5-2023

EARLY INSTRUMENTS IN 21ST CENTURY COMPOSITION AND AN ORIGINAL COMPOSITION FOR SAXOPHONES AND VIOLS

Jacob Bitinas
Stephen F Austin State University, jacob.bitinas@gmail.com

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AND AN ORIGINAL COMPOSITION FOR SAXOPHONES AND VIOLS

By

JACOB BITINAS, Bachelor of Science

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Music

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY
May 2023

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APPROVED:

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Dr. Stephen Lias, Thesis Director

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Dr. Alexander Amato, Committee Member

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Dr. Kathryn Fenton, Committee Member

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Dr. Robert Allen, Committee Member

_____
Dr. Sheryll Jerez
Interim Dean of Research and Graduate Studies

ABSTRACT

Composers continually seek new timbres and sonorities to bend to their will. The early music revival of the twentieth century has resurrected dozens of instruments that have gone unutilized in contemporary composition for centuries. The historically-informed-performance movement has now evolved to a point where early instruments and period performance techniques can add extraordinary new characters to twenty-first century compositions. This thesis explores how composers effectively utilize early instruments like the viola da gamba, harpsichord, lute, and recorder in their compositions.

The document also contains interview transcripts from eight composers and performers, including Nico Muhly, Liam Byrne, Martha Bishop, David Loeb, Yukimi Kambe, Sarah Mead, Heather Spence, and Lisa Terry. Finally, my original composition for an octet of four saxophones and four viola da gambas realizes the research and implements the advice sought during the interview process and is accompanied by an analysis of core concepts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Stephen Lias, for his guidance, support, and encouragement throughout my journey. His patience, expertise, and invaluable feedback have been instrumental in refining and developing my perspective on twenty-first century composition and molding me into a better person. I am also grateful to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Alexander Amato, Dr. Kathryn Fenton, and Dr. Robert Allen, for their insightful comments and suggestions, which have significantly improved the quality of my work. I appreciate their time and effort in reviewing my thesis and providing constructive feedback. I would like to thank the Stephen F. Austin staff for their assistance and support, especially Dr. Scott LaGraff, for his assistance with administrative matters. I am indebted to my family, friends, and colleagues for their unwavering support, encouragement, and motivation throughout my academic journey. Their belief in me and my work has been a constant source of inspiration, and I am fortunate to have such amazing people in my life. Lastly, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the participants of my research study, whose valuable insights and feedback have been crucial in shaping my research findings and composition. Without their participation and willingness to share their experiences, this thesis would not have been possible. Thank you all for your contributions and support.

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CHAPTER 1 – HISTORICALLY INFORMED PERFORMANCE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Historically informed performance[1] saw several mini-revivals throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These revivals helped initiate the resurgence of antiquated instruments like the viola da gamba, harpsichord, lute, and recorder. Though these mini-revivals helped rekindle interest in early instruments[2], it was not until the 1930s that the pace quickened, along with the publication of several new methods for instruments like the viola da gamba.[3] The journey that began as part of the twentieth century HIP movement developed to the point of historical pluralism in twenty-first century ensembles and composition. Now, it is not unheard of to see pieces like Michael Torke's *Time* (2022) include a harpsichord alongside a saxophone or marimba as equal contributors to the ensemble.

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[1] "Historically informed performance" is abbreviated to HIP throughout this document.

[2] The phrase "early instruments" is used throughout this document to describe instruments like the viola da gamba, harpsichord, lute, recorder, or any instrument whose historical period has passed.

[3] Judith Davidoff, "The Waning and Waxing of the Viol: A Historical Survey" (PhD diss., Union Institute, New York City, 1995), 61-63.

The path towards new music for early instruments began over a century ago and is a notion that has not been free of resistance. This chapter focuses on HIP's development up to the twenty-first century, when new compositional trends began manifesting themselves.[4] Since this material has already been the subject of extensive musicological research with acclaimed publications like Harry Haskell's *The Early Music Revival*[5] and Judith Davidoff's dissertation,[6] this chapter aims only to provide background material relevant to the main topic of this thesis: twenty-first century compositional trends concerning new music for early instruments.

The twentieth century HIP movement followed a logical order: a revival of the music, of the instruments, and then of the style. These revivals owe thanks to figures like Felix Mendelssohn[7] and Nadia Boulanger, who laid the groundwork for this movement by resurrecting and promoting works from composers like Handel and J.S. Bach. Though Mendelssohn rearranged pieces to fit his contemporary orchestra and meet his nineteenth century audience's expectations, his efforts to bring music from the Baroque period into the nineteenth century were a necessary first step. The twentieth century's early music

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[4] David Loeb, "The Lyffe and Times of a Viol Composer," *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America* 22, no. 4 (1985): 29.

[5] Harry Haskell, *The Early Music Revival: A History* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc, 1988).

[6] Judith Davidoff, "The Waning and Waxing of the Viol: A Historical Survey."

[7] Though his contributions were made in the nineteenth century, Mendelssohn's work provided necessary steps towards the HIP movement.

resurgence came primarily from a desire to achieve a more "authentic" sound within these revived works. Because performers cannot achieve an authentic sound with inauthentic instruments, antiquarians and musicologists began restoring and performing with original instruments. Musicians like Arnold Dolmetsch, Wanda Landowska, and Paul Hindemith were pioneers in this field through supporting the construction of copies and the study of originals.[8] Audiences could occasionally hear harpsichord or viola da gamba beginning in the mid-twentieth century performances of pieces like J.S. Bach's *St. John Passion* and the *Brandenburg* sixth concerto. This kind of inclusion, no matter how historically informed the remaining ensemble might or might not have been, was a crucial step along the path to the historical plurality modern ensembles are now at liberty to explore. Paul Hindemith expressed his concerns that HIP in 1950 was still not doing enough. The follow excerpt is from a speech he delivered at a Bach commemoration in Hamburg, Germany.

> If we care about performing his music as he himself imagined it, then we ought to restore the performance conditions of his time. And in that case, it is not enough that we use a harpsichord as a continuo instrument. We must string our string instruments differently; we must construct our wind instruments with the scaling of the time; and we must even recreate the relationship between the *Chorton* and the *Kammerton* in the tuning of our instruments.[9]

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[8] Davidoff, "The Waning and Waxing of the Viol: A Historical Survey," 66.

[9] Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41.

As Hindemith mentioned, the simple use of instruments was just another step in the sequence towards his vision of HIP. The final step was toward a more historically informed style. This was, and is, the most difficult to achieve because of the inherent problem: the music performers are trying to reproduce predates any recording technology. This is where the work of revered musicologists like Richard Taruskin and Thomas Binkley or performer-scholars like oboist Bruce Haynes and conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt has been crucial. These figures guided the direction of HIP when relatively little information was available. Since the mid-twentieth century, musicologists uncovered a wealth of primary sources that drove the HIP movement to an undoubtedly more historically informed style than was present in the mid-twentieth century.

A "historically informed performance" from the twentieth century would likely still not hold up to today's expectations, though. Concerning a performance of the *St. Matthew Passion,* Nikolaus Harnoncourt wrote, "The string section spreads a tapestry of sound over everything, so overwhelming that the meticulous instrumentation of the first chorus is drowned out. It seems that we are listening to Brahms."[10]

However, in the mid-twentieth century, it was still rare to hear any ensembles truly specializing in early music.[11] Over the next several decades, entire ensembles formed with a focus on period performance and incorporated instruments according to

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[10] Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, 24.

[11] Loeb, "The Lyffe and Times of a Viol Composer," 29.

musicological research. Baroque orchestras were the most common type of period ensemble, but medieval string ensembles, viol consorts, and renaissance brass bands were also scattered throughout the musical landscape. These specialty ensembles were not typically full-time positions, but enthusiasts could seek them out as early as the late twentieth century.[12] As early instruments like the viola da gamba, recorder, harpsichord, and lute became more recognized for their unique qualities instead of their quirks, composers started utilizing them in new music. Well-known composers like Elliott Carter wrote successful twentieth-century music that incorporated harpsichord or recorder, and more niche composers like David Loeb and Will Ayton became champions for writing new music for violas da gamba and other "instruments whose historical period had ended."[13] Support from organizations like Great Britain's Viola da Gamba Society (VdGS) and the Viola da Gamba Society of America (VdGSA) allowed composition competitions to be held regularly, and these events generated interest among performers and composers alike. The VdGS held biennial competitions between 1955 and 1972 to encourage the composition of new music for viols.[14] At one such competition, David Loeb made necessary connections to support his output of new music for viols.[15]

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[12] Loeb, "The Lyffe and Times of a Viol Composer," 29.

[13] Loeb, "The Lyffe and Times of a Viol Composer," 31.

[14] Dodd, Gordon, and Nathalie Dolmetsch. "The Viola Da Gamba Society of Great Britain: The First Thirty Years." *Early Music* 6, no. 1 (1978): 137.

[15] Loeb, "The Lyffe and Times of a Viol Composer," 29.

Leo Traynor, August Wenzinger, Hannelore Muller, and Ralph Kirkpatrick were other key figures in the twentieth-century development of new music for early instruments. For instance, Wenzinger and Müller were highly influential in Europe and performed concerts of both early and contemporary music for viola da gamba. In 1971, Yukimi Kambe attended a concert featuring this mix of music and became inspired to perform and champion contemporary music on the viol.[16] Ralph Kirkpatrick, a professional harpsichord player who premiered Elliot Carter's *Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Piano with Two Chamber Orchestras* in 1961, had been an early proponent for new music on early instruments. Kirkpatrick wrote to Roger Sessions, Henry Cowell, and other well-respected American composers, encouraging them to write contemporary music for the harpsichord.[17] Leo Traynor was closely affiliated with the Viola da Gamba Society of Japan (VdGSJ) and became the namesake of the International Traynor Composition Competition for New Music for Viols. The VdGSJ held the first Traynor competitions in 1984 and 1986 until it was re-established under the American society in 1989.[18] Since then, the Traynor Composition Competition has worked to

[16] Yukimi Kambe, interviewed by author, January 29, 2023, transcript provided in appendix.

[17] Alison DeSimone, "Review: Ralph Kirkpatrick: Letters of the American Harpsichordist and Scholar," *Notes* 73, no. 1 (2016): 112.

[18] Kambe, interviewed by author.

propagate new music for the viol and establish its place as a living instrument in modern society.[19]

[19] "Leo M. Traynor Compositional Competition," Viola da Gamba Society of America, accessed February 2, 2023, https://www.vdgsa.org/traynor-competition.

CHAPTER 2 – 21ST CENTURY TRENDS AND HISTORICAL PLURALISM

Bruce Haynes' definition in *The End of Early Music* is profoundly relevant when discussing twenty-first century trends. Haynes defines chronocentrism as "the attitude that one's own time or period is superior; the equivalent in time of the spatial concept of ethnocentrism. Contrasted here with pluralism."[20] This type of chronocentrism prevailed in the mid-twentieth century perhaps because of the nationalism and ethnocentrism of the time. The draw of chronocentrism started to weaken at the end of the twentieth century, and now most twenty-first century artists welcome an era of pluralism. Pluralism is evident in twenty-first century ensembles, compositions, and performances. Even the world's most prestigious orchestras have equally well-respected break-out ensembles specializing in HIP with period instruments. For example, out of the Berlin Philharmonic comes the Berlin Baroque Soloists, who specialize in HIP. Esteemed soloists like Patricia Kopatchinskaja develop their aptitude for both new works and HIP through collaboration with both living composers and period ensembles. In 2021, many members of the Atlanta Opera Orchestra utilized Baroque bows to achieve a more historically appropriate style for Handel's *Giulio Cesare,* even while the cast on stage wielded guns in a *Mad Max*

[20] Haynes, *The End of Early Music,* 25-26.

style adaptation.[21] It has become more common to see modern orchestras utilize period equipment to help represent period music, even if it is just for a single piece on a program. These are just a few examples of the innovations, collaborations, and applications of resources that have become exceedingly frequent. Many musicians and ensembles now expertly change their stylistic approach and equipment based on the repertoire.

The twenty-first century utilization of early instruments does not stop at period performance, though. Some composers are also trending towards a pluralistic approach to their work and capitalizing on the wealth of early instruments and early music specialists available in the twenty-first century. Apart from the wide-spread acceptance of early music as a discipline in which musicians can specialize, the most significant contribution to early instruments in the last twenty-three years has been the multitude of new music produced. Several competitions, concerts series, and ensembles worldwide now specialize in contemporary music for early instruments. As noted by Nico Muhly, the bulk of the new repertoire comes from period ensembles and performers who seek out commissions for their specialized ensemble.[22] Some of the period ensembles that have made substantial contributions to this area include New Vintage Baroque, Portland

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[21] Adron McCann, "Atlanta Opera's production of 'Julius Caesar' is a mix between 'Game Of Thrones' and 'Mad Max,'" *WABE*, 2021, https://www.wabe.org/julius-caesar/

[22] Nico Muhly, interviewed by author, February 15, 2023, transcript provided in appendix.

Baroque Orchestra, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Pacifica Baroque Orchestra, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, ACRONYM ensemble, Nordic Affect, The New York Consort of Viols, Parthenia Viol Consort, Yukimi Kambe Viol Consort, and Fretwork. The viol consort *Fretwork* alone has commissioned over 40 new works from composers like George Benjamin, Michael Nyman, Sir John Tavener, Gavin Bryars, Elvis Costello, Nico Muhly, John Woolrich, Orlando Gough, Sally Beamish, Tan Dun, Barry Guy, and Thea Musgrave.[23] While the new music produced for period ensembles is a significant contribution that is engaging and challenging audiences, composers like Martha Bishop and Yukimi Kambe believe there is also great value in creating new ensembles that incorporate instruments from different historical periods and cultures.[24]

The heart of this thesis lies in this overtly anachronistic combination of instruments. David Loeb uses the phrase, "instruments whose historical period has ended" in his 1985 article.[25] This is a sensible description that helps define the variety of instruments both with the "early music" domain and arguably some beyond. Professionals agree, however, that an instrument that can be picked up and played today

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[23] "About," Fretwork, accessed February 6, 2023, https://www.fretwork.co.uk/about

[24] Martha Bishop, interviewed by author, December 15, 2022, transcript provided in appendix.

[25] Loeb, "The Lyffe and Times of a Viol Composer," 31.

must be considered a living instrument.[26] Artifacts from the past still exist in the present, and a true anachronism cannot manifest in the physical world without a time machine. Audiences consume music so differently than they did in the eighteenth century, and now, composers and performers can choose to incorporate instruments based purely on aesthetic choice. There is no doubt that early instruments have a unique voice to lend twenty-first century ensembles. By incorporating early instruments alongside ones that are part of the current zeitgeist, composers expand their selection of textures and sonorities. The prevailing trend of the twenty-first century is that of inclusion; when typewriters and blenders can contribute to a musical ensemble, it is not so wild to welcome musical instruments from the past to help create ensembles of the future.

One of the earliest and most famous examples of this incorporation was Elliott Carter's *Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Piano with Two Chamber Orchestras* (1961). In 1990, David Loeb composed *Mutazione*, an octet for saxophone quartet (SATB) and viol consort (TrTnBB), premiered by the PRISM saxophone quartet and the New York Consort of Viols.[27] Felicity Wilcox's *Gouttes d'un Sand Etranger* is a twenty-first century dialogue between viola da gamba, saxophone, electronics, spoken word, and images that emerged as a recomposition of a Marin Marais piece. *Time* is a piece Michael

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[26] Heather Spence, interviewed by author, January 22, 2023; Sarah Mead, interviewed by author, January 16, 2023, transcripts provided in appendix.

[27] David Loeb, interviewed by author, February 2, 2023, transcript provided in appendix.

Torke released in 2021 that utilizes harpsichord alongside clarinets, saxophones, marimba, piano, voice, and strings. Alex Mills and Liam Bryne combined viola da gamba with electronics to create swirling, alien worlds in *Suspensions and Solutions* (2019). What all these pieces have in common is an innovative sense of inclusion where instruments from different periods and cultures can contribute to a new sonic landscape. Where experimental or extended techniques might stagnate within the standard set of orchestral tools, instruments from the past have helped composers like Caroline Shaw, Michael Torke, Nico Muhly, and Alex Mills engage audiences and performers like never before.

CHAPTER 3 – SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWS

The interviewing process was highly influential on this thesis's content. After compiling a list of core questions, I sought to collect primary source material from professionals who have successfully composed, performed, or supported new music for early instruments. The interviews were conducted between December 2022 and March 2023 and comprised a diverse group of internationally recognized professionals. While the appendix contains a full transcript of each interview, this chapter includes a synopsis of the commentary that is especially crucial to this research. The core set of the eight questions is outlined below.

1. How were you influenced to begin writing new music for early instruments?
2. Are there specific early instruments that are seeing more use in twenty-first century composition? Are there instruments you believe are underutilized?
3. What is the appeal of using early instruments in modern composition? What do they contribute that is unique?
4. What are some challenges of writing for instruments that are traditionally tied to a specific historical period or style?
5. Have you experimented with combining instruments from different traditions, cultures, or historical periods? What combinations have worked well, or what challenges have arisen from your experimentation?

6. How do early music audiences or performers react when new compositions are brought in? Are they typically enthusiastic, hesitant, or neutral?
7. Have you noticed any trends in twenty-first century composition related to early instruments? From your perspective, has there been much observable change in the last 40 years?
8. Do you have other thoughts or general advice about writing new music for early instruments?

The first question addressed how each musician became involved in supporting, performing, or composing new music for early instruments. The interviewees came from a variety of backgrounds, but a recurring theme involved writing for instruments that are available to them. No composer began writing for early instruments without having experience playing or hearing them frequently. Many of the composers mentioned that their relationship with early music began at a relatively young age. In Nico Muhly's case, his background as a young vocalist exposed him to the music of Orlando Gibbons and John Dowland when he was only twelve years old. Most other composers became engaged with early music around their twenties as college students. Many were part of an early music performance community long before they expressed interest in composition.

David Loeb is one composer who stands apart. He was exposed to early music through hearing viol consorts in 1960, but his path was mainly that of a composer. Assuming no one would play contemporary music for viols, he did not begin composing

new music for viol consort until 1965 and submitted pieces to the Viola da Gamba Society of Great Britain's composition competition the following year. He also became interested in composing for Eastern instruments around the same time.

The second question changed depending on whether I interviewed a composer or a performer. The question varied between asking interviewees about noticing if any early instruments are experiencing a compositional rebirth or if there are any early instruments they believe are being underutilized. Notable answers came from Nico Muhly, who pointed out that the more active types of ensembles commissioning more music are getting more written for them. Muhly cited *Fretwork* as a natural example. This London-based viol consort regularly commissions diverse composers from many different fields and takes on a staggering amount of recording projects.

The third question yielded two main responses. Many performers described the qualities of their instruments that were appealing and unique. When speaking on the viola da gamba specifically, Liam Byrne mentioned, "It has very pure natural harmonics, it sustains close interval especially beautifully, it can voice low thirds in a harmonious way, where on cello, it would sort of have like fighting beats et cetera."[28] The viol's unique timbre allows it to maintain a great deal of clarity when playing close intervals in the lower register that would sound discordant compared to some other instruments. He also

[28] Liam Byrne, interviewed by author, February 16, 2023, transcript provided in appendix.

spoke about an aversion to using historical instruments only to evoke historical sounds and that this kind of historicization of the instruments is extremely limiting. Nico Muhly asserted that the actual instrument does not contribute as much as the performer's familiarity of performance practice. The way an instrument is played with the sensitivity and affects of historically informed performance contributes much more than the actual instrument.

Question four concerned the challenges of writing for early instruments. I hoped to collect advice on what challenges composers or performers found themselves avoiding and how these obstacles were overcome. Martha Bishop and Sarah Mead mentioned the presence and power of standard orchestral instruments can easily overwhelm the more sensitive, grounded timbres in early strings. Heather Spence had an experience where the viola da gamba blended beautifully with no real challenges in the context of higher pitched instruments like the modern oboe and flute. Whenever volume becomes an obstacle, Liam Byrne uses amplification. He has had much experience in using acoustic instrument amplifiers and microphones with viola da gamba and mentioned that it has even awakened a greater sensitivity and attention to detail in his playing.

Question five speaks to the historical and cultural pluralism that is at the heart of this document. Yukimi Kambe and David Loeb both have extensive experience combining instruments from different historical perspectives and cultural traditions. David Loeb's interested in composing for early instruments began at the same time as his interest in Japanese traditional instruments. Yukimi Kambe has collaborated with David

Loeb for many of these pieces. Among the pieces David Loeb has written is *Doutaku Hankyou*, a duo for shakuhachi and viol, an octet for four shakuhachi and four viols, and *Mutazione*, an octet for four saxophones and four viols.

Question six centered around the audience's acceptance of, and reaction to, new music for early instruments. In her experience, Sarah Mead mentioned her students and audience members are generally excited to discover new compositions on a program of early music. David Loeb iterated the same can be true, but with a caveat, "One will attract very different audiences according to whether a group plays one new piece within a traditional program or presents a program in which new works predominate." Yukimi Kambe also mentioned that new compositions are a welcome sight with her audiences in Japan. She speaks from the performer's perspective and has built a Japanese early-music community where new music is constantly breathing life into their ensembles.

Question seven asked if there were any noticeable trends in twenty-first century music for early instruments. Martha Bishop spoke on her experience as music director of the Viola da Gamba Society of America, "Gamba players and recorder players are getting much more open to playing modern music than they were 15 or 20 years ago. When I was music director of Conclave of the Gamba Society, I almost could not schedule more than one modern music class per conclave. People just wouldn't take it." Now, community members are more enthusiastic about new music, and the VdGSA's New Music Committee is twelve-members large.

