

Oswaldo Glieca

Music as Liquified Architecture

A personal memoir of
my compositional approaches

Composing is an interplay of thoughts

that slowly, as the mists of confusion lift

and possibility of choices become limited,

a clear defined context is revealed

and ideas

begin to emerge and shape by themselves

MUSIC AS LIQUEFIED ARCHITECTURE

OSVALDO GLIECA

The maturation of compositional technique involves processes of trial and error, emulation and the personal analysis of admired models for a journey of self-discovery. There are only two processes that take place when I compose: the interaction of logical rigor, in expressing the ideas, and of intuition, through the process of creating them. The logical model or system of generating material arises within a structural plan that guides the form of the piece from its macro to micro-structures, while the intuitions come from the accommodation of the aural scenario that I imagine inside these predetermined structural plans.

The unique results of these heuristic methods has driven me to think that the problems which drive the creative processes, can be resolved only if I start out with a rigorous system that can also generate new ideas when others used in the past have exhausted their potency. This also offers me a clear impression of balance and genuine continuity in the work itself. The emulation and analysis of admired models has provided and still provides standards of techniques as well, as these allow me to judge communicative effectiveness. However, I discovered that after a certain point, it is better to narrow the territory within a range of chosen models and composers, not to limit choices, but to form a clearer picture of what I will find efficacious as a composer. If the models are too diffuse, the danger is that various techniques will be adopted merely for technique's sake, which will become obstacles in my search for a personal voice. I think that is always better to take the fundamentals of a method, then to recreate and modify these according to

my personal needs, thus to make new discoveries and accommodate the technique within my musical vocabulary. In one sense, composition is for me an environment in which techniques turn into games: I engage in an internal struggle, ordering and re-ordering sounds until they make sense as a functioning sonic landscape, and can communicate effectively. This communication is concerned more with a realistic sense of social purpose, a concern with extra-musical meanings in the compositional material that audiences may identify with. What I have deliberately omitted is an inventory of techniques: not only can this make for tedious reading, but importantly for me, I do not adopt a fixed set of techniques to fall in with a particular style – technique, rather, emerges from the ever-changing composition games I engage in. The real criterion of quality in music is invention during the process of composition, and aiming for a particular house style is unimportant to me, rather my concern is to create a personal style and sound-craft.

Developing the concepts

It would be fair for me to say that I want to create a unique sound world with each piece I write, a world whose existence is justified through its organizational attributes; for this reason, I must teach myself how to create it and justify its existence for each piece written, how to form it in the mind and convey it on paper. Composing is to me a kind of inner game in which I work through a series of conflicts that enable me to overcome inhibitions and obstacles. Inhibitions at the beginning of the compositional process arise from the fear that the work might never be completed in a live performance, or that it might not turn out as well as I had imagined it. Obstacles can arise from scheduling difficulties or any number of internal and external factors that can restrict my ability to write a piece. Setting aside these concerns, I first note down what in essence I need to compose, believing that in order to develop a piece efficiently and productively, it is

necessity have faith in the very first thought that moved me once again to take up a new piece, since this is the inspirational idea that will keep the flame of achievement burning, containing important elements that must to be stressed to give the piece its identify. Behind my composition, there is always some kind of diagram that I use to set out the various transformations and interaction of my material before detailed work commences. What I sketch out is a systematic procedure, or better, certain geometrical arrangements that will determine how long the piece should be, which sections contain conflict and which relax the tension, the arrangement of metrical structures, relations between tempi – all of this provides me with a macro structure. This is a deliberate and productive deferral of the task of writing out the notes themselves, allowing me to shift my focus progressively from the structure to the material in ever increasing definition.

