2019.8

for String Quartet

Sebastian Adams (Aug. 2019)

Duration: 8 – 12 minutes
(radically different durations also possible if wished)

Commissioned by the National String Quartet Foundation
and composed for the Esposito Quartet

Intro:

The majority of this piece is put together by following a set of instructions regarding structure and by choosing from a bank of available material.

The piece attempts to generalise most of the methods I have used to write music over the past two years. Part of the motivation for doing this is to try and achieve the complex texture of most of my music in a way that doesn't limit the performers' comfort and expressive freedom.

Time spent learning notes that were chosen by the composer because they were one of many possibilities that fitted, rather than because they were the **only** possible option, can be seen as wasted time! In tandem with this, it can lead performers right to the edge (and beyond) of what anybody can be physically or mentally expected to do. While this knife-edge anxiety can be a very exciting effect for a composer to play with, it comes with a flip-side: performers are forced to focus mostly on getting through the music relatively unscathed. All of this is why I am experimenting with a more indeterminate way of composition, something which can seem out-of-place in the context of my work so far.

Basic Idea:

Performers overlay three different structures for most of the piece, before transitioning to a single page of fully-notated music at the work's climactic moment.

The structures are:

(1) intensity structure
(2) material structure
(3) harmonic structure.

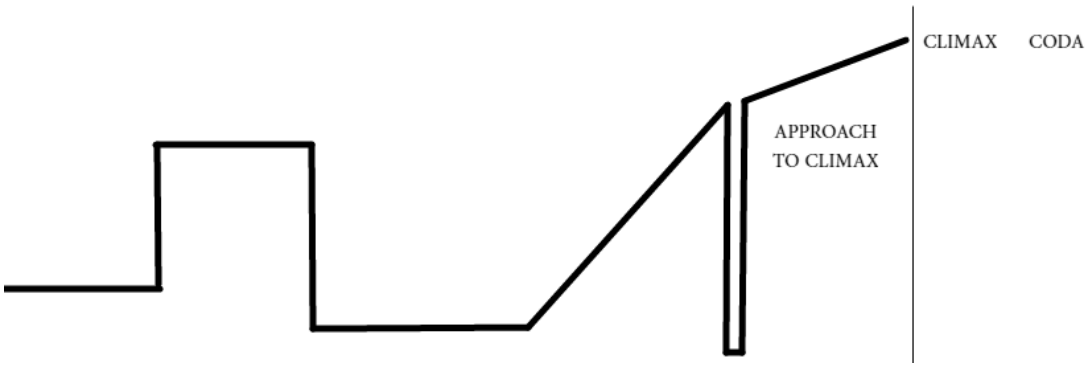
The three structures are very simple, but each player follows the material and harmonic structure in their own way, meaning the overall effect is of eight individual threads coalescing on a single climactic point.

INTENSITY STRUCTURE:

The intensity structure aims to give the piece a coherent trajectory. This structure is the same for all four players, but only needs to be followed loosely. The intensity structure is a line on a graph, ending at the climax of the piece, when the performers revert to notated music. The suggested structure is similar to the exposition and development/working out of a sonata form.

The basic elements of the suggested intensity structure are:
1 {a low-intensity opening}
2 {high 2nd section}
3 {low middle}
4 {gradual rise towards climax}
5 {sudden short collapse}
6 {a rise to climax, introducing new material}
7 {CLIMAX: end of structure}

Suggested Intensity Structure:



(Y-axis is intensity, X-axis is time. The CLIMAX and CODA portion are fully notated in the score.)

Performers should bear the structure in mind and attempt to feel it progressing naturally. Ideally, there should be no timer and no explicit signalling at moments of transition. Low-intensity moments are possible in high-intensity sections and vice versa.

At the "Approach to climax" section, the performers should have reached the end of their tonal structure. At this point, the harmony should fragment into total dissonance (especially with respect to G). A new material bank is also introduced at this section (see Material Structure). The arrival at the climactic point is the beginning of the written page of music, and this should feel like an enormous release of long-building tension.

N.B. If desired, the performers can abandon this intensity structure and create a new one. The only non-negotiable element is the approach to the climax.

TONAL STRUCTURE:

The tonal structure is different for each performer. It also ends at the climactic point, when fully-notated music takes over. The structure is derived from dividing the first 32 overtones of the G harmonic series among the four performers.

Each player should loosely root the tonality of the material they are playing on the note of their current tonal structure position. Players should rise through their personal harmonic grid at roughly even intervals of 30 – 40 seconds.