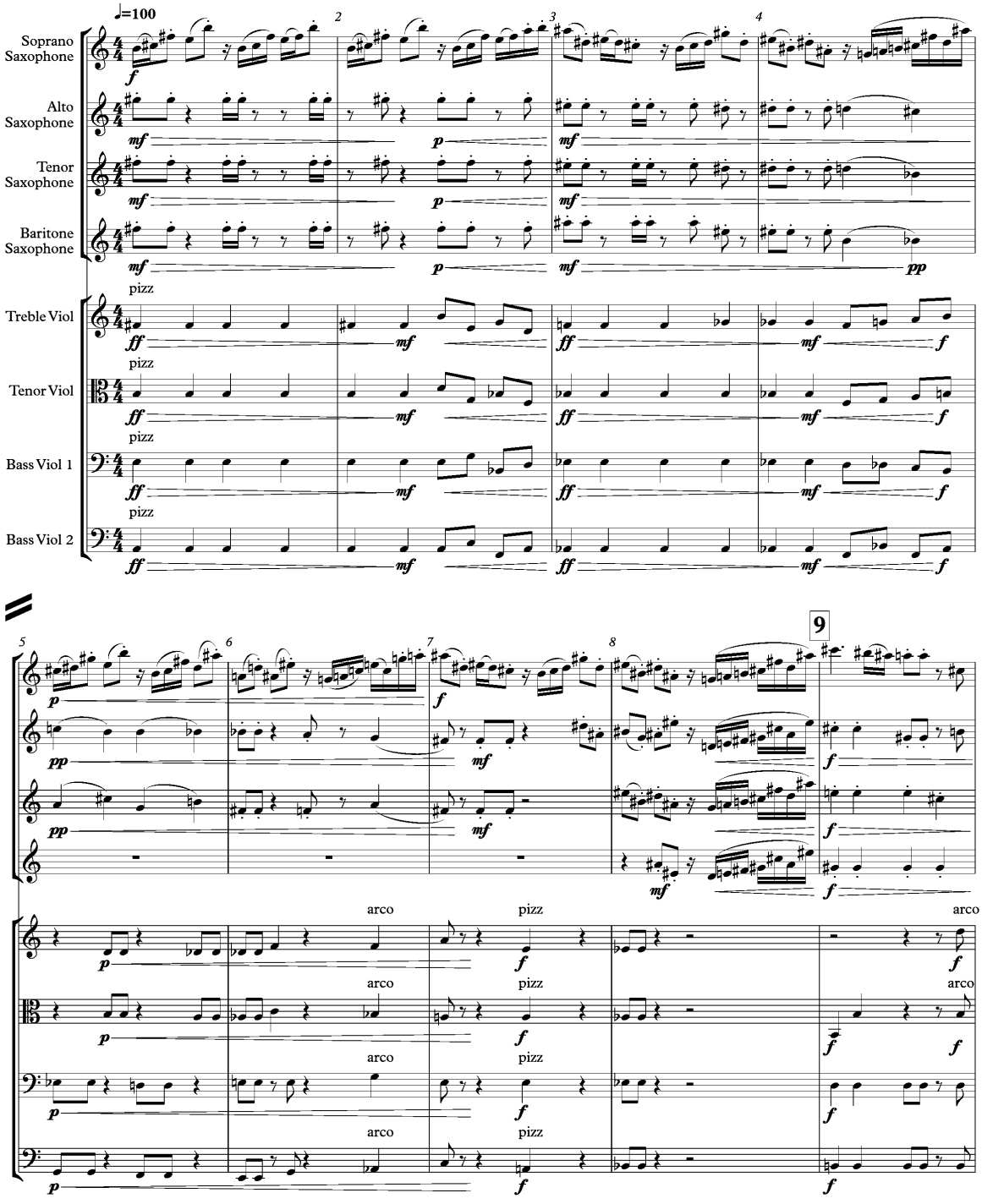
Question eight allowed interviewees to speak on any topic they felt was important to share with composers or performers interested in new music. Nico Muhly's advice centered around working with players as much as possible and "To figure out the ways in which the instrument that you're writing for is totally not the thing that it looks like in the contemporary universe." Discover how the recorder is "definitely not a flute," and explore how the harpsichord differs entirely from a piano. His main advice is to lean into each instrument's idiosyncrasies and understand how they stand out.

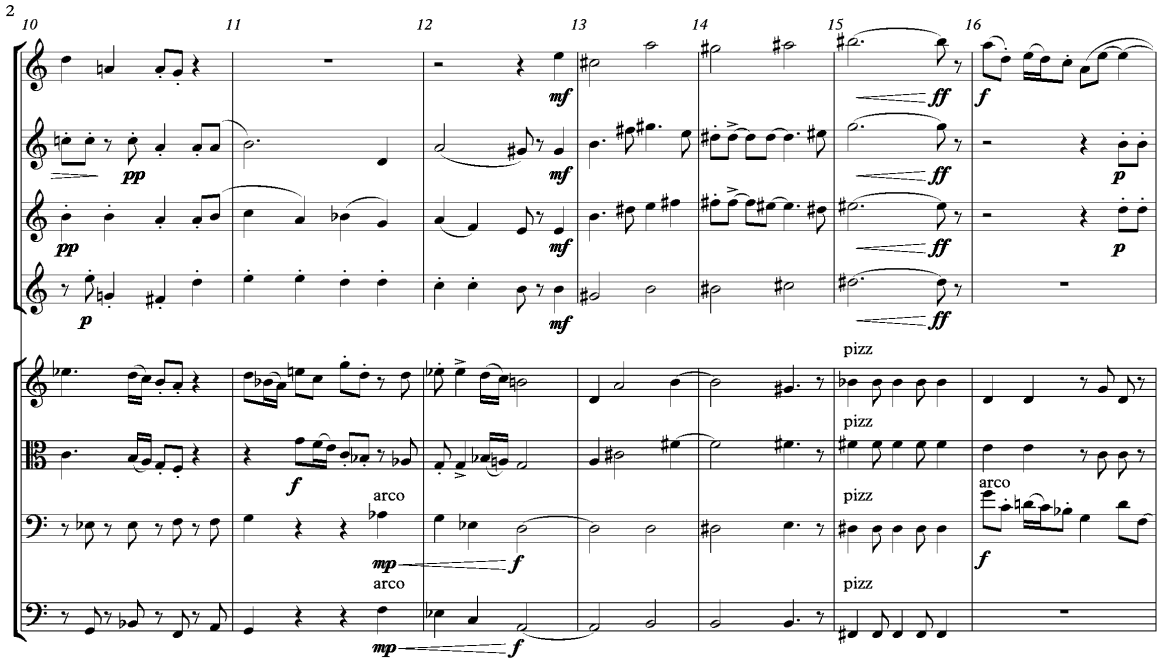
The interviewing process was foundational to this thesis's development and the accompanying composition's effectiveness. Future readers can glean much more information from reading the full transcripts within the appendix. This synopsis summarized the information and advice that helped guide this thesis; however, the recurring advice that came from many conversations was to take continual advantage of the idiosyncrasies of the viol consort and work toward expanding the aesthetic tradition of the saxophone quartet. Combining these ensembles unlocks a wealth of unique timbres and sonorities. The inclusion of early instruments in twenty-first century music is a subject on which the assembled experts have much to say, and the interviews within this document will be a valuable resource for future generations of composers and performers.

CHAPTER 4 – AN ORIGINAL WORK FOR SAXOPHONES AND VIOLS

Anachronexus

Jacob Bitinas

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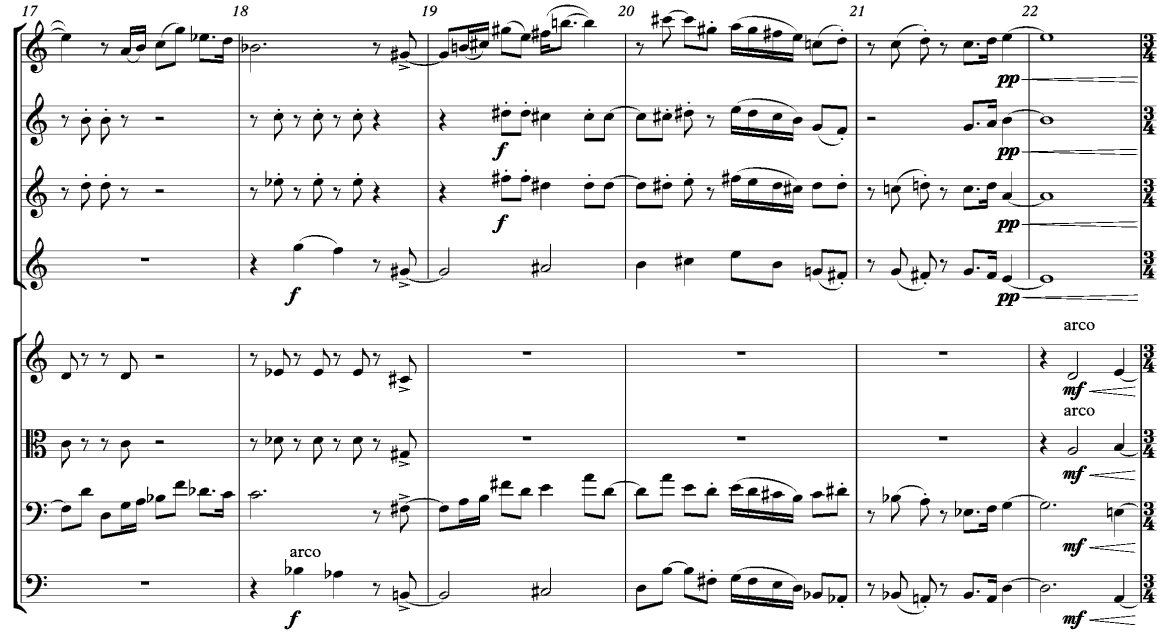
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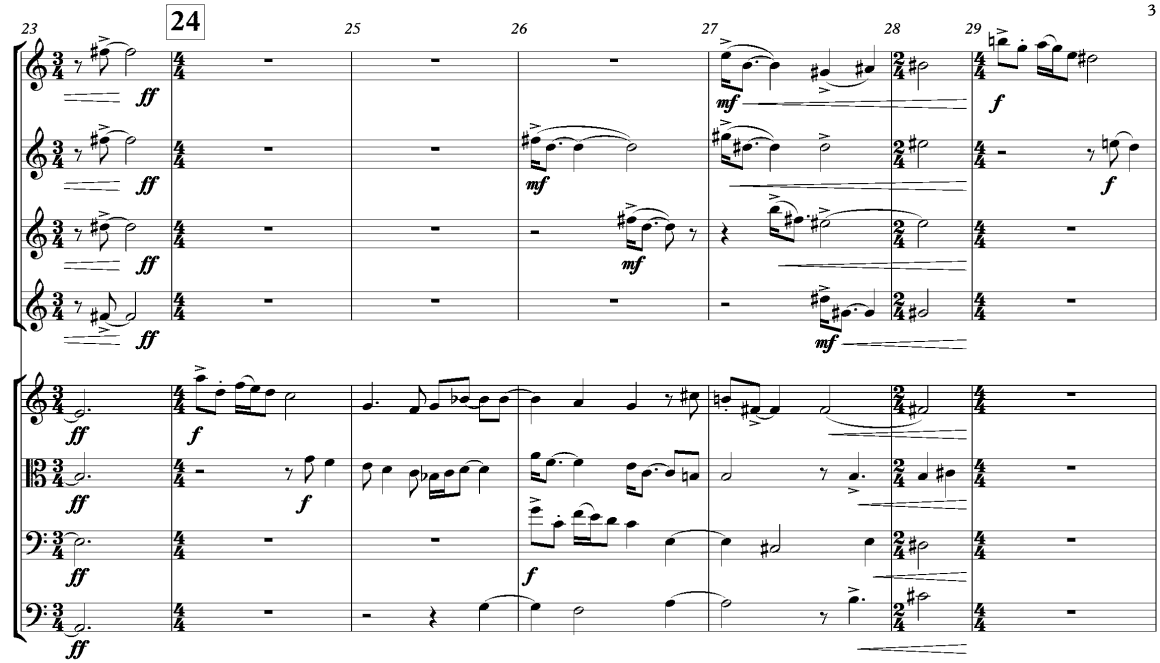
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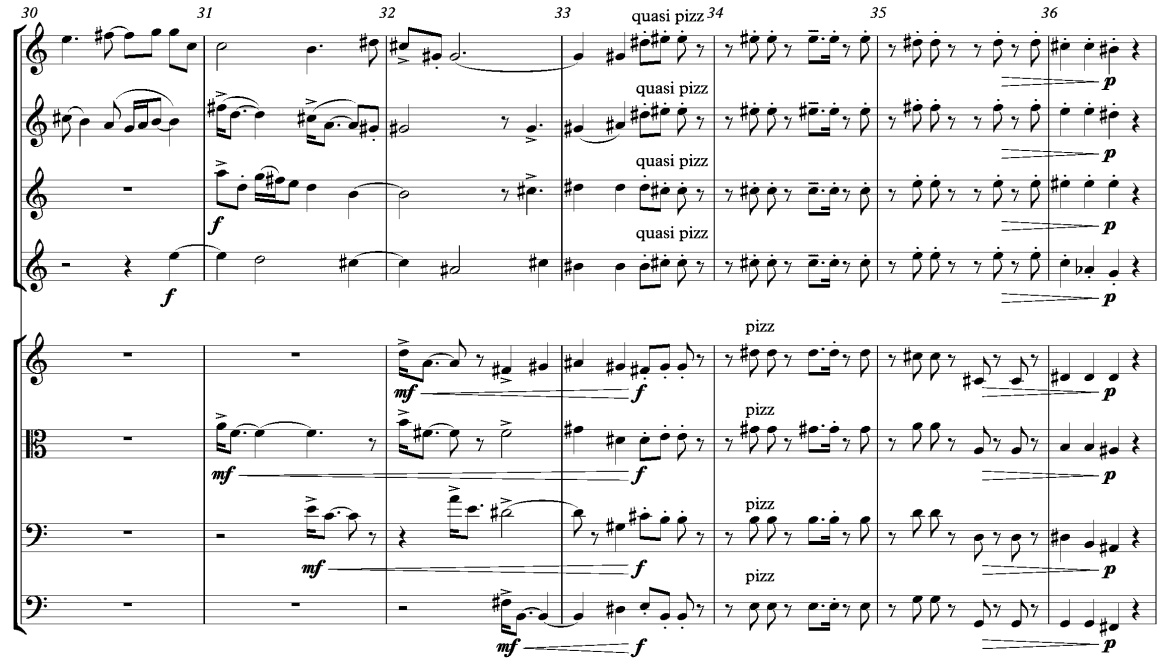
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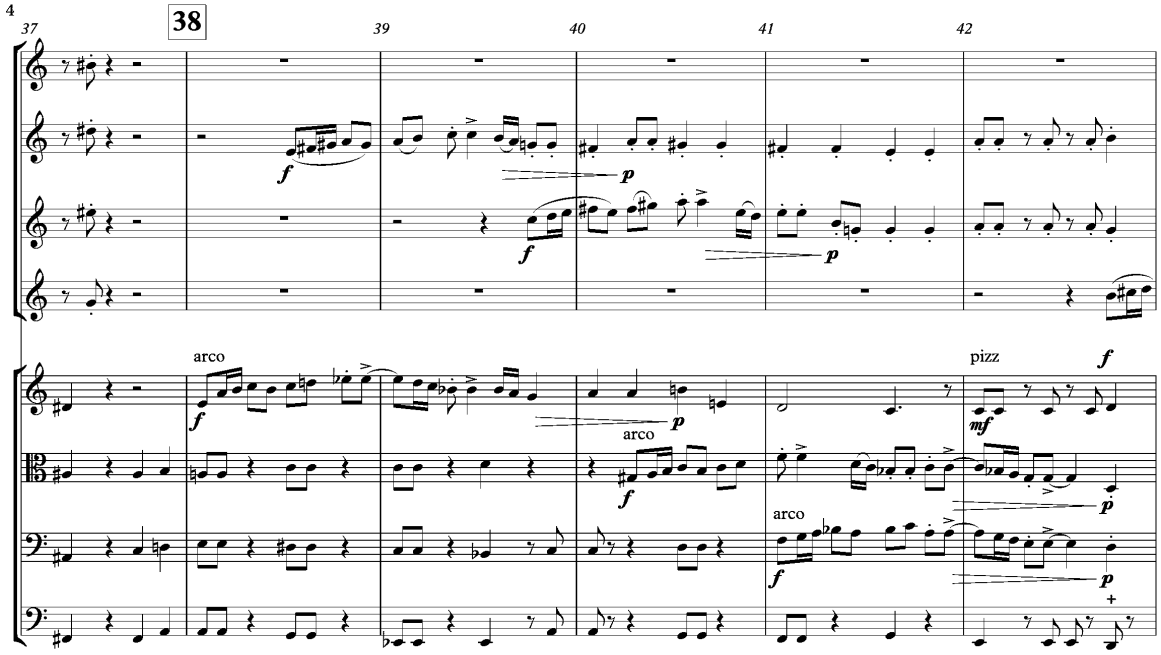
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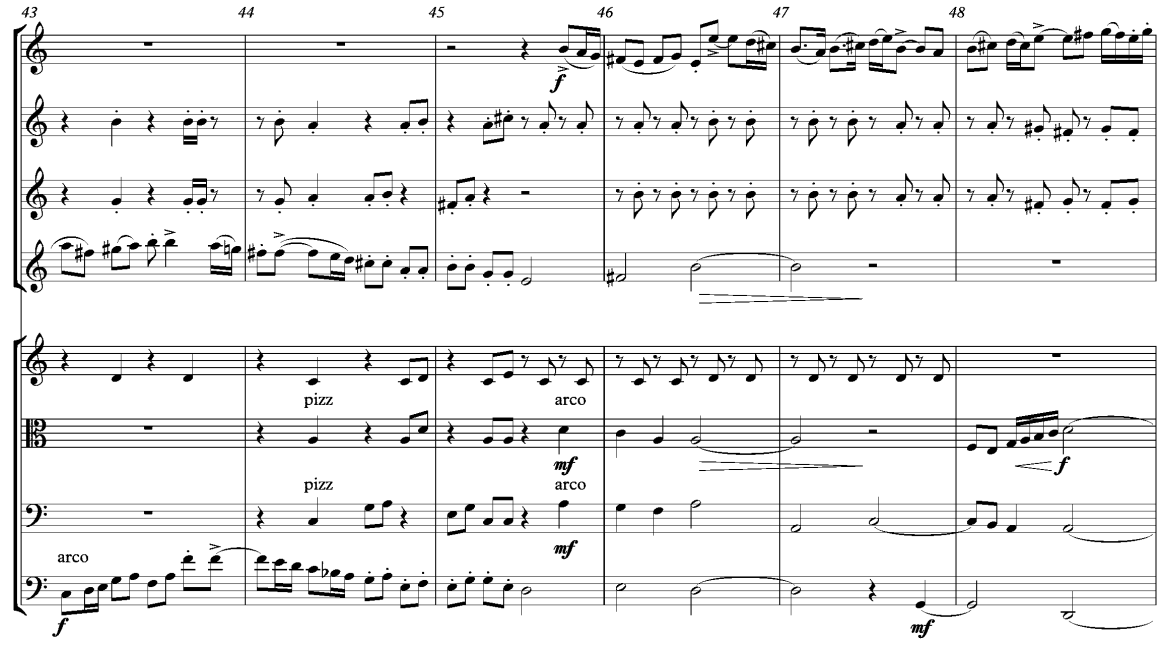
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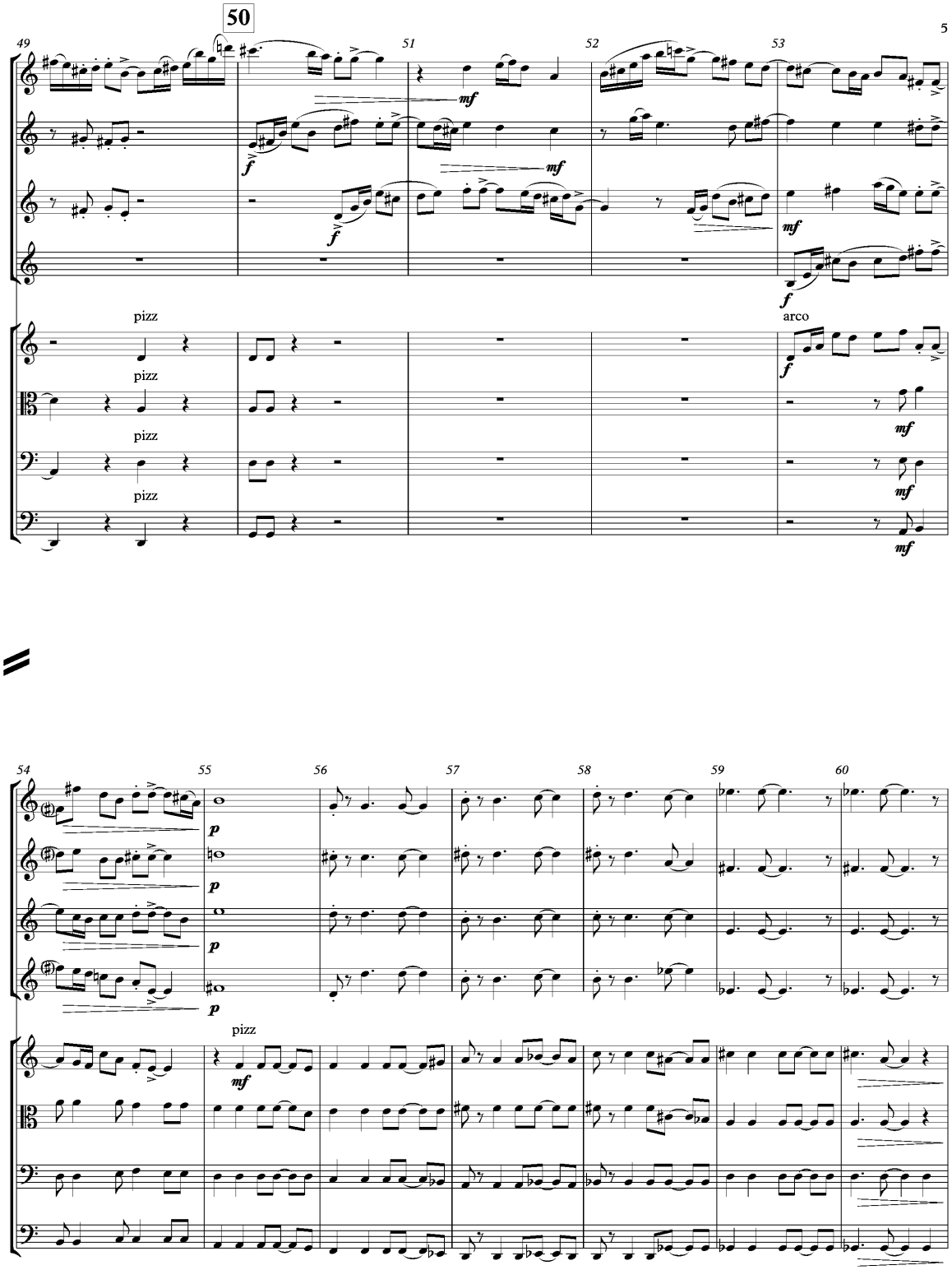
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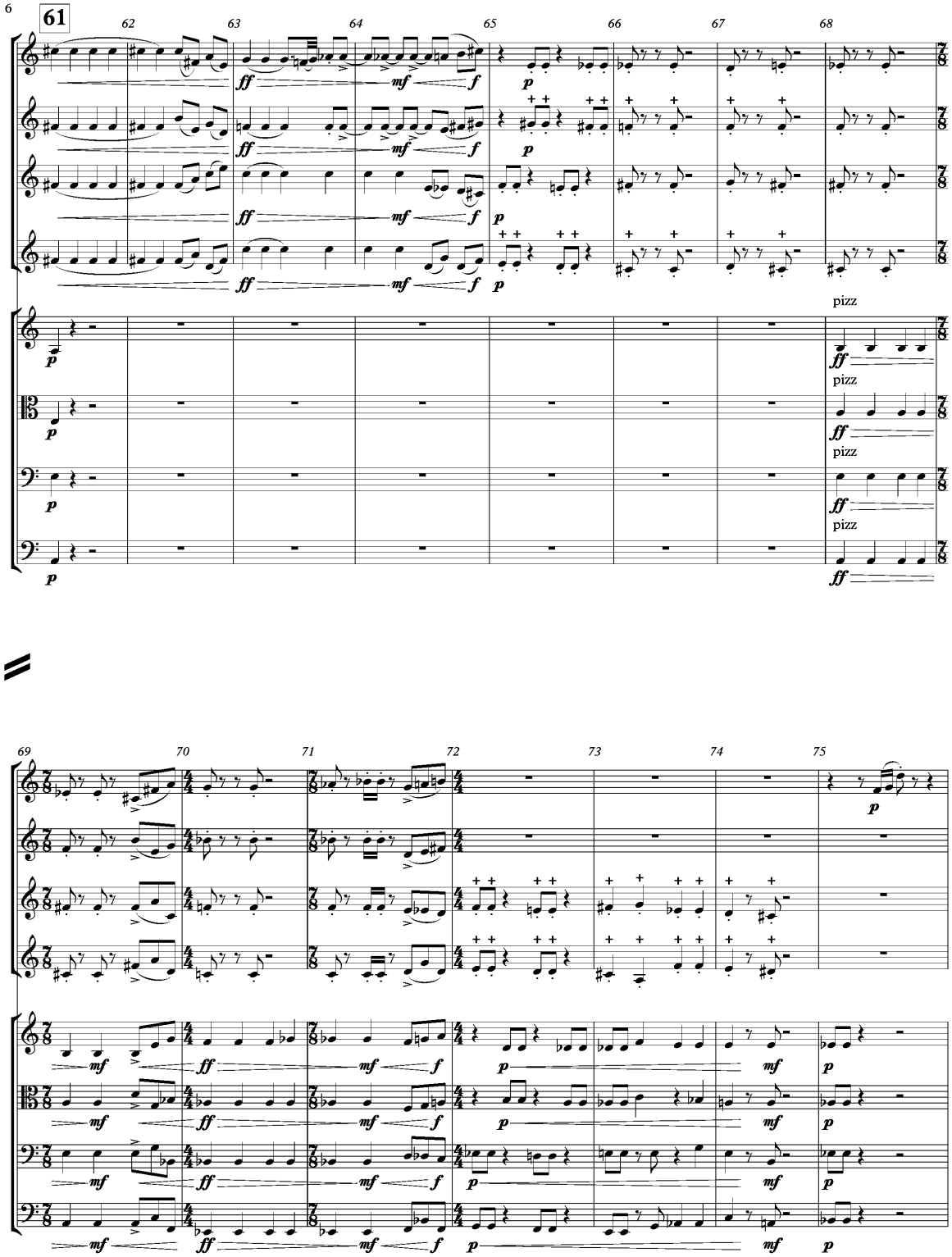
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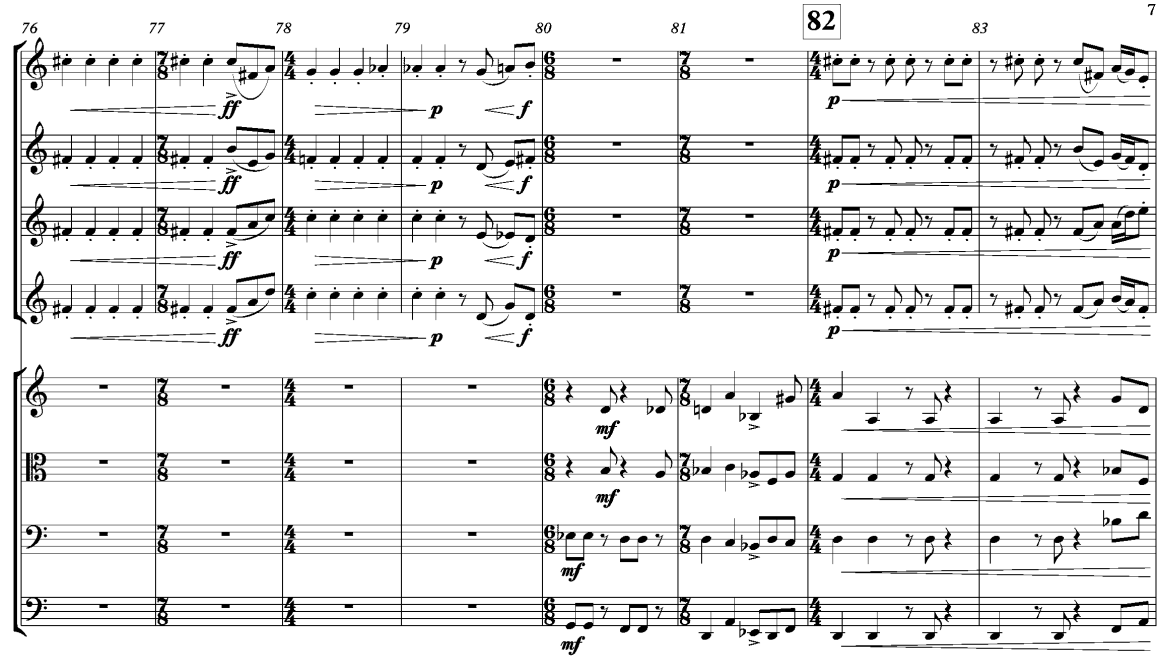
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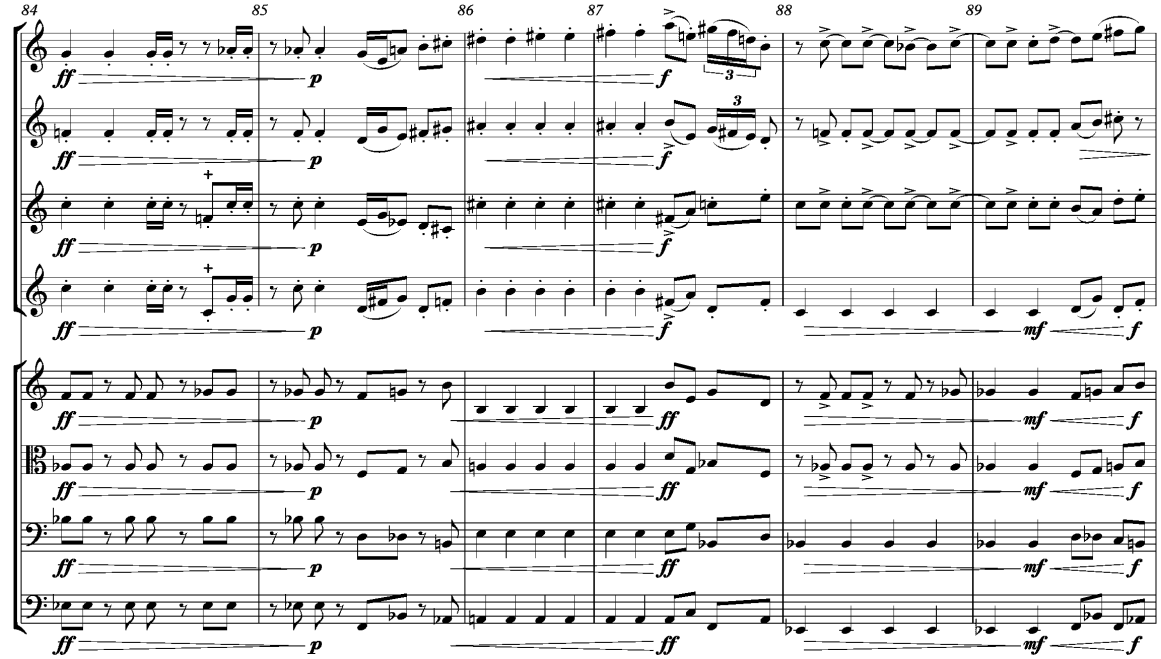

