round and round again, again, round... round again, round round again, round and round, around n'.... around.... ro....un...d....r...o...un......d

Sw. (closed box, both hands)

Org.