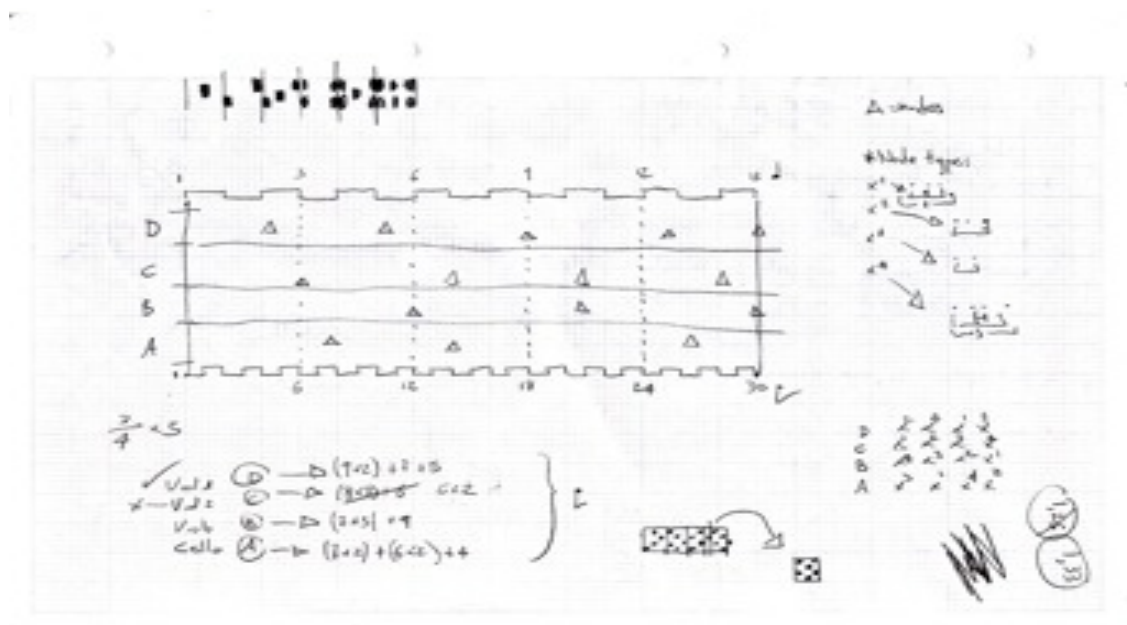


Fig. 1: A colotomic structure made of 30 quaver beats that delimit the temporal space and arrange permutations of internal metrical grouping. The small triangles are points of intersection where certain rhythmical cells appear.

My investigation of the material generally begins with a model from other composer, which spurs me to write, but with no strict reference to rhythms or progressions or other elements that will later be significant. Here, I consciously manipulate the writing, distorting the sounds in my mind from the model score, as if I was correcting one piece and recreating it along the lines it would have taken if I had been its original creator. After this initial investigation, I will sometimes use the piano to test ideas taken from the model score, exploring further the character of what I am trying to create, in an innocent manner, without yet imposing any goal on the process. After this, I begin to create something new by assigning specific roles to particular pitches, thus restricting the range of possible melodic behavior and determining which combinations of pitches will be possible among the instruments. But I avoid creating a piano score that will then be transcribed for the intended instrumental forces. Instead, I create for myself aural images of how these sounds could be arranged, and strive to discover how the different elements can be shared out among the instruments.

This allows me to avoid clichés that will result from keyboard textures and techniques. I do not write down the ideas that may emerge from any explorations at the piano, but retain them in my mind for further filtering. The early phases of the work, as it evolves from the initial vision of the whole, consists of the emergence in my mind of a particular sonority that will fit the first draft. Sometimes there are certain instruments involved from the outset, which might already suggest this particular sonority to me. But otherwise, the process involves a kind of spontaneous generation beyond any existing abstract ideas that are in my head at the time. I have experienced on several occasions the sudden feeling that a work was emerging not so much as a vehicle for specific musical materials, but rather for the sake of the possibilities opened up in the arrangement of these sonorities. Often a piece emerges slowly from a mass of loosely interrelated ideas,

and normally after a period of gestation, I arrive at a kind of a “mental sculpture” which is already endowed with a certain shape, and which can be turned round in my mind and modified if necessary. The energy to be transmitted, the textural density, the array of harmonic fields, and momentum all have an important role to play in my early formulations. This is usually much more vexing, since the ideas are constantly mutating as a result of the musical imagination. But the ideas eventually begin to assume an order, even if the end of the process still lies on the horizon. Then follow sporadic bursts of experimentation with new and already used techniques, during which sudden intuitions as to further developments are followed. By this stage, I usually know what the piece is about, and have become familiar with the tools I will use to develop it, so this requires a period when a system of order can penetrate my consciousness, and so the unfolding of a more concrete formal concept can begin.