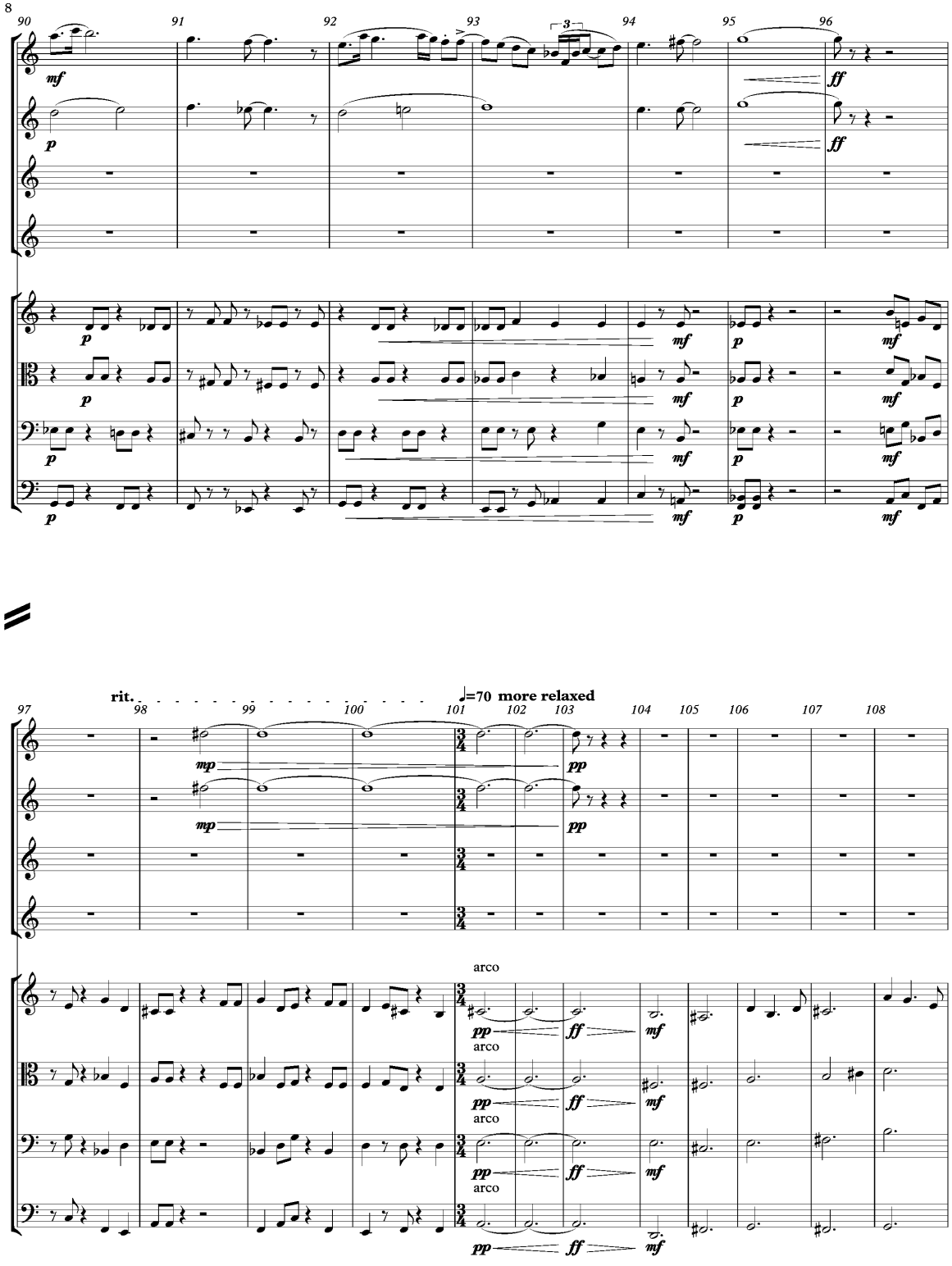
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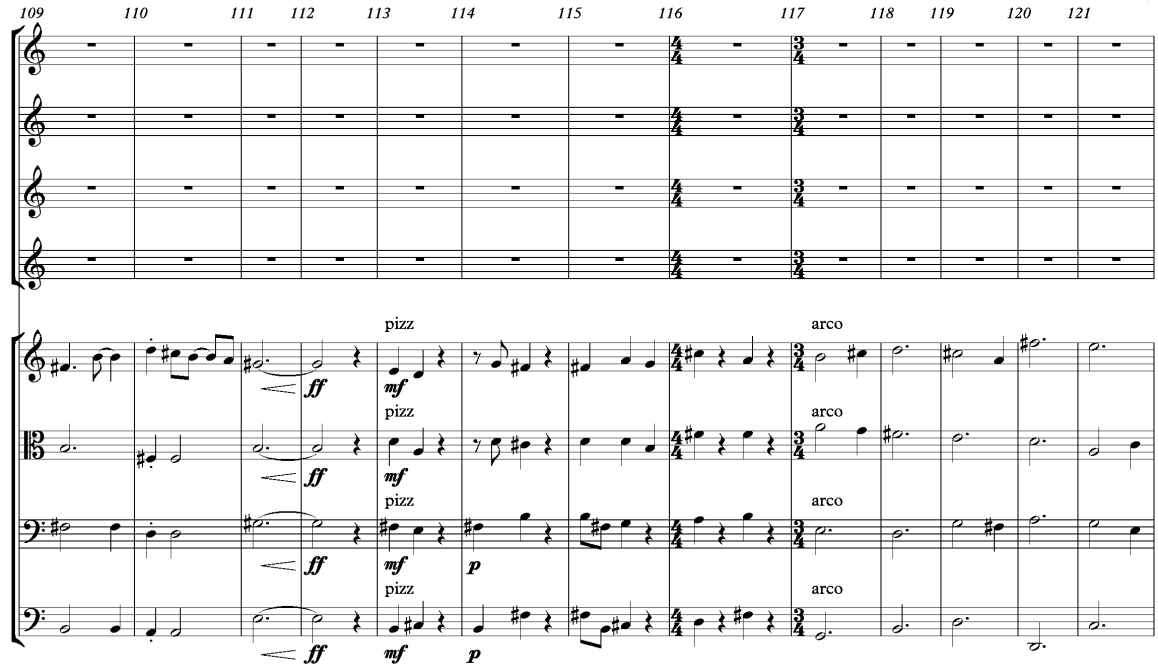
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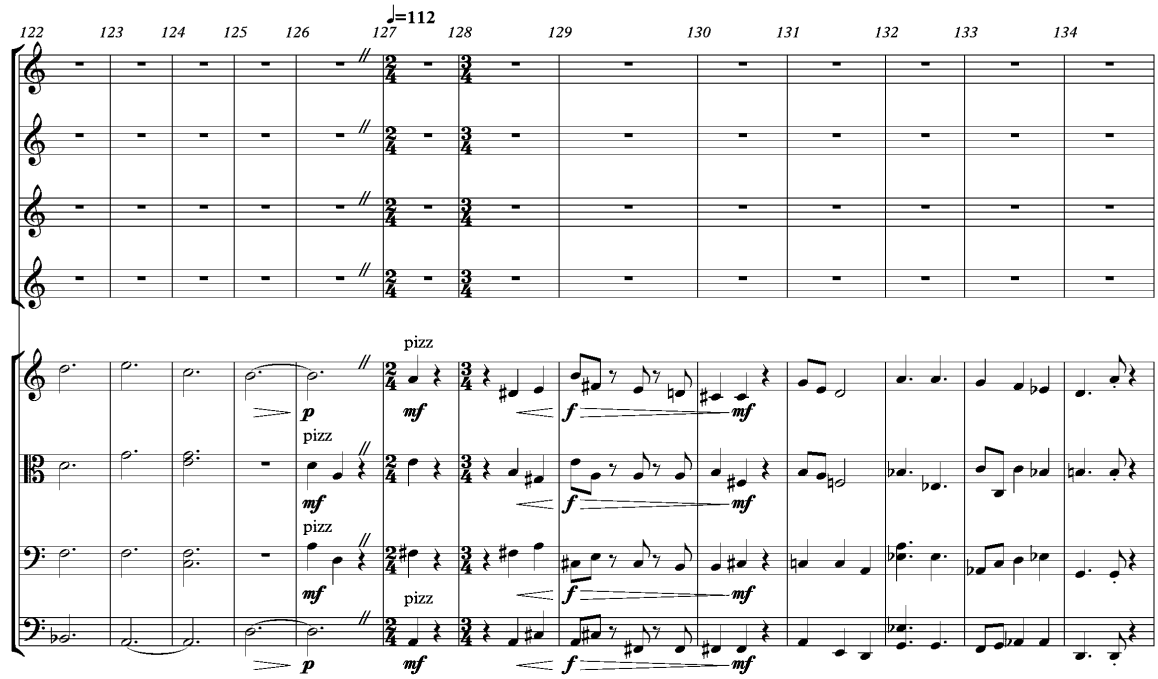
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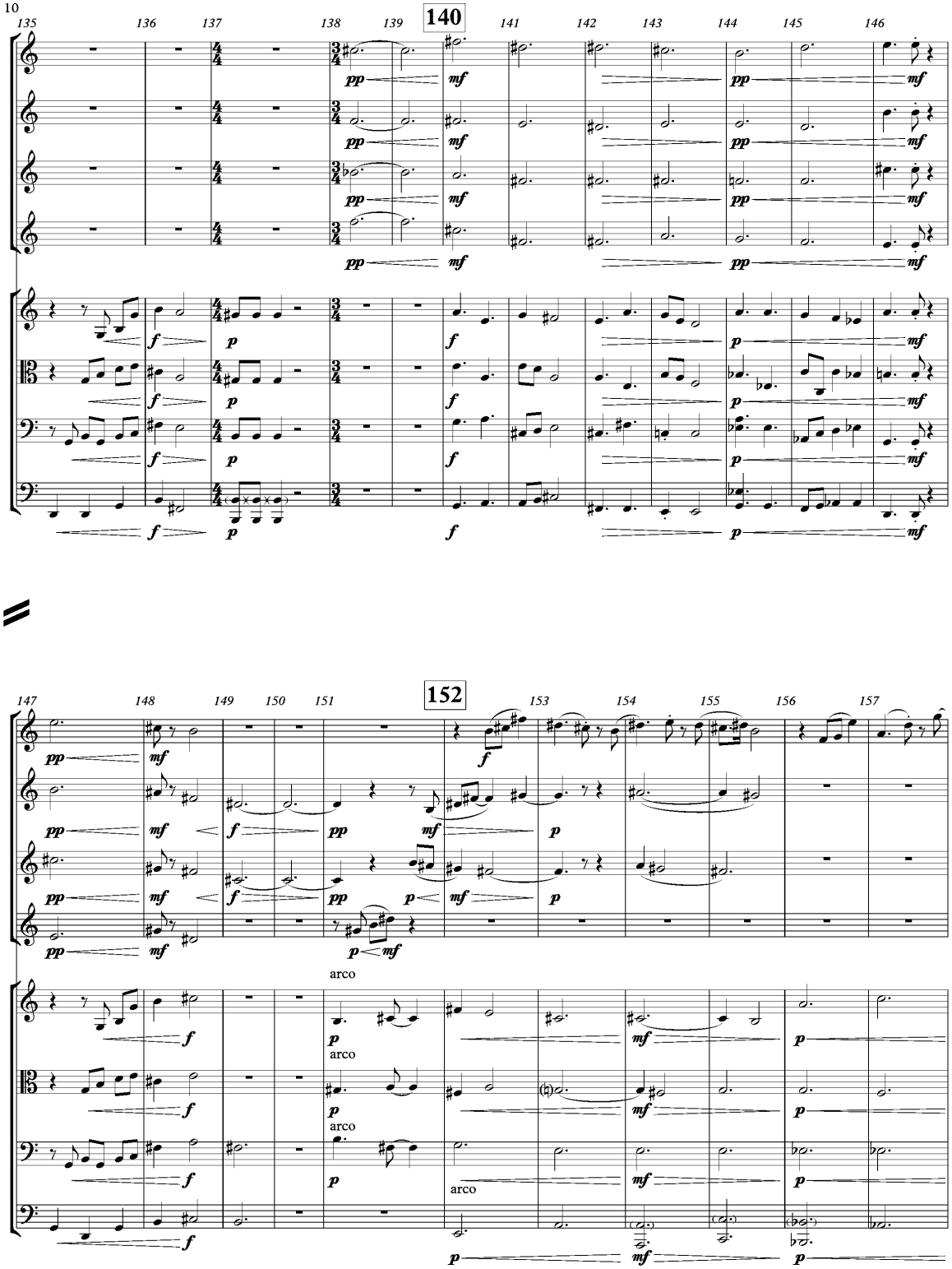
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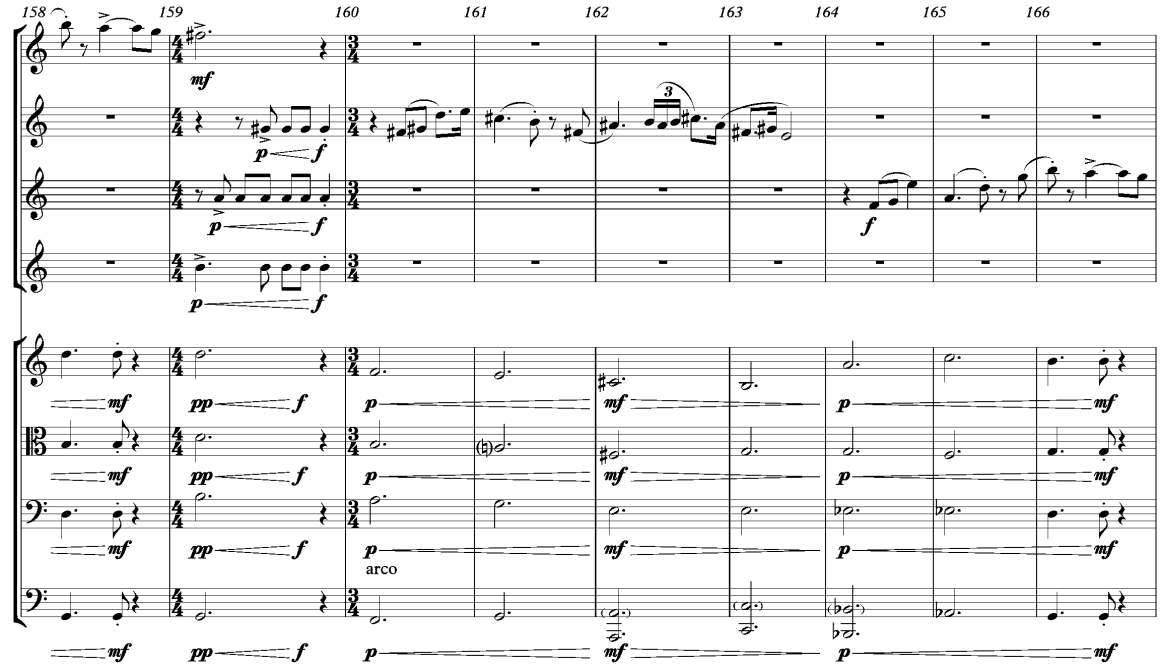
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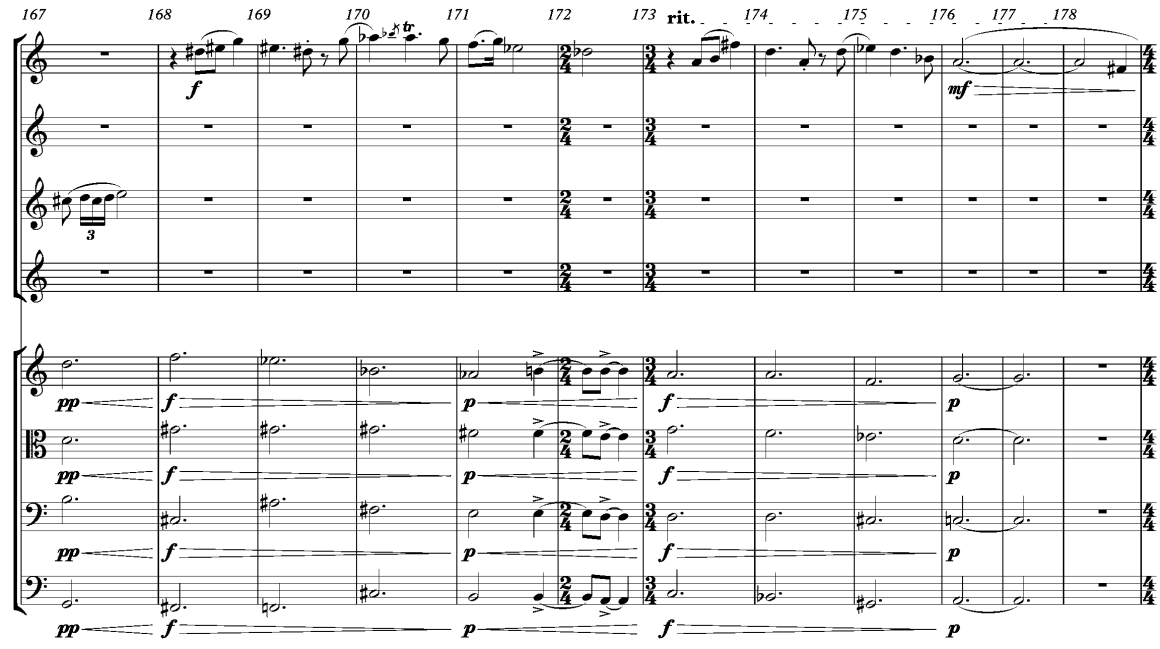
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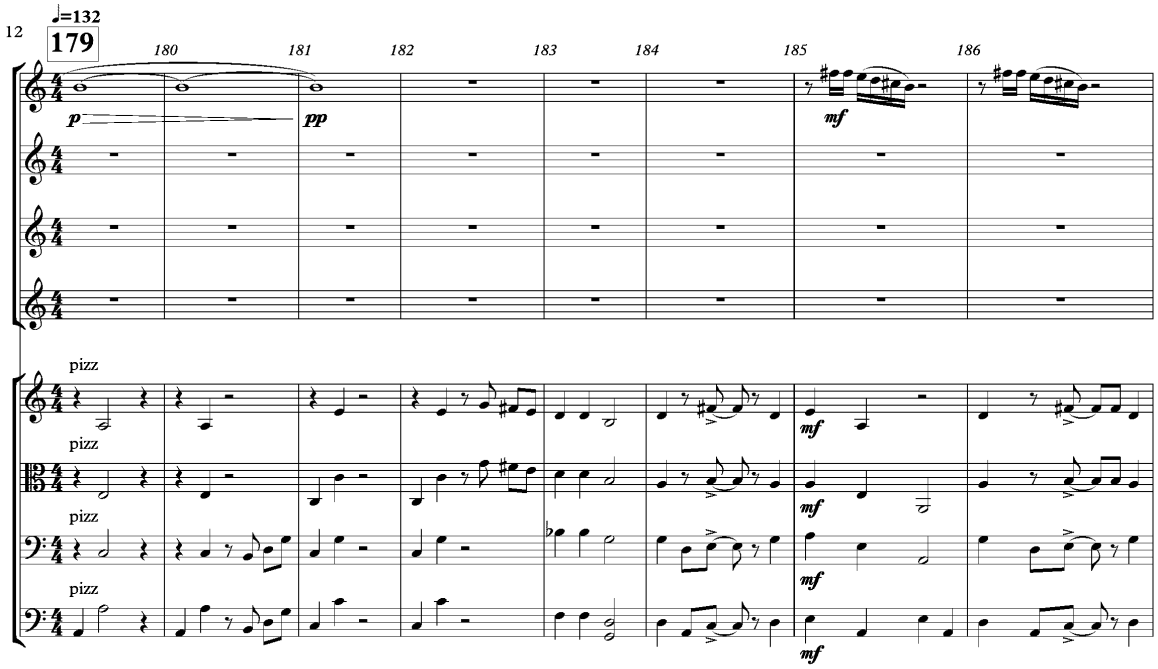
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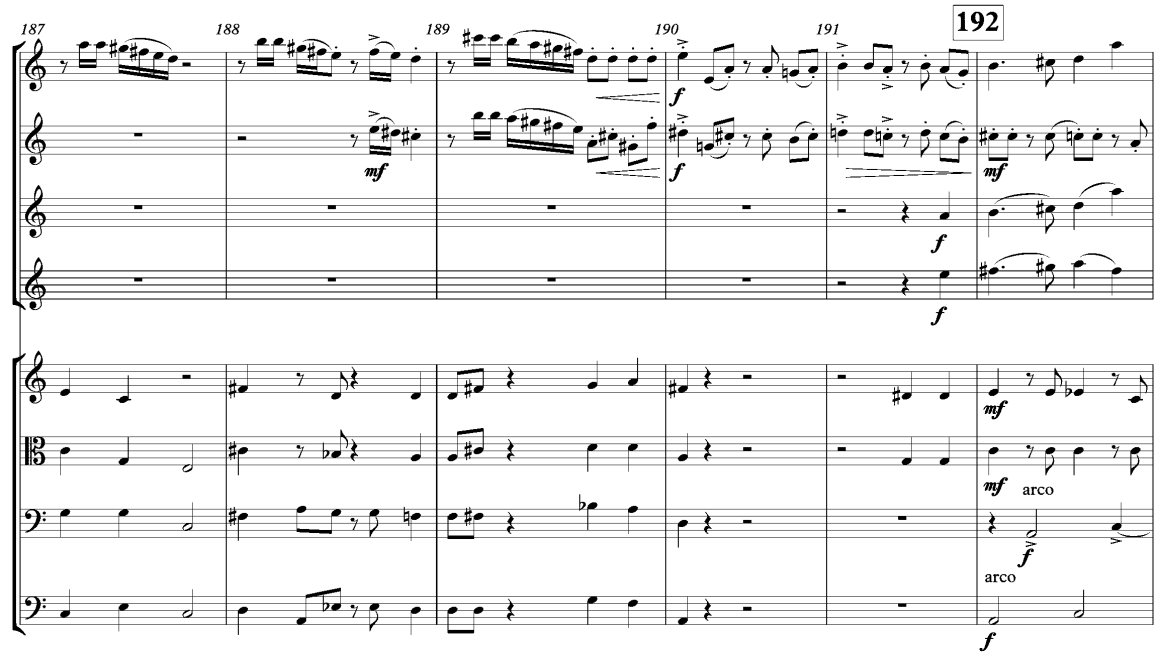