The structure should be at the back of the performer's mind rather than a central focus.

Structures:

Violin 1	G	B	A	E♭	A♭	C	Eb	F	{Climax}
Violin 2	G	D	B	F	A	C♯	Eb	F♯	{Climax}
Viola	D	F	C♯	F♯	B♭	C♯	E	F♯	{Climax}
Violoncello	G	G	D	G	B	D	F	G♯	{Climax}

N.B. For a longer performance of the piece, the timings of each section of the tonal structure grid can be increased indefinitely.

MATERIAL STRUCTURE:

For most of the piece, each individual performer rotates between three material banks in strict order.

The three material banks are called:
{A}: fragments
{B}: whistles
{C}: drones

The contents of the material banks are different for each player, but overlap significantly.

The performers individually superimpose their own material structure on top of the intensity and tonal structures. These structures can be very simple or relatively complex. The only rules are:
1) Material types A, B and C must rotate in strict order at all times (until the approach to climax).
2) For each individual, the duration of instances of each material type should be on separate trajectories, which should be invented by each performer without consulting the other players.

> **EXAMPLE:**
> instances of {A} could be extremely short at the beginning, getting slightly longer throughout the piece; {B} could be very long, getting gradually much shorter until each instance is tiny; duration of instances of {C} could vary randomly throughout the piece)
>
> [Example is purely for illustrative purposes. Each performer should work out their own material structure.]

3) The starting bank and cell for each performer is specified in their performance part.

Selecting material cells within a bank:
There are no rules! You can select individual cells within a material bank as often or as little as you want, and repetition is allowed. If there are cells you hate, you can scratch them out of your part.

Handling Transitions:
Sections of different materials can be separated by short breaths or silences, or can run together. They can also overlap, or gradually transform from one material to the next. Performers should decide how to handle transitions as makes musical sense in the moment of performance.

New Rules for the Approach to Climax Section:

1) The strict order rule breaks down, and use of material can now be improvisatory
2) Trajectory rule also breaks down, now timing is totally free
3) Material Bank {D} is now allowed. {D} is “harsh, sustained notes”
4) During the low period before the approach to climax, the viola player drops out and wraps cloth around the D string

MAKING MISTAKES:

When clear instructions or orders are given, they should be followed only to the extent that leads to the most satisfying outcome.

If intentionally breaking the rules seems to make musical sense – go ahead! This is what the composer would do.

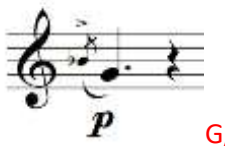
Similarly, mistakes are no disaster. It is more important to concentrate on making music than on following the instructions close to perfectly.

The best approach to the piece would be to try and internalise the rules during practice/rehearsal but then to stop worrying about them completely and feel comfortable.

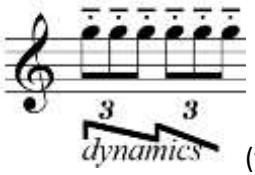
FULL LIST OF MATERIAL BANKS

(the individual instruments' material banks follow in their performance parts, which are included in the full score)

BANK A: fragments

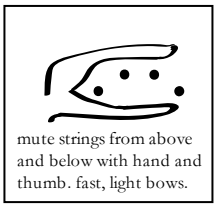


G/Bb motif {+ how to develop} [transposes with key]



(freely embellish) [transposes with key]

berserk arpeggios
[allowed in pp, mp and ff>mf]



Improvise a fast, descending, mostly chromatic gesture starting on any high note.
mp

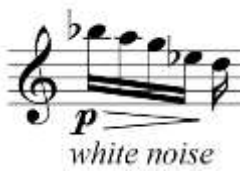
double stop open string along with a flattened minor seventh (in tune with 7th harmonic – minus 31 cents from equal temperament). Play with fluctuating texture
pp – mf allowed.

BANK B: whistles

Gliss. slowly from your highest $F_{\sharp}$ to lowest $F_{\natural}$. Use bow and finger pressure to make a whistling sound. [non-transposing: pitch stays the same in any section of tonal structure]

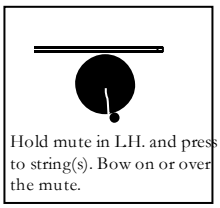
White noise (any way you like)

quiet, slurred trill on artificial harmonic, interval of trill anywhere between major second and major third



[centred on G – but transposes with tonal structure]
[can be embellished]

BANK C: drones



Creaking / whooshing sounds [any way you like]

Pitched drone on note from tonal region's chord.
[pp, sul tasto]

silence

Texture improvisation:
Find four interesting natural objects (not man-made).
Hold them in various ways and then throw them away.
Remember the texture and translate into sound.
Choose from these to use this material cell.