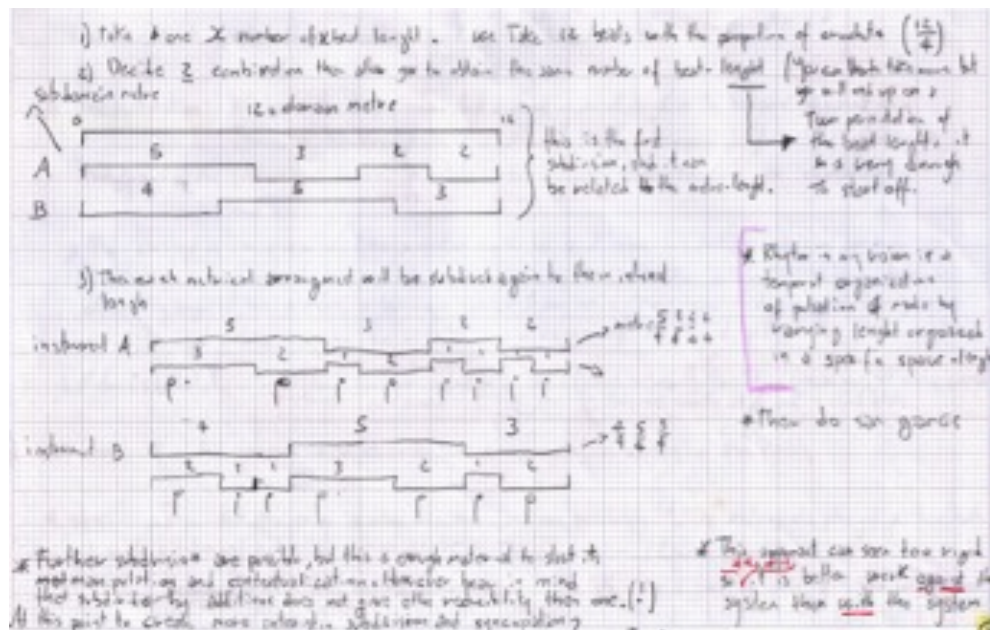


Fig. 2: Another similar structural macro-structural plan that arrange the whole length of a work. The dominant meter of 12 crochets is the main temporal section with the aim of creating rhythmical stratification and conflicting meter between instrumental parts.

Once the macro-structural plan has been established, I begin tentative composition. Most often, this is not at the beginning of the piece: I start from fragments of material that will recur according to the plans already formulated. Here, a self-animating process of spontaneous writing usually emerges, as basic material is laid down, serving for developing variations later in the process. It is like creating small pieces for a mosaic or a jigsaw puzzle: first there is fragmentation, but eventually the overall image takes shape. In time, the work emerges under its own pressure, revealing itself through a self-liberating energy that is transmitted outward from the initial matrix of constrictions against expressive intuition. And so, a composition always begins long before the first notes gather enough energy to appear on paper, and many ideas are abandoned or considerably modified at this gestational stage. As I have outlined so far, a work begins from a vision of the whole, and from a particular sonority. The compositional process may not serve specific musical materials so much as the sense of dynamic possibilities of structures combining with each other. Also, the piece materializes out of a mass of ideas, sometimes detached, sometimes inter-related. Now these processes can continue with such momentum that it is by no means always clear how to call a halt and draw the piece to a close. As a result, most of my works either make an open-ended, expectant gesture (such as long repeated notes), or else conclude in a sudden break.

