

I can still remember one of my first undergraduate composition tutors telling me that one of the keys to successful compositional practice was maintaining clarity of musical materials. “Your materials must always be defined...” were words to the effect of what he said. “...they should carry an identity, so that as you manipulate them through the course of a piece you take your audience with you.” Looking back on these words it is interesting to note that my recent work has become primarily concerned with exploring the validity of this statement, frequently ignoring it altogether.

As time has passed, this attitude has led me to compositional processes that increasingly treat issues such as ‘clarity’ and ‘definition’ almost as controllable musical parameters in their own right – a process which, through what I have said publicly about my music, has become known as ‘veiling’. In my ‘veiled’ music, musical materials are rarely, if ever, explicitly stated but are instead only implied. This article is intended to serve as a brief introduction to these ideas and how they are manifesting themselves in my present work.

I’ve been working with the idea of veils for some time now, but *the temples at ogden and provo* (2009)¹, for solo oboe and ensemble (recently pre-

¹ The title refers to two almost identical Latter-day Saint (Mormon) temples in Provo and Ogden, Utah, USA.

sented at the 2010 Huddersfield Autumn National Composers’ Symposium), serves as a suitable starting point for this kind of thinking. A brief description of some of the harmonic processes used in the piece may be useful in an attempted to define what veiling means in a practical sense.

At its most fundamental level, the entire twenty-minute/seven-movement piece is based on a single twelve-note chord containing all twelve chromatic pitches² (see **Figure 1a**, below), colloquially referred to as ‘the mother-chord’ in my own musical sketches. For the most part, and especially within the solo oboe writing, each pitch-class is locked to the octave in which it appears in the chord.

² The chord was designed so as to encompass the entire range of the solo oboe.



Figure 1: (a) the mother chord; (b) the five-septachord cycle

The mother-chord is then split into five septachords (see **Figure 1b**) via a process of random selection³, the pitch-classes within each septachord retain the octave in which they were locked in the mother-chord. This five-chord sequence is always presented cyclically (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1, 2... etc.), each septachord controlling to a greater or lesser extent (see below) the harmonic material of a passage of music no shorter than a bar. The mother-chord itself is never used as a simultaneity, instead the chord exists as an implicit field, constantly suggested by octave-locked pitches and the ongoing rotation of the five-chord cycle. In a sense, only shadows of the mother-chord are presented at any one time (i.e. a given septachord). If you like, the mother-chord is veiled to a certain extent.

But the process of veiling becomes more concrete in the treatment of the five septachords themselves. Whilst these are used explicitly as simultaneities, they are also used to inform weighted probability-readings of the mother-chord pitch-field. In such circumstances, a selection of pitches is made from the entire mother-chord field using a probability distribution that favors (to differing extents) those pitches present in the particular septachord in the foreground at that moment. As a result, pitch-data is produced that may consist largely of those pitch-classes associated with, for example, septachord three, but also contains some anomalous pitches not associated with that

³ This process is linked to the pedaling-capabilities of the harp, which has an important harmonic function in the piece.

septachord. In doing so, the harmonic definition of the septachord(s) break down and as such, exist in an implicit rather than explicit state. In itself, this harmonic method has little to do with traditional notions of tension and release (although the sequence of septachords in their abstracted explicit form was constructed with this loosely in mind). Anomalous pitches (i.e. selected pitches that do not belong to the particular septachord in question) are treated as harmonically 'neutral'; the manner in which they effect the consonance/dissonance of a septachord is not regarded as part of the compositional process. Instead, the presence of anomalous pitches only serves to make more or less distinct the resultant sonic 'colour' of a particular septachord.

This process is used extensively in the accompanying passages to movement four (subtitled "i will, through the veil"). The tuned percussion parts⁴ for this are constructed using a probability distribution weighted in favor of septachord one and are included as **Figure 2** (below).

Repetition holds a special importance in my music of this nature. At the root of this process random numbers manipulate musical data. The results may have predictable general trends, but the

⁴ These parts are played rhythmically independently from one another on a given conductor's cue. Fig 2. is the first of ten such cues employed in this movement. It should be noted that at this point in the piece pitch-classes have been unlocked from their original mother-chord octaves.