BANK D: harsh sustained notes

Play harsh sustained notes dissonant to G (e.g. $F_{\sharp}$, $G_{\sharp}$, $C_{\sharp}$)

microtones are allowed.

[choose between different kinds of harsh note: extreme sul ponticello, over pressure, etc.]
add more descriptions of harsh notes

PERFORMANCE PARTS

[PERFORMANCE PART: Violin I]

N.B. The full score is necessary in order to learn the piece

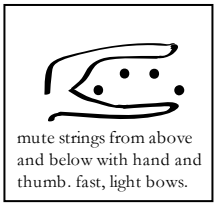
VIOLIN I MATERIAL BANK

FIRST ACTION: Begin in {A} with starred (***) motif.

BANK A: fragments

*** G/Bb motif {+ how to develop} [transposes with key]

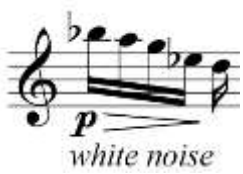
berserk arpeggios
[allowed in pp, mp and ff>mf]



Improvise a fast, descending, mostly chromatic gesture starting on any high note.
mp

BANK B: whistles

quiet, slurred trill on artificial harmonic, interval of trill anywhere between major second and major third



[centred on G – but transposes with tonal structure]
[can be embellished]

BANK C: drones

Creaking / whooshing sounds [any way you like]

Pitched drone on note from tonal region's chord.
[pp, sul tasto]

silence

Texture improvisation:
Find four interesting natural objects (not man-made).
Hold them in various ways and then throw them away.
Remember the texture and translate into sound.
Choose from these to use this material cell.

BANK D: harsh sustained notes

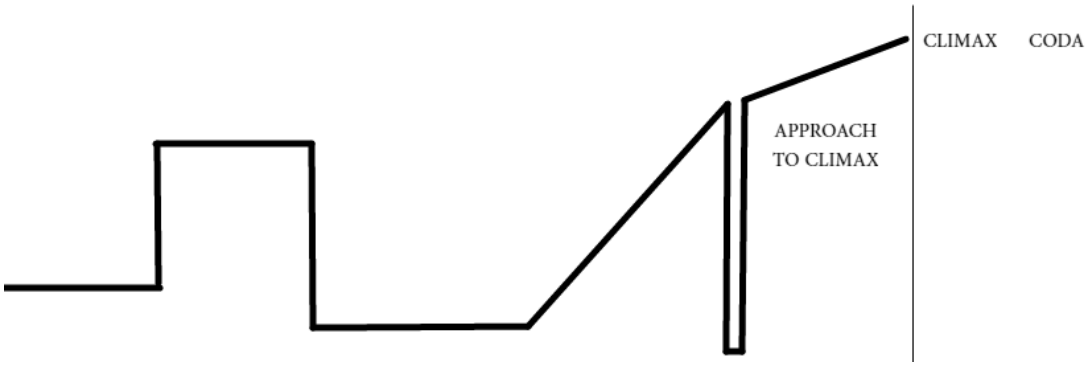
[only use {D} in the Rise to Climax section]

Play harsh sustained notes dissonant to G (e.g. $F_{\sharp}$, $G_{\sharp}$, $C_{\sharp}$)

microtones are allowed.

[choose between different kinds of harsh note: extreme sul ponticello, over pressure, etc.]
add more descriptions of harsh notes

SUGGESTED INTENSITY STRUCTURE:



VIOLIN I HARMONIC STRUCTURE:

G B A $E_{\flat}$ $A_{\flat}$ C Eb F {Climax}

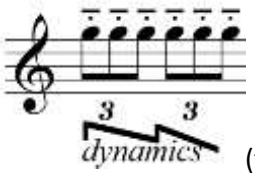
[PERFORMANCE PART: Violin II]

N.B. The full score is necessary in order to learn the piece

VIOLIN II MATERIAL BANKS:

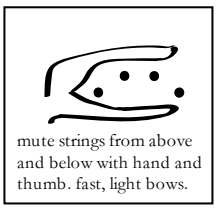
FIRST ACTION: Begin in {B} with starred (***) motif.