The language of music, and musical gestures as a functional model

In compositions written earlier during this course of study, any pitch, rhythm or gesture could, in principle, follow another, since I trusted either my ear or my system to determine the validity of their concatenations, and knew that ideas which did not seem convincing at first could gain justification later on as the piece progressively revealed its identity. But in time, I sought a greater degree of

control, and to this end, I have found a linguistic approach to music of great use and interest. Gestural communications through signaling, is a fundamental approach that suggests I could identify and label musical gestures such as textural driving forces, intervals, dynamic changes and rhythms, and apply to them systematic controls that would achieve calculable results. A piece of music could be constructed and analyzed entirely in terms of gestural syntax on any scale, from small particles to entire movements. This approach produced some improved results in local structural control, and eventually developed into a system of importance, similar to the role of serialism, in my attempts to create fresh methods for composing each new piece. In addition, this approach could provide intervals, and specific pitches when I had recourse to “serialist” tendencies, but also offering me the freedom to remodel the material according to my needs. This system works well for a time, but when its potential is exhausted, then I use other procedures to continue the discourse. Gestural control requires a method that allows for a flexible approach lying somewhere between a generative system and intuitive craftsmanship, representing and assigning definitions to musical gestures similar to communication through physical signaling (e.g. slow chromatically descending gestures could represent melancholy, or a quick ascending gesture could represent a question mark or tension) combinations of pitches, and their melodic contours could communicate meaningfulness through order, which come from spontaneous decisions based on a parametrical organization of pitch, duration, and dynamic level. While such a system does not necessarily communicate precise meanings in the first instance, these contours reveal their strength through repetition and developing variation. Gesture and symbol communicate effectively in particular when they are consciously applied through geometrical variations and permutations, imposing a sense of their physical presence on the material thus also with the influence of impersonation in the composer mind too, activating a personal filtering system in an attempt to understand their significance.

The results of such filtering can be controlled by the composer into a workable degree if the listener is informed about the representations employed in the music which usually happen through the musical form that unwrap itself progressively as in a pyramidal metrical organization.

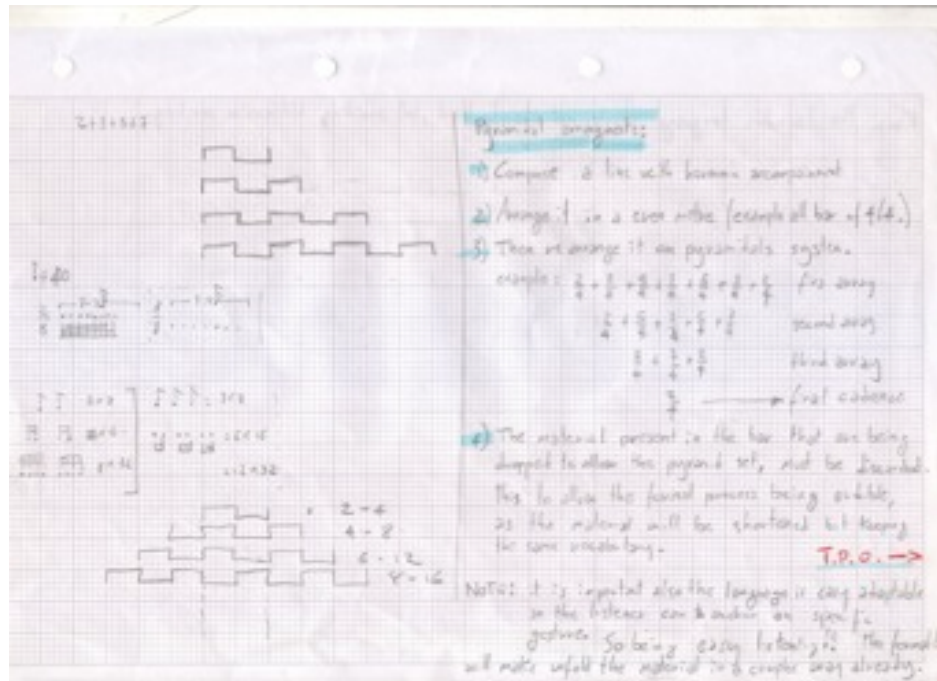


Fig. 3: A pyramidal metrical organization that build a progressive development of material.

I think that with the increasing rate of musical mass dissemination, mere sequences of notes will sound familiar (they will have been heard somewhere before), so it will be the interactions between them that make the difference. The balance of symmetrical and asymmetrical intervallic relationships, and geometrical textural motion are the forces that bring meaningful melodic and harmonic activity into being. Thus music is a fixed object that gains in value because of a multiplicity of possible interpretations, as in architecture, which creates buildings that are generally fixed in their structure but which can accommodate different functions.