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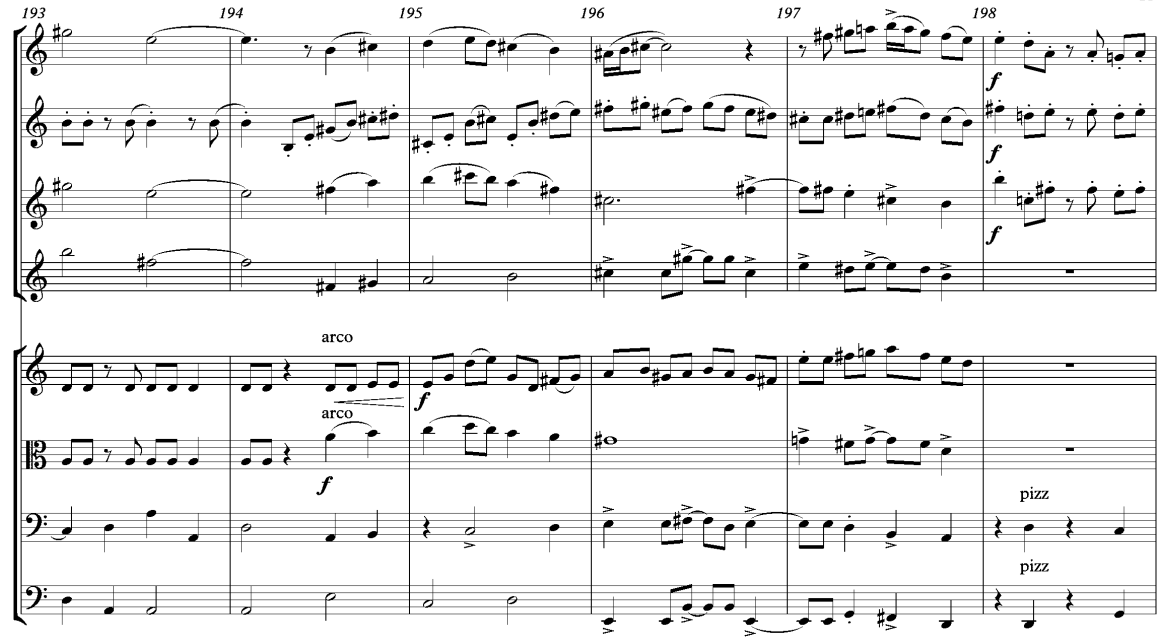
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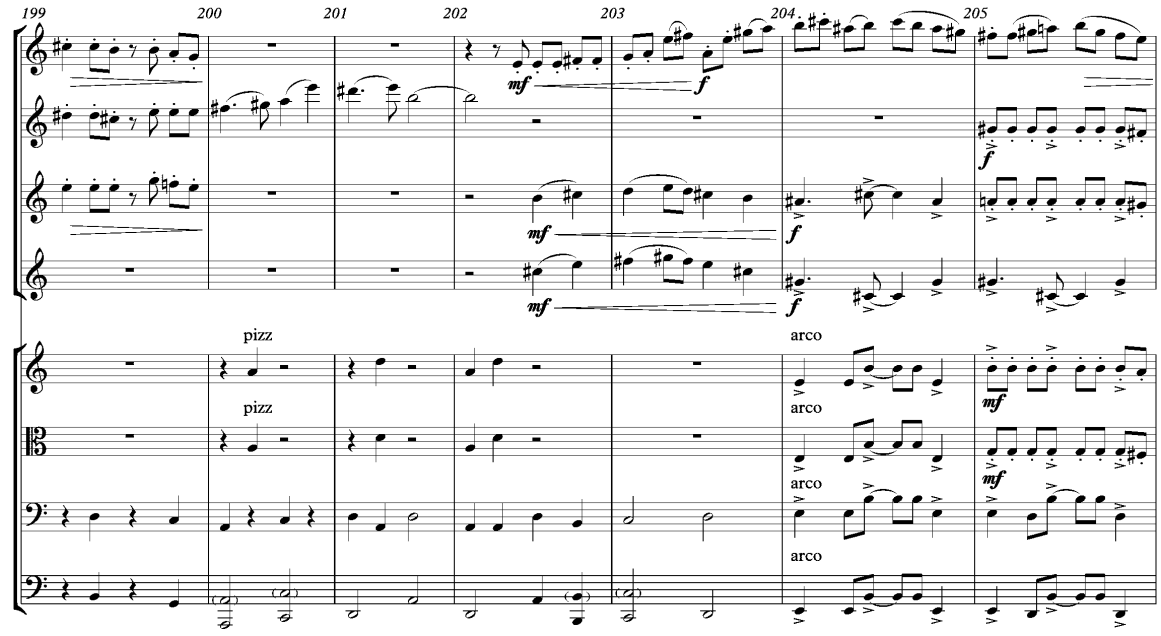
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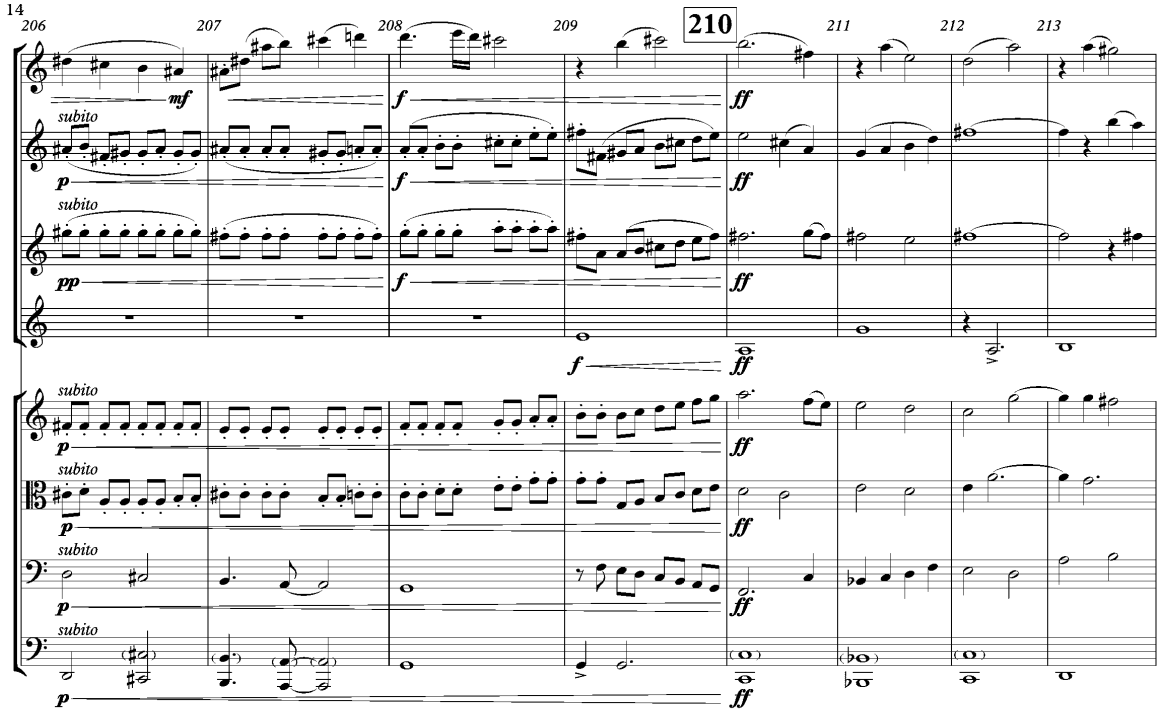
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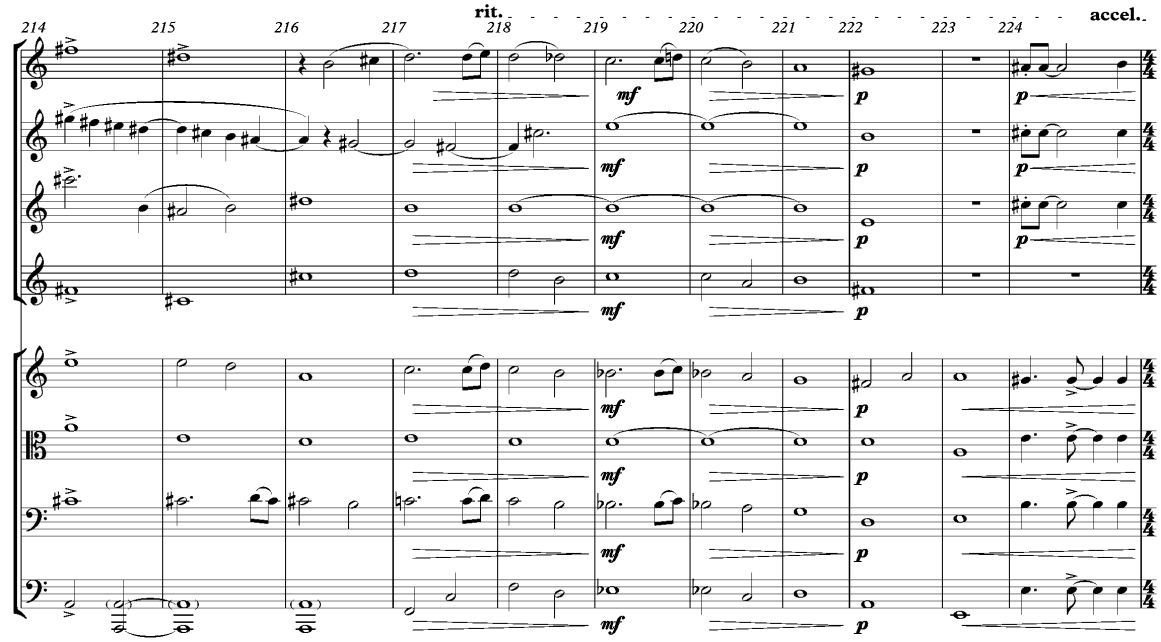
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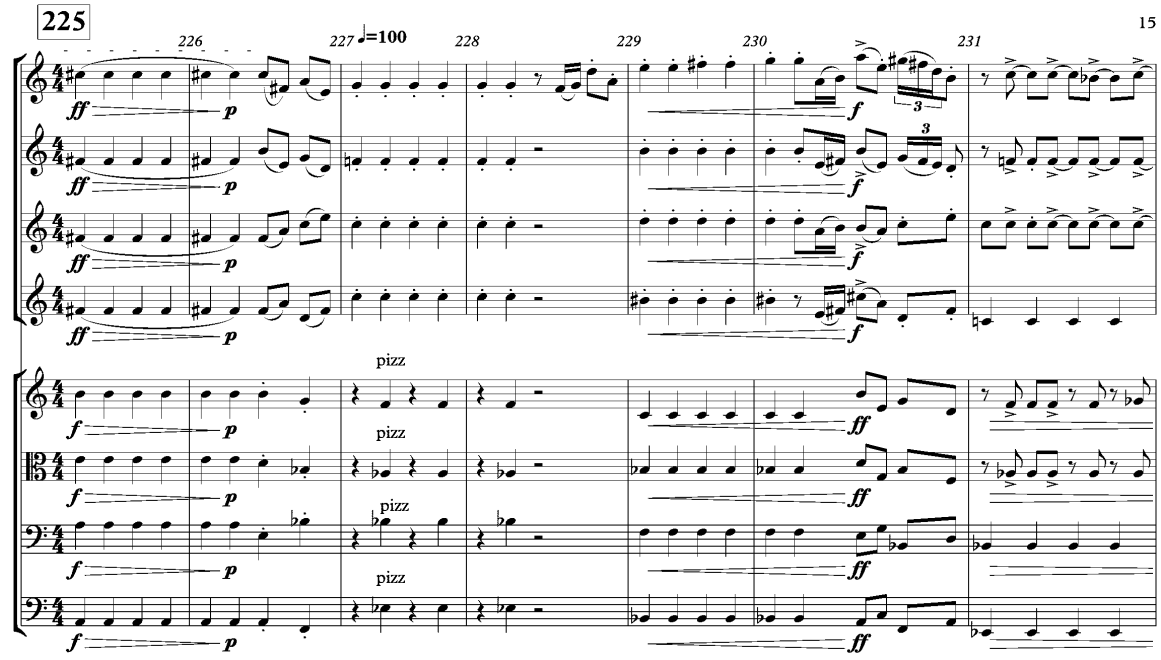
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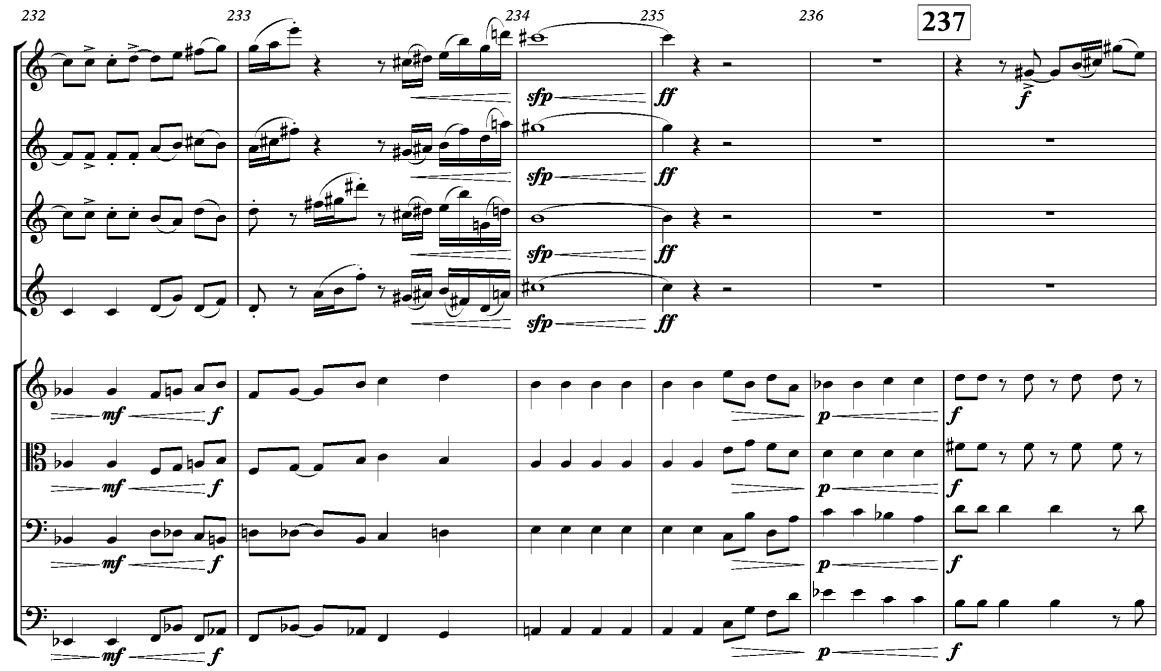
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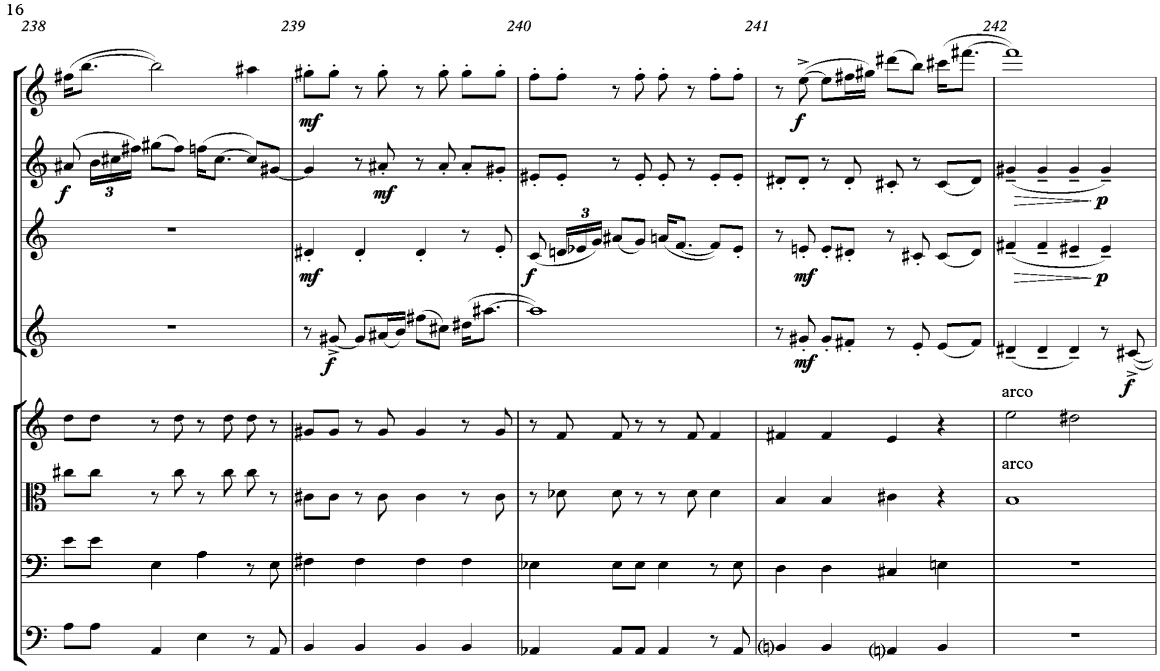