BANK A: fragments



(freely embellish) [transposes with key]

berserk arpeggios
[allowed in pp, mp and ff>mf]



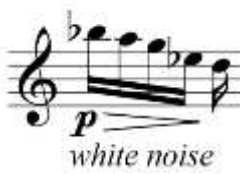
Improvise a fast, descending, mostly chromatic gesture starting on any high note.
mp

BANK B: whistles

*** Gliss. slowly from your highest $F_{\sharp}$ to lowest $F_{\flat}$. Use bow and finger pressure to make a whistling sound. [non-transposing: pitch stays the same in any section of tonal structure]

White noise (any way you like)

quiet, slurred trill on artificial harmonic, interval of trill anywhere between major second and major third



[centred on G – but transposes with tonal structure]
[can be embellished]

BANK C: drones

Creaking / whooshing sounds [any way you like]

Pitched drone on note from tonal region's chord.
[pp, sul tasto]

silence

Texture improvisation:
Find four interesting natural objects (not man-made).
Hold them in various ways and then throw them away.
Remember the texture and translate into sound.
Choose from these to use this material cell.

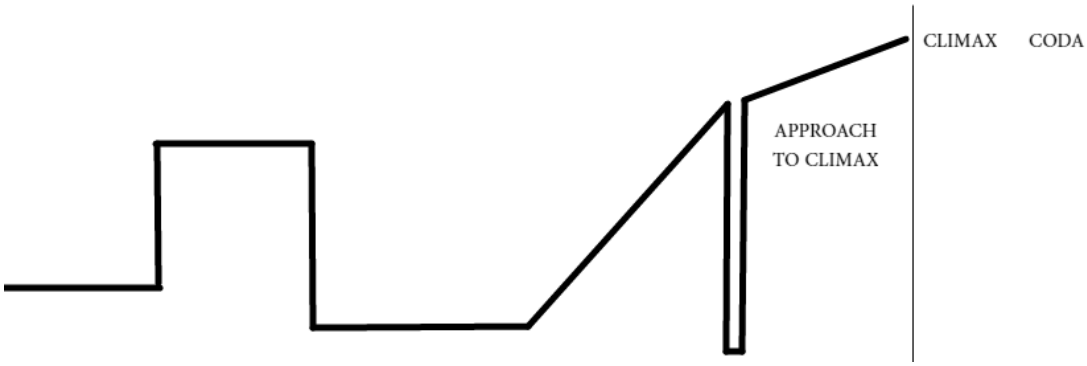
BANK D: harsh sustained notes

Play harsh sustained notes dissonant to G (e.g. $F_{\sharp}$, $G_{\sharp}$, $C_{\sharp}$)

microtones are allowed.

[choose between different kinds of harsh note: extreme sul ponticello, over pressure, etc.]
add more descriptions of harsh notes

SUGGESTED INTENSITY STRUCTURE:



VIOLIN II HARMONIC STRUCTURE:

G D B F A $C_{\sharp}$ Eb $F_{\sharp}$ {Climax}

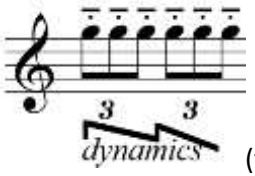
[PERFORMANCE PART: Viola]

N.B. The full score is necessary in order to learn the piece

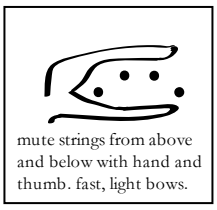
VIOLA MATERIAL BANKS:

FIRST ACTION: Begin in {B} with starred (***) motif.

BANK A: fragments



(freely embellish) [transposes with key]



double stop open string along with a flattened minor seventh (in tune with 7th harmonic – minus 31 cents from equal temperament). Play with fluctuating texture

pp – mf allowed.

BANK B: whistles

*** Gliss. slowly from your highest $F_{\sharp}$ to lowest $F_{\flat}$. Use bow and finger pressure to make a whistling sound. [non-transposing: pitch stays the same in any section of tonal structure]

White noise (any way you like)

quiet, slurred trill on artificial harmonic, interval of trill anywhere between major second and major third

BANK C: drones

Creaking / whooshing sounds [any way you like]