The Expressiveness of my Music Through Architecture

Sometimes as a composer I am also engaged directly with the audience too, questioning myself as to how my music will sound to a concert-goer, or indeed to more passive listeners (although I recognize that the wider, mass audience has no interest in contemporary concert music). I have to address the question of how I gain their attention. Even so, I know that most of the compositional process will unfold, moment by moment, without any special regard for listeners. When I compose, I am generally trying to create music that will give me the greatest satisfaction when it comes to be performed. But within these limits, once much of the composition has been decided already, I do consider whether listeners will be able to hear the development of musical elements that interact. In these initial compositional steps, there were no harmonic progressions even demanding control, and instead, I worked with motivic forms and their derivatives; if anything, there was too much rather than too little material here. The task was to retard the progress of development in order to enable the averagely attentive listener to keep in mind what preceded so as to understand the consequences, but not to retard it so much that the listener loses sight of the macro-structure.

As I mentioned earlier, storyboard sketching and middle ground planning allows me to stand comfortably between micro- and macro-structural concerns. Since the formal plan is predetermined, it follows that form determines function, and that the fragments determine the content. Structure is the container inside which my musical material is held, like the material shape of a building whose enclosed spaces can be filled in a variety of ways. The material fills the structure, but does not generate it. Instead, the material sits pregnant within my head while I struggle to find or build appropriate edifices in which it can grow. As a result, my music can comfortably take the direction I want, at one time, say, foregrounding

rhythm, at other times rhythm.

The architectural highlights are often worked on first. An architect will determine the dimensions of a building first, consider how it will fit with its environment, and then proceed to the components. I tend to work as I mentioned earlier from fragments or musical portions that need to fit into a pre-determined design, always striving to link them together, creating reasons why the various passages justify their place in each section.

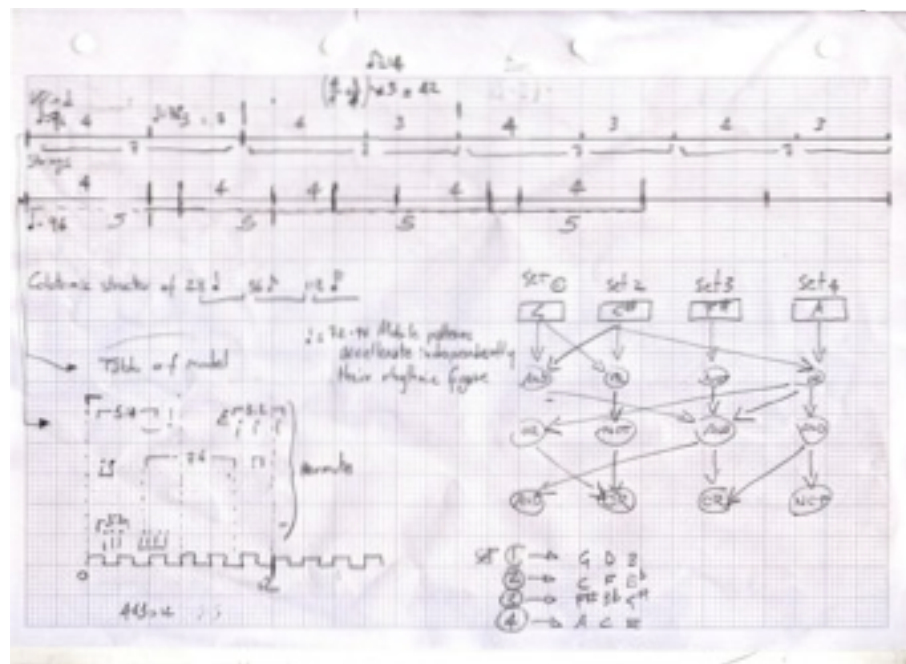


Fig. 5: Four different meters conflicting while sharing the same table of patterns which will be repeated or permuted. On the right, a pitch organization that serve as fundamental generative system. It is based on a primordial computer program made by gates that control the stream of material. It is based on the repetition of the same array to allow an even distribution of the musical output rather than its constant development.

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