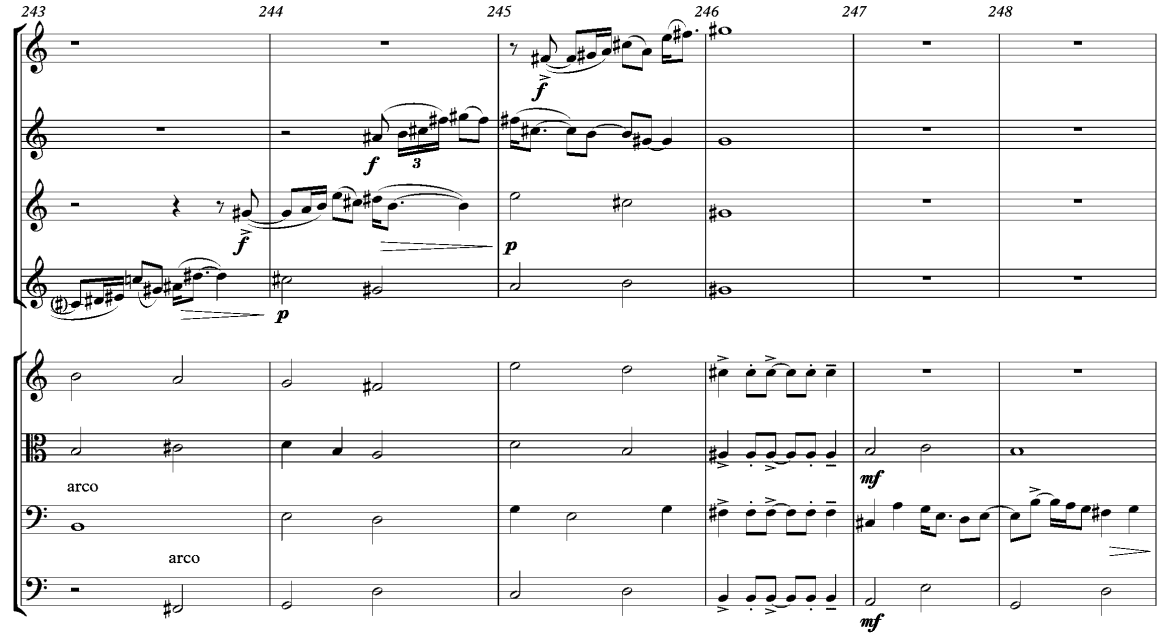

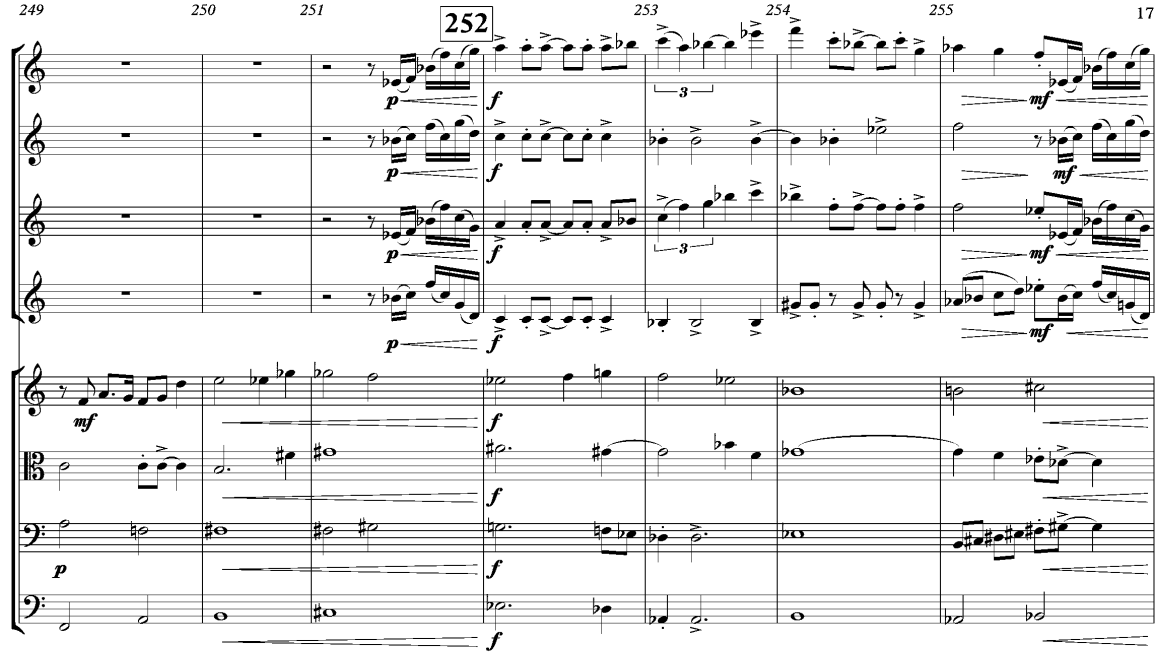
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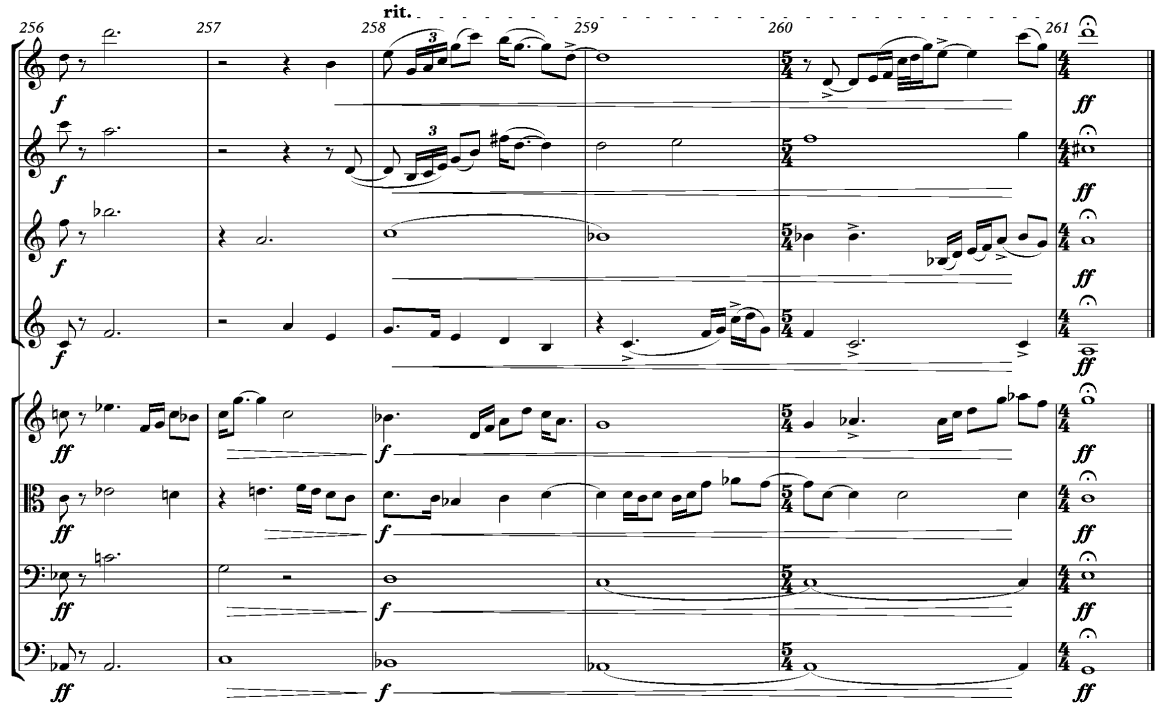
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CHAPTER 5 – NOTES ON THE COMPOSITION

In composing this piece, I hoped to bridge two styles and traditions that are overtly contrasting. Throughout my research, however, I realized the decision that the viol consort and the saxophone quartet share more similarities than I initially imagined. In my interview with Sarah Mead, she commented that she "long believed the saxophone quartet to be a truer successor to the viol consort than the modern string quartet."[29] In much saxophone quartet music, there is an overarching equality of parts. Each instrument is not always delegated to serving a specific role within the ensemble throughout a piece, and the timbres of the instruments allow for a staggering uniformity of sound when the quartet unites rhythmically. This uniformity of sound is also true of the viol consort. The ability for the instruments to blend exceedingly well together comes from their similarity of construction and that they are a "family" or "consort" of like instruments.

Combining the saxophone quartet and viol consort in a piece has happened at least once before. I discovered a single piece written for this type of octet throughout my research. It is for four saxophones and four viols and has the exact instrumentation as mine: four saxophones SATB and four viols TrTnBB. The piece is David Loeb's 1990

[29] Sarah Mead, interviewed by author, January 16, 2023, transcript provided in appendix.

octet *Mutazione*, and it was premiered by the saxophone quartet PRISM and the New York Consort of Viols. I was surprised to discover I had chosen the same instrumentation in the viol consort as David Loeb, because most four-part viol consort is scored for two trebles, one tenor, and one bass (TrTrTnB.) I had decided early that the saxophones would likely dominate the upper register, and adding an extra treble voice would crowd that range. Since the bass viol is much more powerful than the tenor viol and I knew the volume balance would be a challenge, a high bass part would be preferable to scoring the consort with two tenor viols (TrTnTnB.) These could likely have been on David Loeb's mind, as he decided upon the same instrumentation for *Mutazione*.

With the choice of instrumentation and my preparatory research for the piece summarized, I will continue by elaborating on three core concepts in this piece. This first concept focuses on timbral blending and non-antiphonal grouping. The second concept centers around showcasing the viol consort as an ensemble dependent on resonance and decay as much as initiating and sustaining sound. The third concept explores the stylistic flexibility of both the viol consort and the saxophone quartet. My analysis will conclude with an explanation of the harmonic language and thematic material throughout the piece.

The first concept to elaborate upon is the timbral blending and non-antiphonal grouping throughout the piece. When writing an octet that consists of two distinct families of instruments, committing to a segregated treatment of each ensemble is tempting. Though this piece does take advantage of some "double-choir" moments, it was essential to discover moments where instruments could be grouped in other, more

inventive ways. Figure 1 demonstrates the blending of different instrument groups in ways not segregated purely by instrument family.

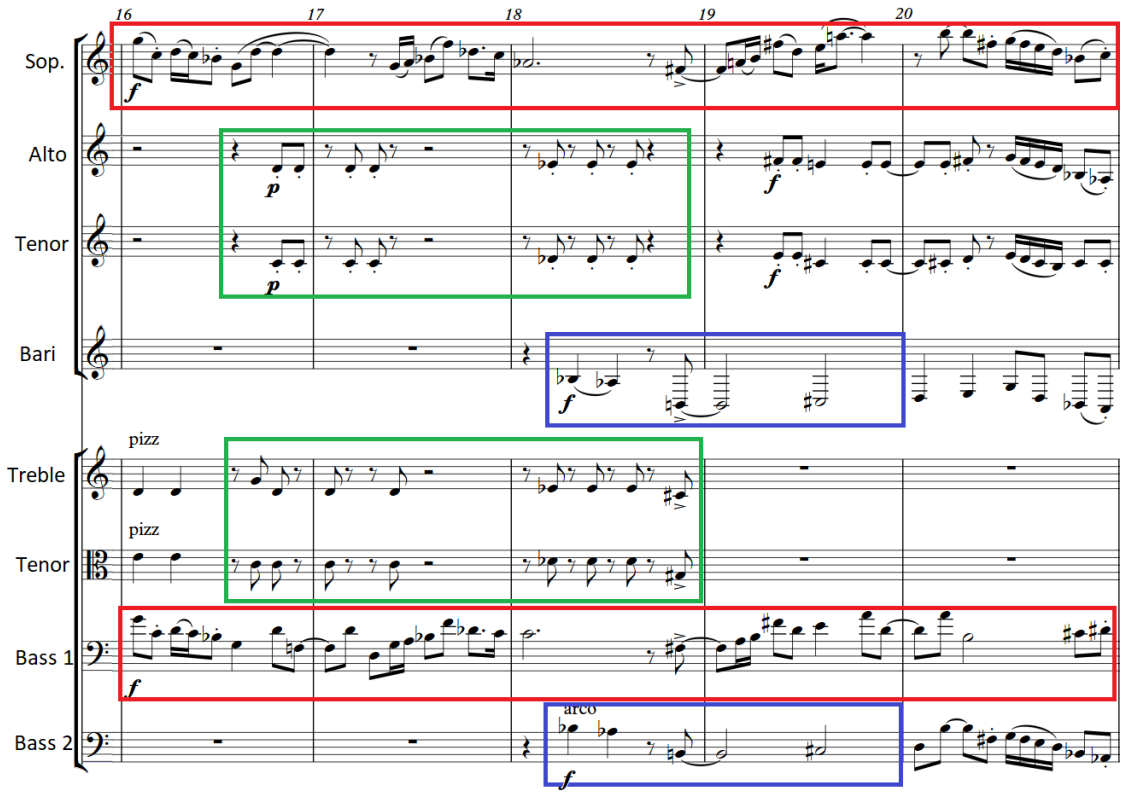

Figure 1 – Non-antiphonal Groupings mm. 16-20

The first group (outlined in red) includes the instruments with melodic material. Because the soprano saxophone and bass viol occupy such different sonic areas, they work well to complement each other by doubling. The second group (outlined in green) contains the instruments participating in a rhythmic accompaniment. The treble viol part is relatively low in its range, which exemplifies a more resonant quality. The tenor viol is

in the middle of its range, approximating the same resonance as the treble's low end. The alto and tenor saxophone's role in this group is to punctuate and add rhythmic energy to the viols. Matching the high viols with the middle saxophones helps achieve a quality of resonance and articulation that sustains this section's momentum. The third group in this figure (outlined in blue) pairs the baritone saxophone with the bottom bass viol. These parts enter in unison and help accentuate the playful rhythmic figures in the melody. Figure 2 demonstrates a similar grouping where specific viols and saxophones are paired to achieve the musical goal.

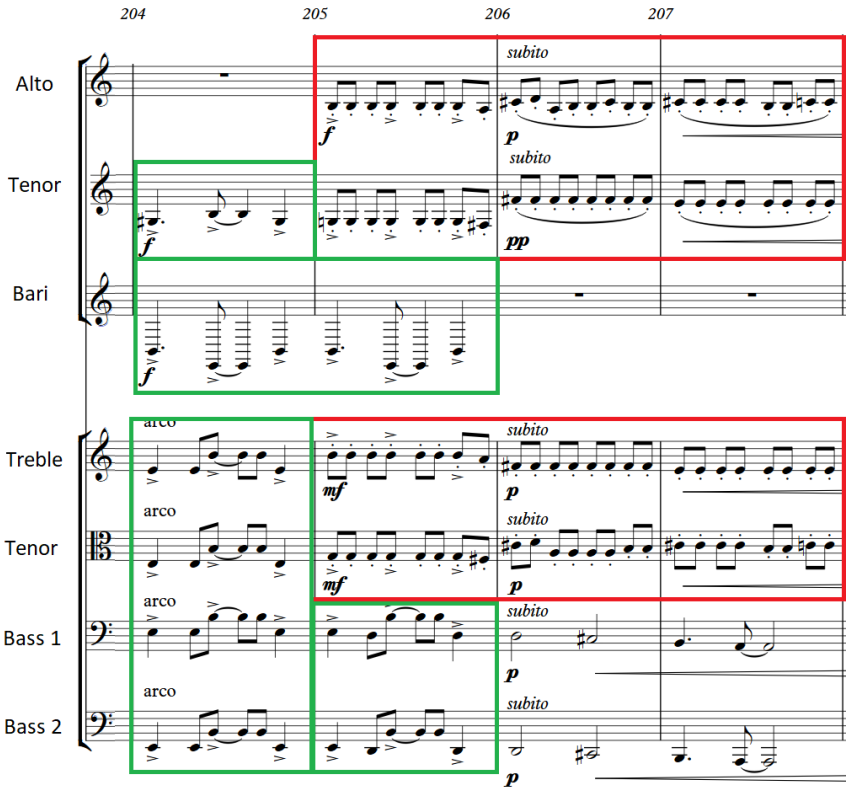

Figure 2 – Non-antiphonal Groupings mm. 204-207

The high viols and middle saxophones combine again in measure 205, though the viols are arco in this example. A viol-centric texture dominates the sudden shift to a quieter dynamic in measure 206. The melody is alone in the soprano saxophone, and the bass viols work together in octaves to compensate for a lack of depth as the baritone saxophone rests in measure 206. The tenor and baritone saxophones also join the entire viol consort in measure 204 to bolster their unison rhythms. Examples of timbral blending are present throughout the piece, and they help to achieve a more cohesive sound across the entire octet. These groupings of instruments highlight the possibilities of timbral blending and avoid segregating the quartets into groups of like-instruments.

The second central topic revolves around the importance of resonance and lyricism in the viol consort and is best explained by a moment in Liam Byrne's interview, "My core understanding of the viol as a sound concept… is that we really are halfway between a bowed instrument and a plucked instrument."[30] The viol consort can be a very lyrical sonority. Still, it is important to consider that the way it produces sound relies much more on resonance and decay than the modern cello or violin.