Figure 2

c.9"

Vibraphone (Percussion 1)

mf *ppp*

Tubular Bells (Percussion 2)

mf *ppp*

Pedal. *fz* *ppp*

Tempo markings: $\text{♩} = \text{c.136}; \text{rall}$... $\text{♩} = \text{c.52}$
 $\text{♩} = \text{c.72}; \text{rall}$... $\text{♩} = \text{c.36}$

Articulations: *hard sticks*, *hard mallets*, *Pedal down continuously, do not lift between phrases*

particulars of each result are very much indeterminate. Obviously, the process may be run multiple times with radically different results and it is listening to these parallel instances that interests me. It is only listening to a multitude of instances of the same indeterminate process that patterns between instances can be noted and anomalies perhaps recognised – in a sense, repetition helps the listener gradually see ‘beyond the veil’.

Whilst within *the temples at odgen and provo*, movements one (“tabernacle”), three (“the temple of soloman”) and six (“the temple of the new jerusalem”) can be understood in this way, the role of repeated instances of chance-based processes has grown to become even more important in my recent work.

In *temples*, fixed, pre-existent music objects are blurred by weighted probability distributions. Therefore, in this particular piece, there is a concrete ‘true music’ that lies behind the ‘veiled music’. In presenting the ‘veiled’, I was trying to invoke knowledge of the ‘true’, or at least ‘that which has been hidden’. But what if that which is behind the veil is less concrete? What if, ultimately, the object behind the veil could never be absolutely realised in a musical score?

In more recent pieces, I have been confronting such questions by attempting to create implicit musical objects that can only ever be experienced when instanced. The most recent manifestation of such ideas has become *veils* (2010), an experimental piece (almost an *étude*) for clarinet, violin and piano, written for ensemble plus minus and to be performed at the University of Huddersfield in March 2011. Again, a brief explanation of the technical attributes of this piece may help illuminate the concepts. To allow for a direct comparison with *temples*, once again the approaches the work adopts to pitch will be focussed upon, although it should be understood that the implicit musical objects employed in *veils* also have equally important rhythmic and timbral attributes that are not discussed here.

veils consists of a cycle of nine related musical objects. In this context, each object ‘exists’ only as a pitch-field (or other parametric field) and a weighted probability distribution. Let us consider

the simplest of these objects, object six, as an example:

Object six comprises a twenty-four-note series (see **Figure 3**, overleaf) and a probability distribution controlling the number of ‘skips’ to be made in the series (a skip of ‘0’ implies the series progresses sequentially, whereas a skip of ‘7’ implies that 7 pitches are to be omitted before the next is stated) (see **Figure 4**).

This simple pairing of field and distribution is the most concrete form the musical object takes – far less defined than the pre-designed chords manipulated in temples. It is important to note that, within the context of a fixed musical score, a listener cannot experience the entirety of this object. To experience this object holistically would involve simultaneously experiencing all possible outcomes of this distribution as applied to the series (and not just superimpositions thereof) and this is, of course, impossible. All that can be experienced is an instance of this object (to be fully realised these pitch-distributions would need to be combined with their rhythmic and, to a lesser extent, timbral counterparts).

Two examples of instances of object six can be seen below, scored for violin (**Figure 5**) and piano (**Figure 6**).

Before continuing, it is probably useful to explain how these instances are used to construct *veils* as a whole.

veils is comprised of a series of twenty-seven short fragments of music, each scored for a solo instrument drawn from the trio (clarinet, violin, piano). Each instrument has nine fragments ($9 \times 3 = 27$). Each fragment comprises instances of one, three or five objects drawn from the nine-object cycle, always in sequence⁵. These fragments are then presented rhythmically independently from one another. The players are cued by a set of synchronised stopwatches (hence the timings at the beginning of the fragments printed above) to allow the fragments to be presented in a variety of contexts; sometimes alone, sometimes colliding with other fragments. As such, the fragments veil both each

⁵ A given fragment may instance object one; or one, two then three; but never one, three and nine.



Figure 3: object six – twenty-four note series

No of skips	P(X)
0	2/3
1	1/6
2	1/6

Figure 4

The bias in this very simple distribution is for consecutive notes from the series, but in other related implicit objects (namely objects five and seven, which use almost exactly the same series) this distribution is far more complex.

other through different degrees superimposition and veil the nine-object sequence as a whole.

In experiencing the work, the listener's journey again becomes one of developing an experiential familiarity with a musical landscape, the features of which are both obscured by other features (as in the case of the nine-object series) and are ultimately unknowable in and of themselves. To put it another way, by virtue of the fact that no two instances of the same object are ever the same but contain highly statistically similar data, a listener's recognition/identification of an object begins to draw from deeper patterns in the music than merely the surface detail (which is indeed different in each instance). In a sense, in order to draw comparisons, you must begin to listen beyond the veil.

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