Pitched drone on note from tonal region's chord.
[pp, sul tasto]

silence

Texture improvisation:
Find four interesting natural objects (not man-made).
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[choose between different kinds of harsh note: extreme sul ponticello, over pressure, etc.]
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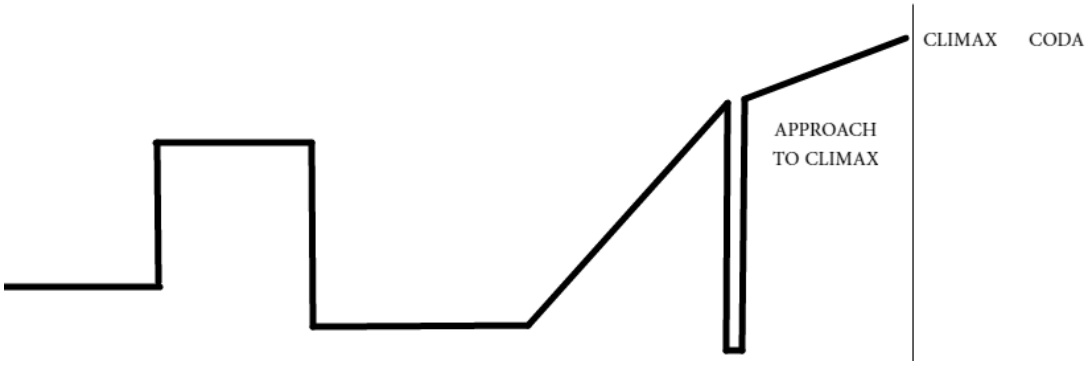
SUGGESTED INTENSITY STRUCTURE:



VIOLA HARMONIC STRUCTURE:

D F $C_{\sharp}$ $F_{\sharp}$ $B_{\flat}$ $C_{\sharp}$ E $F_{\sharp}$ {Climax}

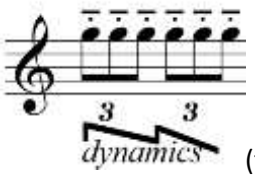
[PERFORMANCE PART: Violoncello]

N.B. The full score is necessary in order to learn the piece

VIOLONCELLO MATERIAL BANKS:

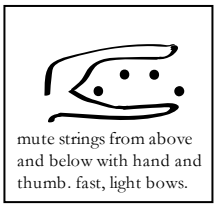
FIRST ACTION: Begin in {C} with starred (***) motif.

BANK A: fragments



(freely embellish) [transposes with key]

berserk arpeggios
[allowed in pp, mp and ff>mf]



double stop open string along with a flattened minor seventh (in tune with 7th harmonic – minus 31 cents from equal temperament). Play with fluctuating texture
pp – mf allowed.

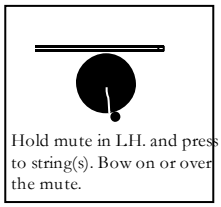
BANK B: whistles

White noise (any way you like)

quiet, slurred trill on artificial harmonic, interval of trill anywhere between major second and major third

[centred on G – but transposes with tonal structure]
[can be embellished]

BANK C: drones



***

Creaking / whooshing sounds [any way you like]

silence

Texture improvisation:
Find four interesting natural objects (not man-made).
Hold them in various ways and then throw them away.
Remember the texture and translate into sound.
Choose from these to use this material cell.

BANK D: harsh sustained notes

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microtones are allowed.

[choose between different kinds of harsh note: extreme sul ponticello, over pressure, etc.]
add more descriptions of harsh notes

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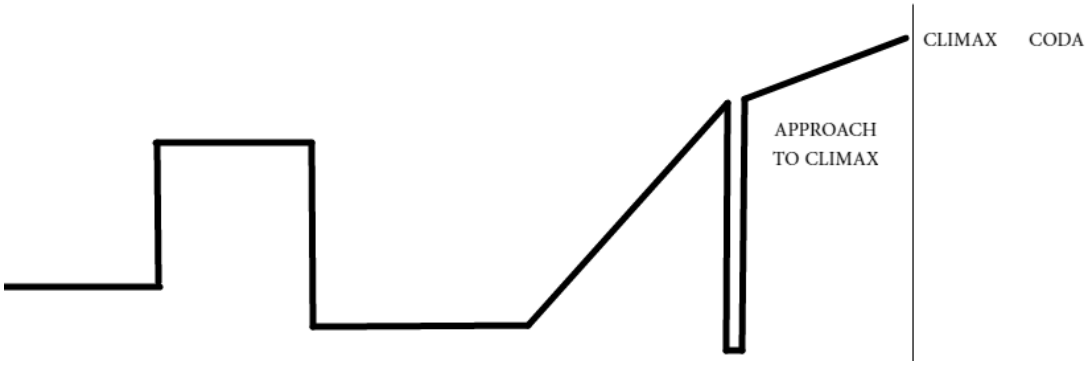

VIOLONCELLO HARMONIC STRUCTURE:

G G D G B D F $G_{\sharp}$ {Climax}