In concordance with Lian Byrne's advice, I found many opportunities to showcase the viol consort as a plucked and bowed instrument throughout this piece. Not only does significant arco material demonstrate my adherence to this concept, but my

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[30] Liam Byrne, interviewed by author, February 16, 2023, transcript provided in appendix.

inclusion of extended pizzicato sections also stems from Byrne's advice. The effect of an entire viol consort playing pizzicato is one of the most underutilized textures in the repertoire, and my experimentation throughout this piece has yielded unique and engaging sonorities. The pizzicato sound is integral to this piece; the viol consort spends roughly one-third of its time plucking. Figure 3 demonstrates a significant moment where the viol consort's pizzicato is the dominant sound.

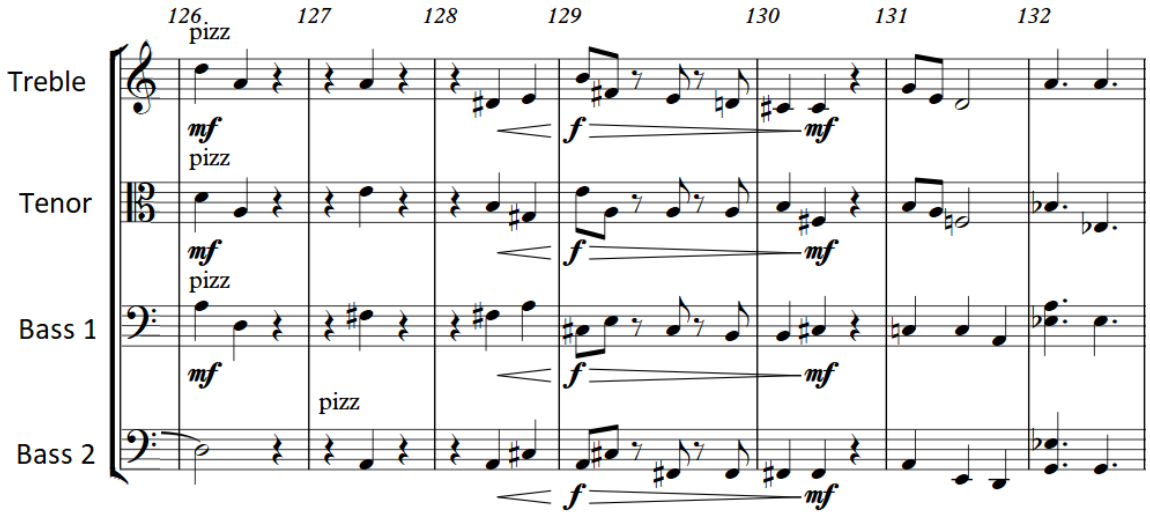

Figure 3 – Exposed Pizzicato in Viol Consort mm. 126-132

The viols present this material alone, and the presence of half notes and rests signifies a more idiomatic treatment of the viol's resonant pizzicato compared to the cello or violin. Though this is a transitional moment between two larger sections of the piece, here, the exposed pizzicato in the viols introduces the material that will be used throughout the next section as an underlying rhythmic backdrop. Figure 4 demonstrates

the saxophone's response to the viol's pizzicato by combining the slap-tongue technique and staccato articulation.

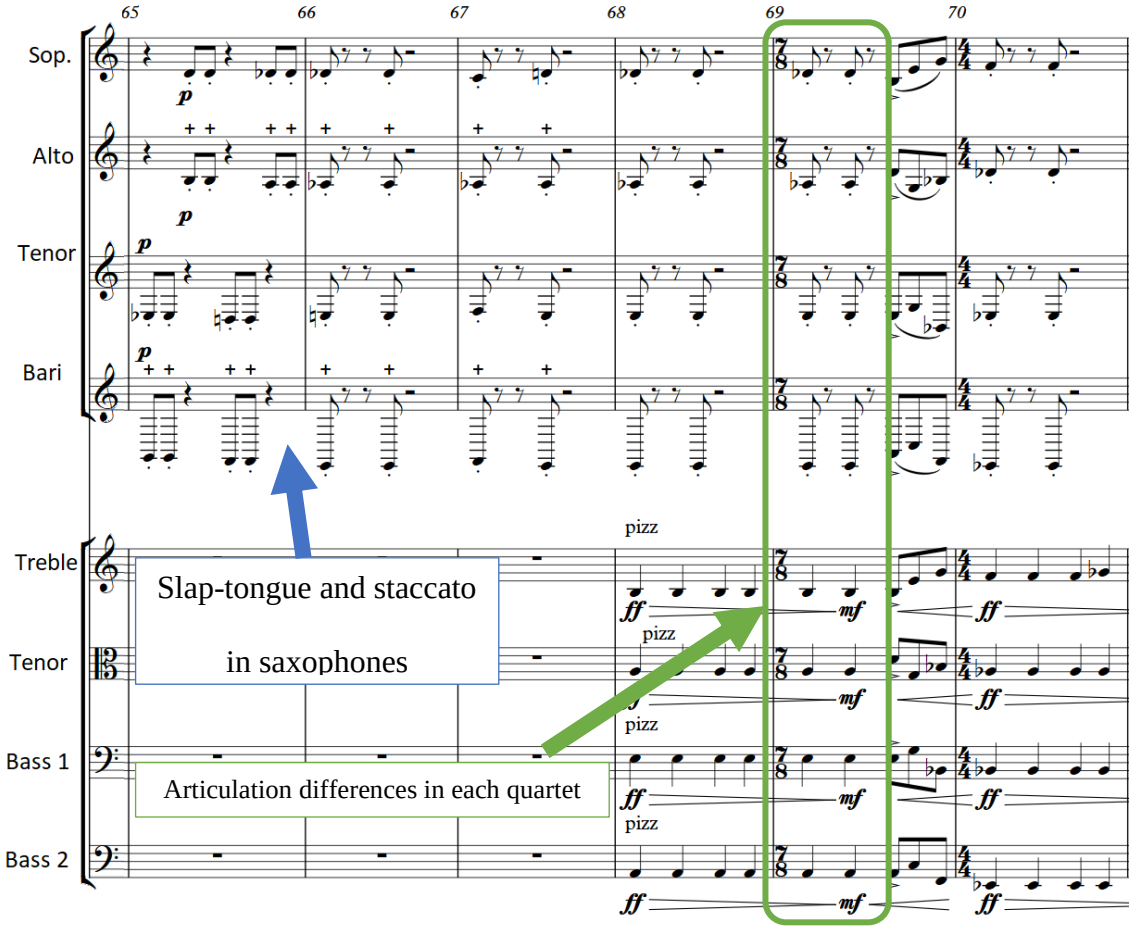

Figure 4 – Saxophone Articulation and Viol Pizzicato mm. 65-70

The saxophones begin this transition alone, but the viols join in imitation. Measure 69 is written differently in the viols than in the saxophones. This difference in notation clarifies that the viol pizzicato should resonate without being covered by a held note in the saxophones. Eighth notes with staccato marks in the saxophones help initiate

the pizzicato sound, but the lasting resonance comes from the viols. The same concept applies to Figure 5, where saxophones are instructed to play “quasi pizzicato.”

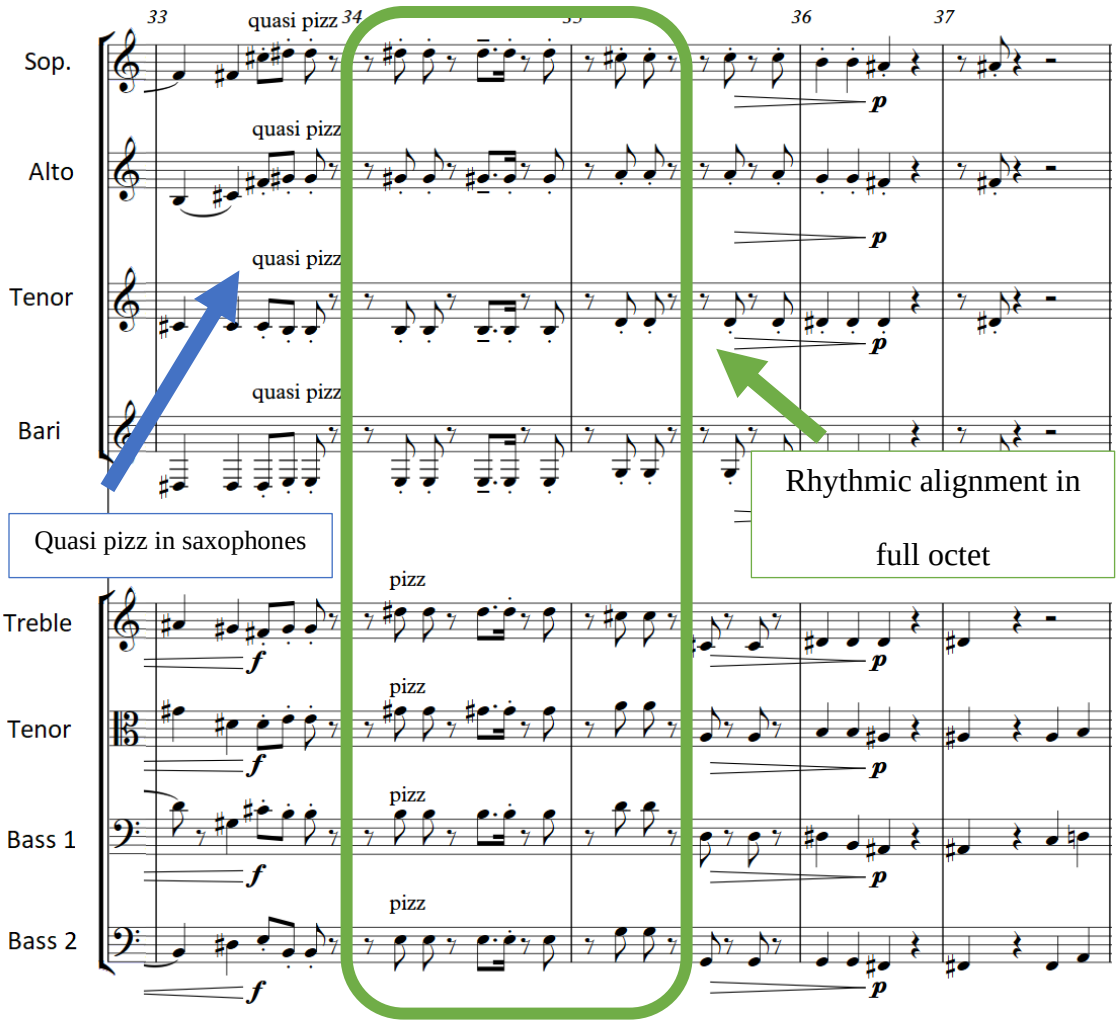

Figure 5 – Quasi Pizzicato and Rhythmic Alignment mm. 33-37

Here, the entire ensemble unifies to create a more percussively driven section within the piece. All viols are higher in tessitura to accentuate the more percussive nature of this section. As on any string instrument, higher notes on the viol have a more

immediate attack and less resonance. The higher tessitura enables a more punctuated and articulate attack, which is appropriate to this section where the saxophones double the viol consort. Measure 34 doubles every voice of the consort with its saxophone counterpart. The treble viol is in unison with the soprano saxophone, the tenor viol to the alto saxophone, et cetera. As is evident from measure 34, the ranges of these instruments align exceedingly well with each other, and there is a significant overlap in tessitura. Throughout the piece, there are additional examples of exploiting the resonance low pizzicato of the viols and contrasting them with the more punctuated staccato from the saxophones.

Concept three involves showcasing the stylistic flexibility of the octet. In his interview, Nico Muhly cited the viola da gamba as the "most cantabile of the instruments." Other interviewees mentioned the viol's connection to lyricism and vocal music as well. Heather Spence and Sarah Mead noted the meaningful connection between viol music and vocal music. A historical link is also present here; viols have been used alongside the voices for madrigals and masses since the Renaissance. Many other interviewees also mentioned the importance of writing for viols as if they were more related to the voice than other instruments. The vocal quality of polyphonic Renaissance music forms the foundation of the viol consort's repertoire, and it has shaped the instrument's playing technique. Therefore, it would be a missed opportunity to present music for the viol consort that did not showcase its strengths. Swelling, vocal harmonies contrasted with the rigid, rhythmic figuration is third concept to be highlighted.

Musicians often contrast instrumental and vocal styles. Music that exhibits a more "instrumental" style is characterized by unexpected chromaticism, rapid leaps of large intervals, and sustained percussive or rhythmic energy. Music that exhibits a more vocal style contains more connected and melodic lines, swelling harmonies, and stepwise motion. Though many saxophone quartets excel in achieving a lyrical style, a significant amount of their repertoire is associated with a more "instrumental" style. This piece explores and juxtaposes the instrumental and vocal styles of both quartets within the ensemble. Figure 6 contains the transitional material into the first dominantly lyrical section of the piece.

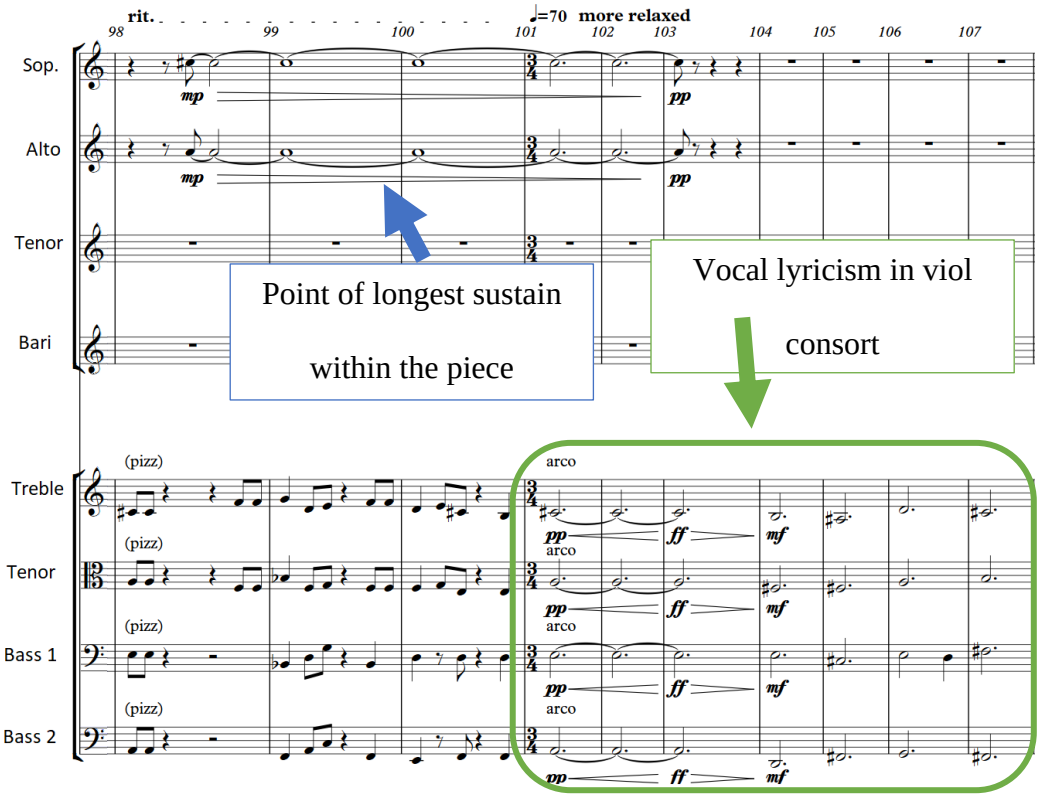

Figure 6 – Transition to Lyrical Material mm. 98-107

In this transition, the viols finish pizzicato in a low, resonant tessitura while the top two saxophones introduce the longest note that has happened yet within the piece. The tempo slows, and the character changes in measure 101 as the viol harmony unfolds. This is the first moment where the texture clears into simple homophony and the bowed viol takes the foreground. The viols move primarily as a single unit, embodying their ability to "fall into each other and become one thing, pull away from that one thing, and return to it. There is a rich sort of soup of overtones that isn't confusing or distracting."[31] Figure 7 demonstrates the same type of harmonic sea in the viol consort but as background material on which the alto saxophone can float.

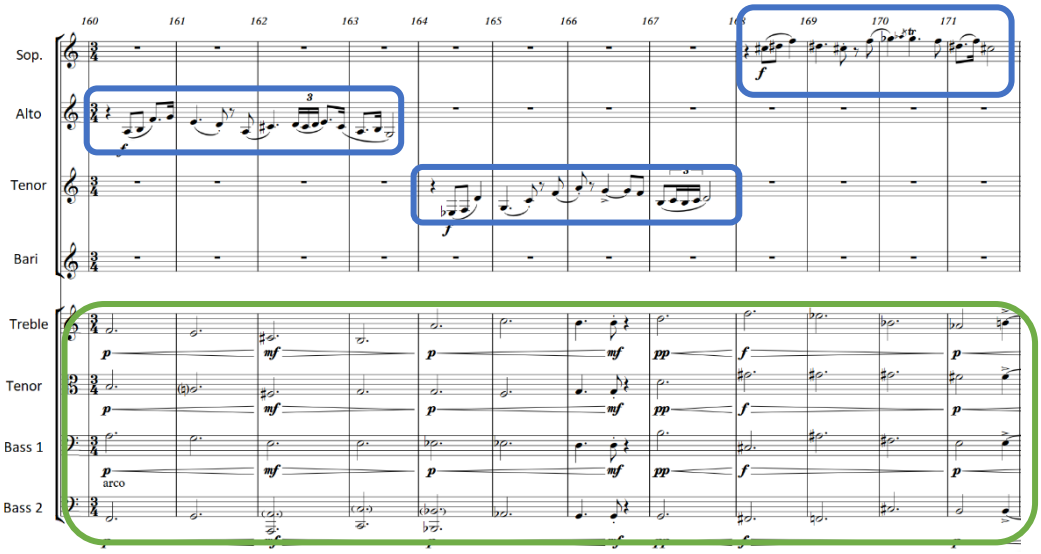

Figure 7 – Lyrical Viol Texture as Background Material mm. 160-171

[31] Sarah Mead, interviewed by author, January 16, 2023, transcript provided in appendix.

In measures 160-172, the soprano, alto, and tenor saxophones exchange melody as the viol consort provides a harmonic backdrop. Non-functional harmony dominates this section, and the full range of the low bass viol's seventh string adds considerable depth. The saxophone's melody is more ornamented to reflect the soloistic nature of this section. Figure 8 provides a final example of lyricism and mixed polyphony.

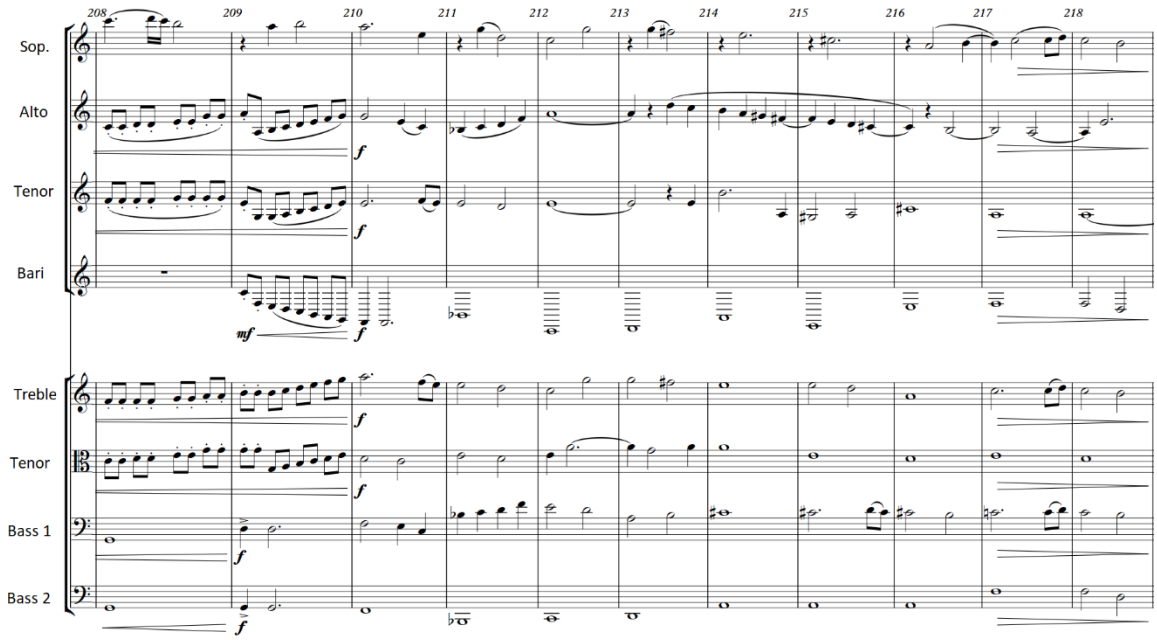

Figure 8 – "Graveyard" Section mm. 208-218

One of the most climactic and ethereal moments of Jacobean or Elizabethan consort music is when a section of rapid activity suddenly gives way to dramatically augmented note values and a slower harmonic rhythm. Colloquially, this is sometimes referred to as a "graveyard" section. Measure 210 approaches a modern interpretation of a "graveyard" section and is euphoric climax of the piece. Preceded by a section of

rhythmic activity and energy, this section is a welcome contrast and utilizes all members of the octet in a harmonic spiral toward an inevitable resolution. This juxtaposition of rhythmic energy and broad, floating gestures falls directly in line with concept three. Figure 9 continues to demonstrate concept three by showcasing the more rhythmically driven style at which the saxophone quartet excels.

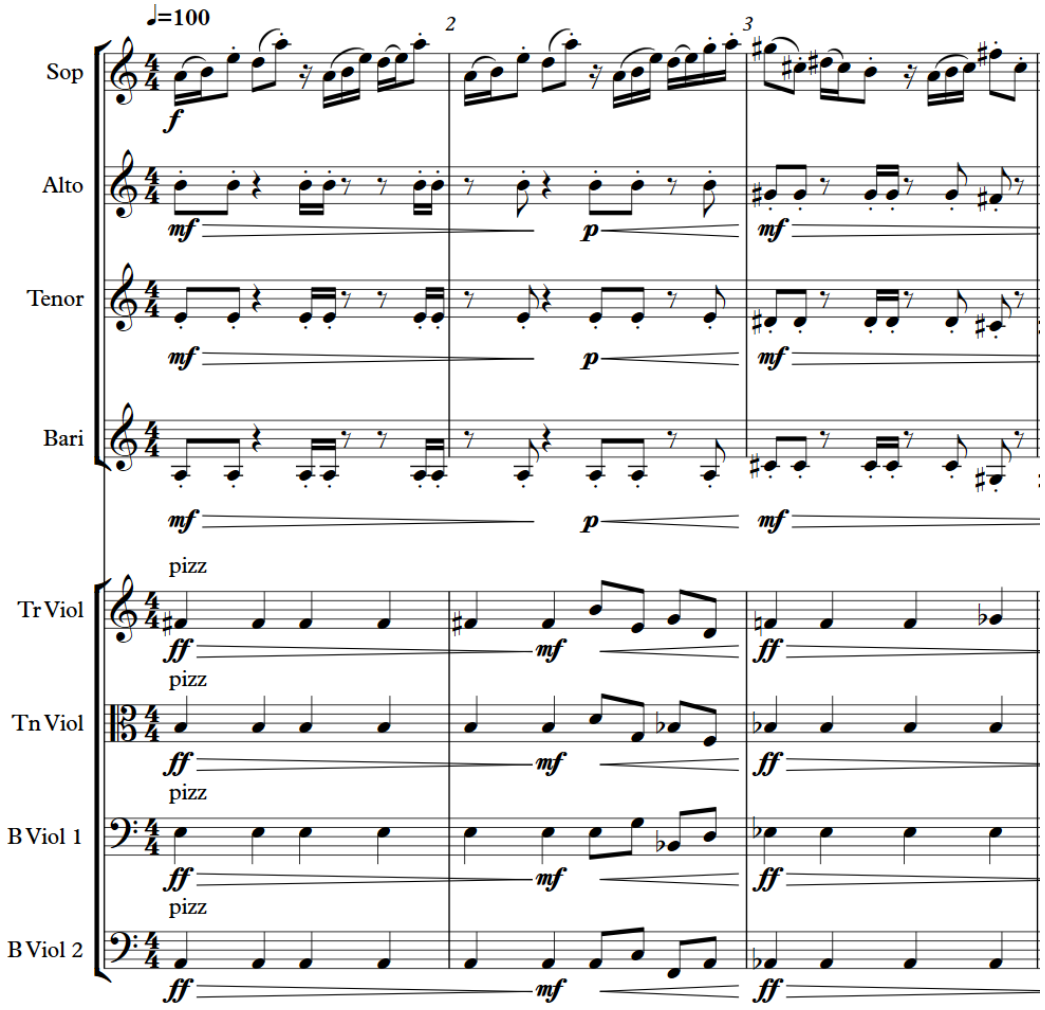

Figure 9 – Rhythmically Driven Instrumental Style mm. 1-3

The piece opens with a driving rhythmic figure. The viol consort's steady pizzicato pulse drives the momentum and provides a stable point of departure for the more rhythmically intricate saxophone parts. The alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones work as a unit to play disparate rhythms within the resonance of the viol pizzicato. The soprano saxophone provides rising melodic gestures with sprightly articulation. Since the piece opens with this playful energy, it sets an expectation that it will be predominantly instrumental in style. The energy of the opening gesture is maintained well into the piece, but the first anticipation of a more cantabile style arrives alongside the viol's transition to arco in measure 10.

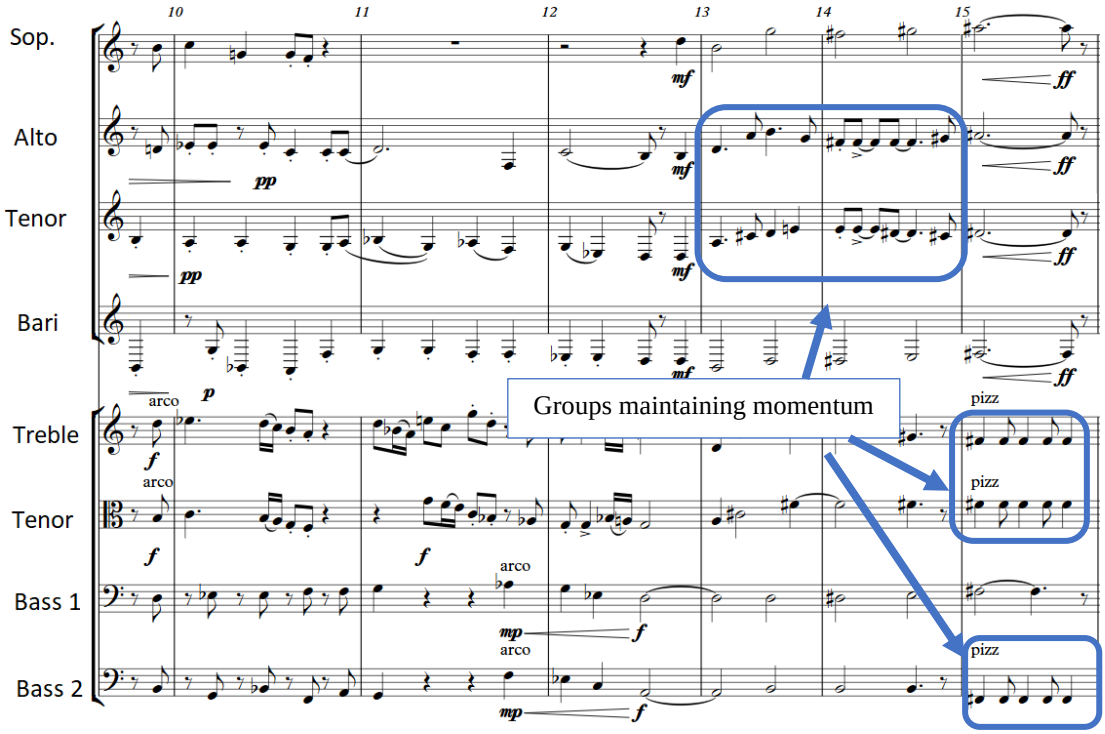

Figure 10 – Anticipation of the Lyrical Section mm. 10-15

Figure 10 shows the gradual development of longer note values up to measure 15. Though this stint with lyricism is only brief, the momentum can be easily lost. The alto and tenor saxophones maintain the rhythmic momentum in measure 14, and the viols regain control through the pizzicato in the next measure. Throughout the piece, this sustaining of both rhythmic momentum and sprightful energy guided the composition. There exists a delicate balance between sustaining the momentum and fatiguing an audience with an abundance of active material.

The final portion of the analysis explores the piece's harmonic language and thematic material. It is helpful to describe music along four independent axes: diatonic to chromatic, consonant to dissonant, functional to non-functional, and tonal to atonal. These four axes will form the basis of the remaining analysis. Using these descriptors, I would generally categorize my piece as chromatic, consonant, non-functional, and tonal. Figure 11 demonstrates one of the significant moments of chromaticism within the piece; all twelve chromatic pitches are present within two measures.

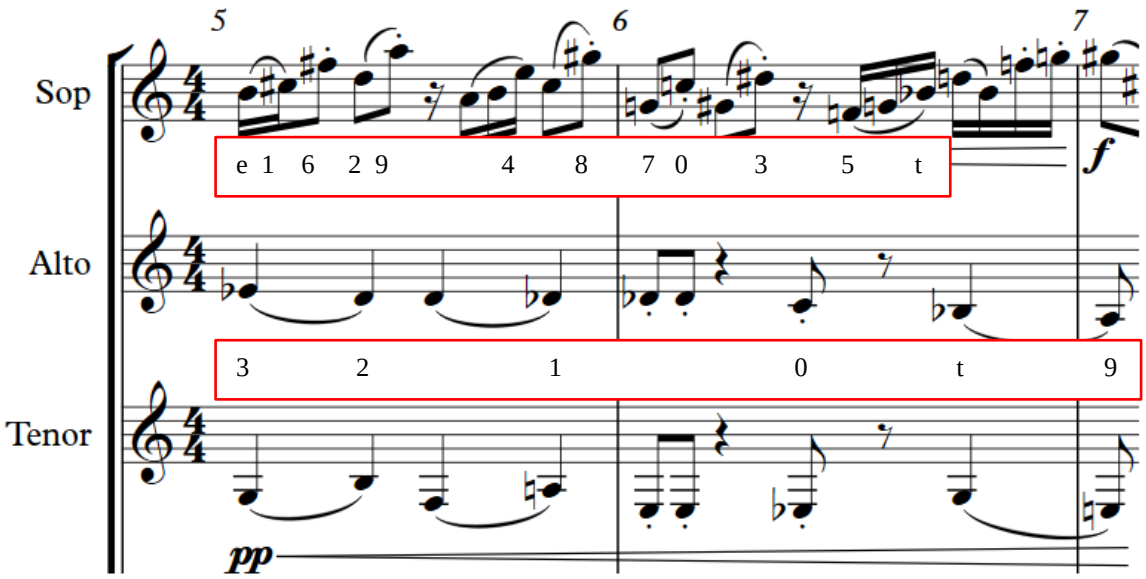

Figure 11 – Chromaticism mm. 5-6

This figure shows the soprano saxophone's rising melodic gesture that dominates the opening material as it chromatically descends in measures five and six. In the figure, the integer notation marks the soprano and alto lines as each new pitch occurs. Though the soprano line alone contains all twelve tones, the chromatic descent in the alto line and the drifting chromatic harmony in the rest of the ensemble are also significantly chromatic. Chromaticism in music can be used to achieve various effects, from sorrow and despair to whimsy and gaiety. The chromaticism throughout my piece typically manifests itself in a light-hearted, playful character. I frequently pair the chromatic gestures with rising, non-stepwise lines that help achieve a more playful character. This leaping is also demonstrated in Figure 11, where the theme in the soprano saxophone contains five stepwise relationships and sixteen leaps of a third or greater.

Though the material is highly chromatic at times, it remains generally consonant. I utilize intervals of great tension like the tritone or minor second only sparingly to help drive cadential motion. The consonant harmonies help establish the overtly joyful nature of the piece. Added-note chords are a frequent sonority and are typically derived from quintal harmonies, just as the dominant melodic material focuses on the interval of an ascending fifth. Figure 12 highlights the quintal chords in the opening material.

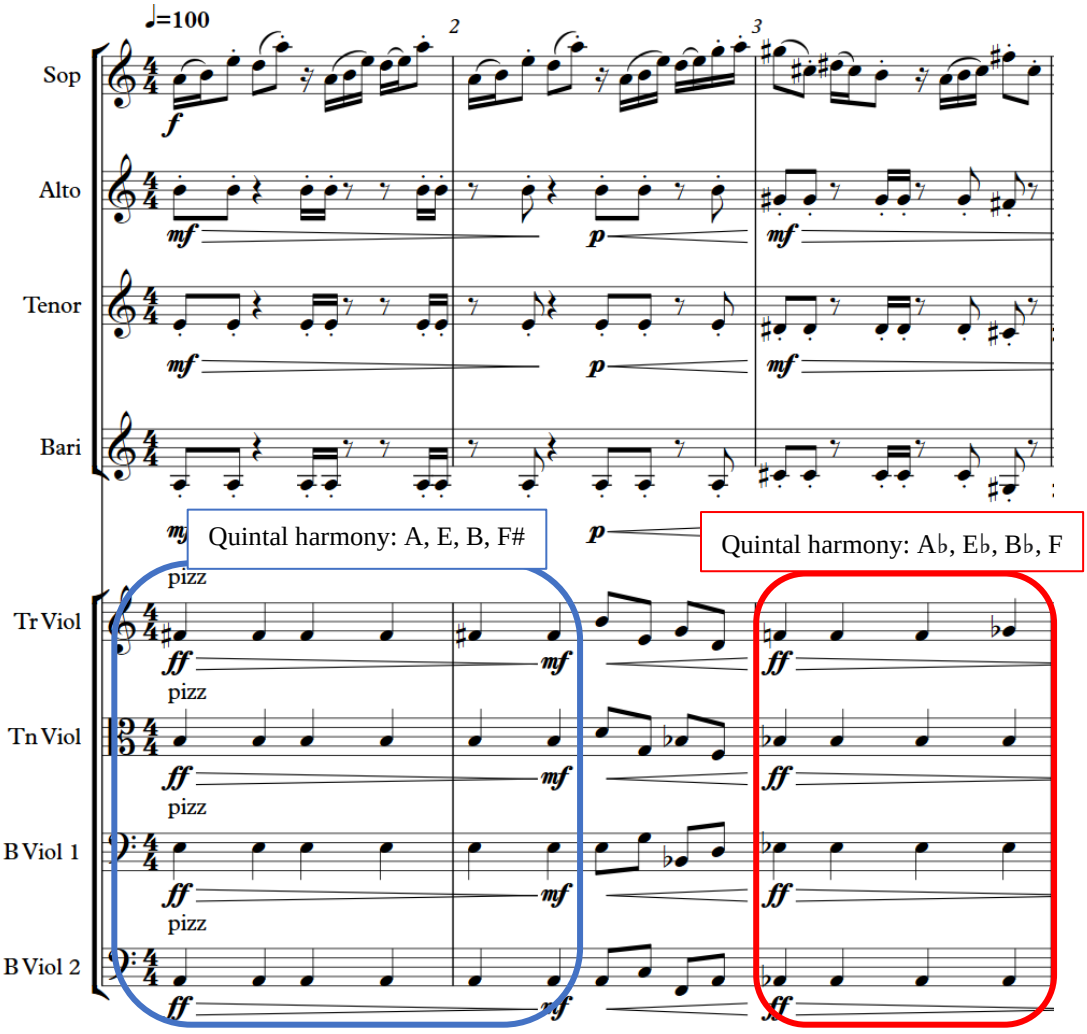

Figure 12 – Quintal Harmony mm. 1-3

The first two harmonies of the piece are four-voice quintal chords, and the connection to chromaticism is also present in the ½ step chromatic relationship between them. Like much Renaissance polyphony, the harmonies that are non-functional within this piece stem from each voice's linear motion. I seldom generated material from a vertical perspective. Because most of the harmonies arose from linear motion, chords and harmonies formed without concern for their typical functional role in the section's key area. This is why the harmony is not always well-interpreted functionally. Figure 13 exemplifies some of the non-functional, linearly derived harmonies.

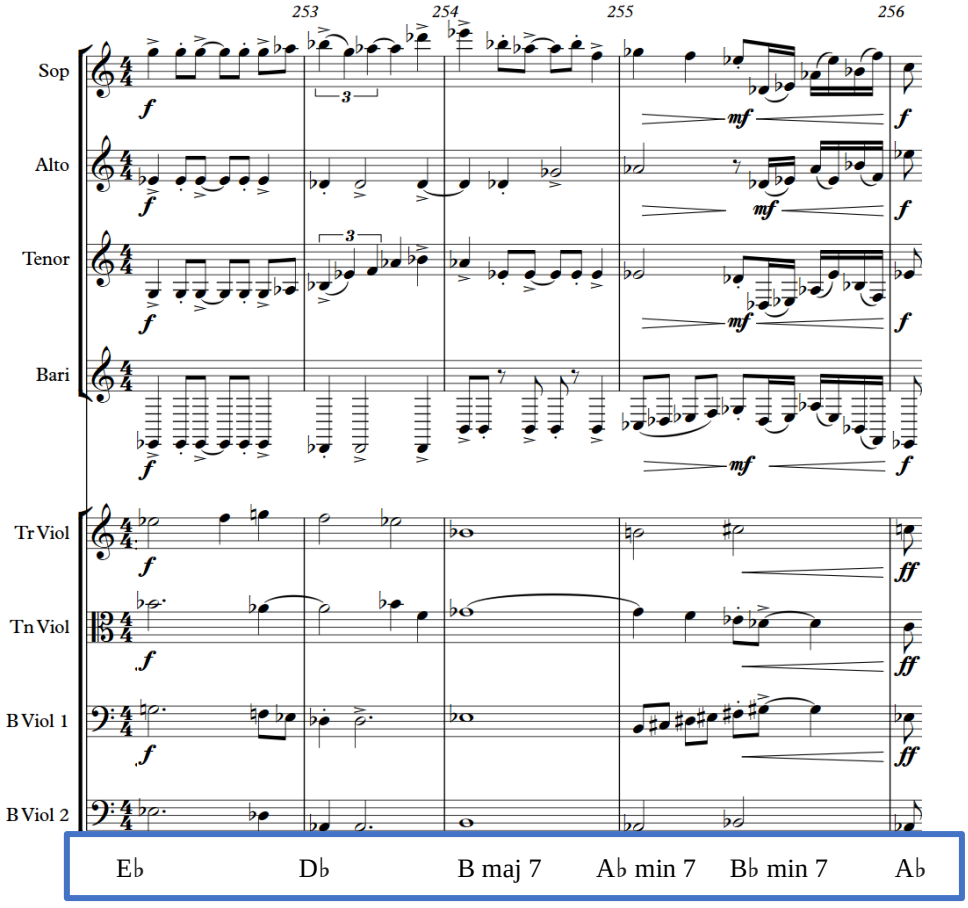

Figure 13 – Non-Functional Harmony mm. 252-256

Simplifying the harmonies in measures 252-256 yields the progression outlined in example 13. This section does not build upon an understanding that certain chords function as predominant, dominant, and tonic. Linear motion drives the resolution to A♭ major instead of a motion from dominant to tonic characteristic of functional harmony. Throughout the piece, linearly derived harmonies take on the role of developing tension to create drama within the music. The surprising harmonic turns characteristic of non-functional harmony make this piece more engaging.

In summary, the three core concepts outlined within this chapter center around Nico Muhly's advice of finding the unique qualities of each instrument and exploiting the sounds that come to them most naturally. Concept one elaborated on the blending of timbres from viol to saxophone, exemplified in the varied non-antiphonal groupings throughout the piece. Concept two centered around showcasing the viol consort as an ensemble "halfway between a bowed and plucked instrument."[32] Typically, the saxophones in this piece provide contrasting, punctuating sonorities to the more resonant pizzicato from the viol consort. Concept three elaborated on the octet's stylistic flexibility and juxtaposition of instrumental and vocal styles. Finally, I described how the piece is generally chromatic, consonant, non-functional, and tonal by analyzing harmonic language and thematic material. My implementation of these concepts aims to bring the

[32] Liam Byrne, interviewed by author, February 16, 2023, transcript provided in appendix.

viol consort's soundscape to the twenty-first century alongside its musical successors. With new compositions incorporating sounds from different historical periods and cultures, composers strive to create an era of historical and cultural pluralism. Our compositional frontier is filled with more opportunities and diverse palettes than have ever been available to our predecessors, and a nexus of ideas, cultures, and traditions helps push our art to new heights.

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APPENDIX – TRANSCRIPTS OF INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH SARAH MEAD

This interview was conducted through video conference software on January 16, 2023.

Jacob Bitinas

How were you influenced to begin writing new music for early instruments. When and how did that start?

Sarah Mead

I would say that I don't think of myself primarily as a composer. I think of myself primarily as a coach and player. The reason I started writing was largely for my own better understanding of the music that I was already playing. I was already making arrangements of sixteenth-century music to make it possible for players of different levels to play together. I would simplify some parts or put together a couple of different pieces that I thought could work to accommodate my students, and I had such fun doing that, that it began to lead me into writing things of my own. And it was largely to understand how the composers of the sixteenth

century, which is really the period that interests me, did what they did. I find that doing things is how I learn. Posing to myself the problems composers of the sixteenth century posed themselves helped me to understand better what they were struggling with, so that's where I started. I wasn't trying to write in the style of anybody. I wasn't trying to recreate music that people would think had been written in the sixteenth century. Instead, I was just trying to pose the challenges that they were posing themselves and see how I would work them out myself and see what the challenges forced you to think about. I should say this from the point of view of somebody who's written a lot more poetry than she's written music. I have done the same thing with poetry. I get fascinated with how the form, particularly highly constrained forms, push you to create something that you might not have thought of if you had total freedom to do anything you wanted. So, it's working with constraint that I find most interesting.

Jacob Bitinas

That's a great way to approach composition. I know that you've done a lot of poetry, so that's exciting that you combine those arts approach them from a problem-solving perspective, where working with constraints pushes you to creative solutions.

Sarah Mead

I've been writing poetry since I was in my teens, although I did write songs back then too. The image I get is, you may have seen photographs of a cephalopod

stuck in a very small space, with only a few ways of getting out, and the small space and those little arms coming out and solving it. That's how I think of constraints, and I find that very stimulating.

Jacob Bitinas

Yes, I think there are a lot of great parallels to what composers are trying to do now with some aspects of twenty-first century composition. Are there any specific early instruments that you're drawn to? Not necessarily just to compose for, but also listen to.

Sarah Mead

Well, anybody who sees my Facebook page knows that under religion it says that I'm a committed polyphonist, and polyphony is what fascinates me. So single line instruments tend to be what fascinate me or instruments that can play multiple lines of polyphony, but I'm not as interested in a sequence of vertical events. I'm much more interested in the intertwining of horizontal events. I tend to be drawn to the instruments that I have been inside of. I've spent a lot of time inside of so viols of course, but also recorders and, my spouse is a sackbut player. I think of sackbuts as very close to the human voice, and I think I always think of composition in terms of sort of focused voices focused by the sound of their instruments. Whether or not there are words.

Jacob Bitinas

The polyphony is what immediately hooked me when I started out in early music as well. Experiencing such intense contrapuntal lines, sitting in a circle around musicians, it's an experience like nothing else. So, what is the appeal of using early instruments in modern composition? What characteristics or quirks about composing for the viol do you find interesting or like to lean into?

Sarah Mead

I think that what draws me to all the instruments I just mentioned, and voices that are being used in that same manner, is the way that they can fall into each other and become one thing, pull away from that one thing, and return to it. There is a rich soup of overtones that isn't confusing or distracting, it's very clearly what it is, and the other instruments can match it and fall in line with it. I find that very appealing. It has a lot to do with resonance and the pleasure of sharing resonance with other instruments.

Jacob Bitinas

I'll never forget one coaching session led by Roy Marks where he was describing just that sense of communal resonance. We were all sitting in a close circle, and he made a demonstration by pushing out a very loud, resonant "A" on his tenor viol. We just took a second to listen and watch our own instruments as they began to resonate sympathetically with his pitch. He was essentially playing our instruments! I feel as if you don't get that sense of communal resonance with any

instrument in the modern orchestra due to the low tension on the gambas, and it's very freeing.

Sarah Mead

There's an aspect that I know you're very aware of on the viol that if you try to force it to do too much, it shuts down, kind of like a human does. You can encourage it to really resonate, but if you say, “I want this,” it becomes kind of shut off from you. So, it's that working in conjunction with and encouraging it, allowing it to resonate by loosening your legs, loosening your hands, and letting the sounds really influence the instrument. I said my spouse is a sackbut player. He also plays lute and other winds, and we often play together just for fun. When I got my great bass Renaissance viol, he had just recently gotten a contrabass sackbut. We had these two giant instruments in the house, and we thought it would be fun to play a bunch of music transposed down an octave plus a fifth or wherever the lowest we could play them, just to get to know these instruments. Our instruments were playing each other so much of the time; that gave such pleasure to just feel them moving.

Jacob Bitinas

What are some of the challenges that you find yourself having to overcome when you're writing for instruments, like the viola da gamba, that are traditionally tied to a very specific style and historical period? Do you embrace the style and write

within it, or do you try to weave in and out of it? How does that influence your composition?

Sarah Mead

I haven't been very experimental outside of the kind of sounds I already love from the tradition of the instruments themselves. I mentioned before that I've played on concerts of new music written for old instruments or for mixtures of old and new instruments. Back in the 80s and 90s, which is when I was involved in pieces like this, and these were I think revivals of pieces from the 60s and 70s that were being put on programs of "old is new" and "new wine in old bottles" and things. What actually bothered me quite deeply about the pieces that we were expected to play was that they seemed to have no respect for the instruments. They seemed to be considering them to be a primitive form of modern instrument rather than what they really were. My instrument was being asked to play things that wouldn't sound good on it. Things that would sound much better on, say, a viola. There are notes that are dead on viols, and I don't see any reason to ask the viol to play them. I think any composer who doesn't understand what the innate features of the viol are, instead of thinking of it as being an unfortunately primitive version of something else, is missing the point. When you said, "what are some of the challenges," I think some of the challenges are to recognize what the instrument is really good at and make the most of it. If you want to exploit the sounds that aren't its first language, then you have to do that consciously, instead of just going

back and forth between notes that that have richness and resonance, and notes that don't without thinking about where you're putting them. I think that's one of the biggest challenges: is to know the instrument's strong points and not to think of it as having weaknesses, but of having strengths.

Jacob Bitinas

Have you ever done any composing or thought to do any writing or combining of these instruments yourself?

Sarah Mead

I haven't done it, though I could imagine a situation with specific people whose playing I like, I wanted to write for but I'm not as deeply acquainted with orchestral instruments as I am with the older ones, and I don't find myself going, "Oh gosh, I wish I could use those sounds." I like the sounds available to me, which, I guess, would be considered a narrow view, but I just don't have the experience to do that, and I do have the experience of having old instruments be made to sound apologetic or weak when juxtaposed with modern ones, and I don't think it's about the instruments. I think it's about the players. Now, we have players who have a better understanding of all the wonderful things about the early instruments and are less likely to kind of bully or strong arm them from the point of view of what they can do that the early instruments can't. I think there are players now who would treat it as more of an exciting adventure to be gracious and inclusive rather than sort of standing apart.

Jacob Bitinas

On the topic, what trends have you noticed in twenty-first century composition related to old instruments or the way performers approach them that is different than it might have been 40 years ago?

Sarah Mead

My world is relatively narrow, although I teach in a regular university where people are playing modern instruments, and we have our own resident string quartet. I even feel, for example, that the members of our resident string quartet are more aware of and sensitive to different styles and sounds than maybe that quartet, which has changed personnel over time, would have been 40 years ago. I found one of the interesting challenges with university students who have come up playing in high school orchestra, band, or chorus, and have taken a year or two of theory, that they tend to think that, in doing that, the truth has been revealed to them. When you challenge those truths like "what is a cadence, what does tonic mean, what is in tune," it can be very threatening to young players who have just recently gotten a handle on those ideas. But I do see programs like in Indiana or at Juilliard where students or pre-professionals are opening their minds to a larger world of listening.

Jacob Bitinas

How has the early music audience's reaction to new music changed over the past few decades? Do you find any pushback from early music audiences when new compositions are brought up, and if so, how do you sort of combat that?

Sarah Mead

I don't have that broad an experience with that. For example, with my student ensembles at Brandeis, I think the audience is excited when they hear something they know. If I've done an arrangement of "Yesterday" to complement a Dowland song, people like it because they get the point; it's a familiar tune that could be covered, just like Downland was a familiar tune that could be covered. In a situation like that, an audience loves it. I think all of us who perform early music know that there are certain kinds of audiences or concert series that would hesitate to have you play a modern piece and say, "I don't think our audiences will like that." I'm not sure that's really true. I've done programs that have mixed music from the fifteenth century to twentieth century, and the audiences have responded really well to them, but I think part of it is the context. Making programs with the newer music where you have some sort of handle that connects you between one kind of music and the other kind of music. My brother is a 12-tone composer who teaches at Indiana University, so I've seen how different his audiences are from mine; but also, I think in in many ways his music is considered more rarified than mine. It's harder to grasp, to know how to get into it. I do think that ways of leading people into it makes a big difference, and there is a tendency for people

who haven't heard much new music to assume that it's going to be squeaks and growls.

I haven't heard much or any effective atonal music on early instruments, and I think it's because atonal music presumes an equality of notes. I got sort of passionate about this in a talk that I gave in Italy back in December. It was about how we tend to teach music students this idea of a continuous keyboard that goes on forever, and that any of those notes is fair play. Taking into account what your instrument does best narrows that a great deal Taking it away from a keyboard and instead thinking of it in terms of the way each instrument works can change the way you think about notes. I see that to be really similar to the endless possibilities that are available to you with a Google search; that anything is equal. Anything you want to know, you can have. Any note you want, you can have. But having to actually look something up in an index and then find it on the shelf and pull that down and look for a footnote and go to another one, that's a different way of finding out things, and it brings it onto a human level where we can connect with it more easily. That’s off subject, but it's sort of a passion of mine and I think that atonal music kind of presumes that “this” note, and “that” note are of equal importance because of their role in the row, rather than the quality of sound that they get, and how and the voice leading moves from one to the next.

Jacob Bitinas

I hadn't thought of it exactly in that way before, and that's such a great point. Of course, the viol has so much more resonance on certain pitches and can lead into certain phrases much more effectively. The same with for instance, a French horn or other brass instruments that can hit certain partials confidently and sound so resonant and beautiful, but then it can be much harsher and difficult to control in certain areas of the horn.

Sarah Mead

But if you have an electronic keyboard, you can play anything.

Jacob Bitinas

Exactly. Otherwise, our last question is one of general advice. What other last thoughts or advice do you have concerning writing new music for early instruments?

Sarah Mead

I've only written a limited number of pieces, and I've just been lucky that people have heard them and wanted to publish them. I was in the right place at the right time. You know perfectly well that nobody's going to make a living doing it, so that's not even worth mentioning. I would say it's really important for a composer who wants to write for instruments that grew up in a time when they were used in an intimate setting, to think about the aspects of what humans like to communicate. Instruments that were played around a table right after eating are going to reflect how people feel about interacting with each other around a table.

This is really different from facing outwards towards an audience. Even in larger settings like a church, they wouldn't have been performing for an audience, they would have been playing for their own small group in the choir, and it was just fortunate that people could hear it. This idea of presenting may get in the way of a modern composer. So, what gives me a source of inspiration in these instruments is remembering how they reflect a human conversation among individuals.

Jacob Bitinas

That is beautiful. Thank you again, Sarah, for talking with me about this!

INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA BISHOP

This interview was conducted at the home of Martha Bishop in Atlanta, Georgia on December 15, 2022.

Jacob Bitinas

How did your compositional studies start?

Martha Bishop

When I was in college, I didn't take composition because the compositions that were coming out didn't interest me - John Cage and things like that. Coming from a little town in North Carolina, they just didn't make a bit of sense to me, and I didn't want to compose that way. So, I didn't compose except when classes expected me to. One of my favorite compositions was a mass that I had to do for a counterpoint class, so that was early music in a way. Fast forward for several years, and I got pretty serious about doing my own composing in 1980. There were some earlier than that, and early pieces were in tablature because we were so excited about playing tablature on the gamba. It led to some duets for bass viols, and one of the earliest compositions that got published was one for two lyra viols in different tunings. The lyra viol and soprano pieces were picked up for publication pretty quickly.

Jacob Bitinas

You started out as a saxophone player in High School, did you ever experiment with combining instruments or styles from different parts of your life, like the cello, viol, and saxophone? Did those worlds ever meld together?

Martha Bishop

I think they did, because when someone who's early in their compositional career writes, they usually write what they're used to hearing, so the early compositions are certainly tonal. Later on, they got farther away from tonality, especially when I was lucky enough to work with a good composition teacher at Emory. But that was a lot later. The early pieces really are fairly tonal, and a lot of them involved either tunes that were familiar, or settings of poetry. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a favorite; I set a lot of her things. Meanwhile, we had a group of instrumentalists who played a lot of Renaissance music, and we needed a lot of arrangements of pieces with obbligato parts added and so forth. Bass lines often, if they were single line pieces, and I got to writing for those. At the same time, I was playing in a string quartet, and we needed popular music for parties. So, I had to do settings of those because you couldn't buy them, and all that influenced the writing I was doing.

Jacob Bitinas

What are the challenges of writing for combinations of early and “modern” instruments within the same ensemble?

Martha Bishop

Balance is the main one, I think. It depends a little bit on who you're working with. If you have really good players on all parts, I think it could work very well. Especially if you're careful about your scoring. You have to be so careful that you don't put them all together because the early instruments are likely going to be overpowered. If, in your case, it's saxophones versus gambas., saxophonists have a way of asserting themselves, and gambas really don't have that much dynamic volume, especially the upper range. I think the tessitura is more important in early instruments even than it is in modern strings. A violin can get quite brilliant on top, and a gamba kind of peters out on top. The advantage of bass viol versus cello is that you might have a seventh string on the bottom, and that gives you greater range, and the bottom strings are usually pretty strong on a on a bass gamba.

Jacob Bitinas

What are some of the challenges of composing new music for instruments that are traditionally tied to a very specific style?

Martha Bishop

Gamba players and recorder players are getting much more open to playing modern music than they were 15 or 20 years ago. When I was music director of Conclave of the Gamba Society, I almost could not schedule more than one modern music class per conclave. People just wouldn't take it. At that time, they also didn't want to play with young players because they thought they were so

much better than the young players. Now, they're very happy to play in classes with young players. As far as the modern music, I think you have to be pretty careful what you give gamba players to play, and I'll speak from gamba since that's my thing. They want parts that are fun to play. Generally, they like the counterpoint because it gives them parts to play, and they like imitation because, like anyone else, they like familiar things. If you write for the better-trained and more skilled performers, then you can create much more complicated parts in different keys. Those pieces are a lot of fun to write if you have some background in counterpoint and it's always been a love of mine, especially since I had a really good counterpoint class.

Jacob Bitinas

You mentioned that in the last 15 or so years that the early music community has become more receptive to contemporary composition. Do you have any thoughts on why this transition is happening?

Martha Bishop

I think the younger people coming in like playing music from their own time. I also think that it makes a big difference when our friends are writing the music. We like playing music that our friends have written, especially if they have a track record of having music that we either can play or like to play. We are running out of music for a lot of people who have played these instruments for 30 or 40 years now. If they've gotten to the point of getting through the really hard

stuff, which is Lawes and some others, then they are willing to try new music, and some of the new music is not so hard for them to grasp. They tend to like to play pieces they can get through at the outset, though composers like myself enjoy doing things that will challenge them. Things that require a little bit of work. One of my colleagues is Roy Marks, and he says that he likes when he puts a new piece of music, probably his own music, on the stand for them, play it through 17 times without saying a word, and then see if they like it any better. Doesn't that sound like Roy?

Jacob Bitinas

That's very Roy! For our last question, where do you think the frontier of contemporary composition for early instruments lies? Could you speculate on what the next big thing in for new music for early instruments is?

Martha Bishop

It’s definitely already going towards more electronics. I think a lot of the composition that's going on maybe has to catch up with using different scale tonalities as well. As people's ears get used to it, then they will accept it more. I think combining ensembles of old and new instruments is actually a good thing as well. Maybe not combining large groups, but one or two instruments. Including more percussion could be a good asset as well, and the piece that I wrote for Jody Miller had percussion and was a successful combination of modern percussion

with recorders. He also had a whole light show to go along with it. That was a fun piece I never dreamed would become what he made it.

Jacob Bitinas

Do you have any last general advice or thoughts about composition?

Martha Bishop

I think if you compose, do it a lot. Try to do it every day if you can. It's hard but, I think a lot of the ideas I get are away from any computer, keyboard, or instrument. I'll be driving along, and something will come to me. Listen for those things when they come to you and make use of them. Also, talk to good composers about it, and take classes in it if you can. The best help I've ever gotten was through John Anthony Lennon at Emory University. He opened my eyes.

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID LOEB

This interview was conducted through written responses received through email on February 2, 2023.

Jacob Bitinas

How were you influenced to begin writing new music for early instruments? When and how did you start?

David Loeb

I heard viol consorts in recordings and one concert 1960-62. Assuming that no one would perform contemporary consorts, I did not start composing consorts until 1965, when I wrote pieces for the Viola da Gamba Society of Great Britain's competition the following year.

Jacob Bitinas

What is the appeal of using early instruments in modern composition? What characteristics or quicks do you find interesting?

David Loeb

Viols are very well suited to both harmony and counterpoint, and they seem to blend well with almost anything else.

Jacob Bitinas

What are some of the challenges of writing for instruments that are traditionally tied to a specific historical period and style, like the viola da gamba?

David Loeb

Rather than a challenge, I find that one can take advantage of historical references, but viols can work well in contexts totally detached from their historical aspects. Certainly, my *Jiuta* has very little to do with the viol traditions, but it has enjoyed widespread exposure. At least ten people in four continents have given around 100 performances of that piece, and it is both published and recorded. On the other hand, my *In Nomine a1* (also published) is very close to historical traditions.

Jacob Bitinas

Can you describe your experimentation with combining instruments from different traditions or historical periods? What challenges arose from combining instruments like saxophone and viol like you have in the past?

David Loeb

I have been combining viols with Japanese traditional instruments for nearly fifty years. *Doutaku Hankyou* (Echoes from Bronze Bells) is a duo for shakuhachi and viol (1975, recorded on my *Musica Transpacifica* CD, on which other "combined" pieces appear, including an octet for four shakuhachi and four viols). Rather than contrasting different traditions, I tried to integrate them as much as possible. Most of the first movement is a canon, which requires both instruments to imitate figures played by the other. Perhaps it is worth pointing out that the open strings of the viols outline a pentatonic scale.

I do not want to create the false impression that I have not composed for viols with modern Western instruments. Most of them are duos, but I also wrote a piece for viol and string orchestra which Wenzinger performed.

My octet for saxes and viols is scored for the same combination as yours (SATB – TrTnBB). It was composed in 1990 for a concert given by PRISM and the NYCV as one of the events in conjunction with the 150th anniversary of the invention of the saxophone.

Jacob Bitinas

How do you see the typical early music audiences or performers react when new compositions are brought up? Has their reception changed over the past 40 years?

David Loeb

I have found that audience reactions are similar to audience reactions to any contemporary music. Of course, one will attract very different audiences according to whether a group plays one new piece within a traditional program or presents a program in which new works predominate.

Jacob Bitinas

Do you notice any trends in twenty-first century composition related to early instruments that might not have been present in the 20th century? In other words, how do you think writing new music for early instruments has changed in the past 40 years?

David Loeb

Since the very large majority of composers are trained to write for modern instruments, the styles of new viol music probably don't differ greatly from general contemporary trends. One exception: when most composers were writing 12-tone and serial music, very little viol music used such techniques. Some viol composers have made use of minimalist techniques, but probably less than the larger compositional community.

Jacob Bitinas

Do you have any other thoughts or general advice about writing new music for early instruments?

David Loeb

In principle I see no obstacle to combining viols with instruments from most traditional cultures. From a practical standpoint, Japan seems to be the only non-Western country which has both thriving viol and traditional instrument communities. If that changes, then one might well see new pieces for viols with other traditional instruments.

There is also the very real language issue. I have communicated with Japanese musicians in Japanese for more than fifty years. I do not have comparable skills in any other Asian language. Thus, I have composed a considerable body of vocal music setting Japanese texts, but could not do so in any other non-Western language.

Once I wrote a piece for sitar and four viols which had two performances, but the sitar player was Japanese! I have composed pieces for Chinese, Korean, Mongolian, and Lao-Thai instruments, but nearly all the performers of those pieces speak either English or Japanese, or both. The very few exceptions have been a handful of performances arranged for me by other people.

INTERVIEW WITH YUKIMI KAMBE

This interview was conducted through written responses received through email on January 29, 2023.

Jacob Bitinas

How were you influenced to begin supporting new music for early instruments? When and how did you start?

Yukimi Kambe

Before I mention the main answer, I write shortly about my childhood. I had begun violin at age 4. My parents suggested to me, “Do what nobody has done.” In 1960s, I was doubtful for ‘more big sound’, ’the prize of concours is to aim’, ‘perfection is the whole’. At Ferris Junior College for music, I learned professional player exists to play music created in the same time with my life. And I had an idea, to learn classic music is to know how to live today, like Feudal Lords of Japan learned Chinese military achievements of old days to win the coming battle. There, I had chance to hear Prof. Toshinari Ohashi’s play Marais. The last chord attracted me with resonated sound from 6 strings at once, which violin does not have. How I come to new music for viol, I quote my sentences for the obituary of my viol teacher Hannelore Müller at Scola Cantorum Basiliensis (SCB), which I sent to president of VdGSA, John Moran but not used the whole:

Shortly after I arrived in Basel in 1971, I heard a duet concert of early and contemporary music by Hannelore Muller and Dr. Wenzinger. I was impressed by not only their perfect technique, the unity of their musical expression, the sound of their wonderful Stainer viols made in the same year 1673, but also their policy of playing music of our time. With my poor German, I told her that I would like to play contemporary music in the future. Not too long afterwards she brought David Loeb's *Jiuta*, saying, "It is for you," without telling me she had ordered a piece for me from him! It is not an easy piece to play, but it has an excellent mood for a Japanese viol player. The encounter with David was the beginning of my contemporary viol activities and has become my life's work. The creation of the Traynor Competition in 1984 and 1986 in Japan was created to broaden this. Since then, David and I have maintained a close friendship for almost fifty years. It all began from Hannelore's kindness. I began the first Traynor competition while my term of president of Viola da Gamba Society of Japan. It was before Leo Traynor went back to U.S.A from Japan. I am thankful the Viola da Gamba Society of America continues it. After I studied the different musical styles of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries in Italy, France, England, and German in SCB, I was confident that there can be something "Now," or "Japanese," added from twentieth century. My Diplom Arbeit for SCB was 'Die Verwendung der Viola da Gamba bei J.S. Bach'. And I found how Bach changed his compositions of John- and Matthew Passion every time according to his given situation. It

reminds of me Psalm 33:3, “Sing unto him *a new song*; play skillfully with a loud noise.”

Jacob Bitinas

What is the appeal of using early instruments in modern composition? What characteristics or quirks do you find interesting that are unique to the viola da gamba or other early instruments?

Yukimi Kambe

The most important appeal is natural sound caused from gut strings and depth of the body construction. A relaxing effect or calmness of mind comes from the lower tension when compared to modern instruments. Resonance of harmonic consonance and simple dissonance with viol consort in good intonation is the appeal. If the tonal bias is used effectively, arising from numbers of open strings D,G,A,C,E,F in four voices (TrTnBB) consort may be the appeal. Viol had already such conflict in seventeenth century. Jean Rosseau (1644-1699) compares the character of violin and treble viol as follows: ‘… du Jeu de l’Instrment, qui ne veut pas estre traité à la maniere du Violon, dont le propre est d’animer, au lieu que le propre du Dessus de Viole est de flater.’ *Traité de la Viole,* Paris, 1687, p.73. And we have additional conflict with modern instruments.

Jacob Bitinas

What are some of the challenges of playing new music on instruments that are traditionally tied to a specific historical period and style, like the viola da gamba?

Yukimi Kambe

If the composition require viol “to be a homogenized quality like modern instrument,” it is challenging. Technically, we can express as if it is forte, but can’t make real forte in volume like romantic continuous crescendo, fortissimo, or very long tone in forte with one bow stroke. Fast, short notes without a slur can’t make sound because the gut strings cause more friction. Spiccato is difficult, because of underhand bow hold. Irregular string changes in fast tempo is challenging and it will be ineffective. Early music is your ancestor, it will be respected regardless of performance quality. Contemporary music, however, is different. Each composer has different style. We need to take more time to find the individual charm and the way to express it. It is pleasure to do it, but contemporary music feels like more work compared to early music which we almost know.

Jacob Bitinas

Have you had experience with combining instruments from different traditions or historical periods? What challenges have come from combining modern and early instruments or instruments from Eastern and Western cultures?

Yukimi Kambe

Yes, I had played with Shō (mouth organ) of Japanese court music, Shakuhachi, Shinobue, 25 strings Sō (coto), Kokyū (3 strings bowed instrument) of Japan and Sitar of Indo. They had problem to adjust to European temperament, rhythm and

feeling of play together because the music was written in European style. Sitar players normally improvise and don't read music. Our consort, Yukimi Kambe Viol Consort, had recently played with a modern violinist on a program from Josquin des Prez to Bach. One of the encores was from R. Lovland, *You Raise Me Up*. The violinist wanted to learn the sound of viol consort and intended to make a concession or to adjust to us, but there was still intonation problems with the pure major third. I had often played passions with modern orchestra, but Bach composed on viol in good contrast.

Jacob Bitinas

How do your typical audiences or performers react when new compositions are brought in?

Yukimi Kambe

Audiences who hear viol for the first-time, including children in U.S.A. and Japan, find no problem with our mixing program. They find it interesting and feel the future of the viol which had thought to be an old-fashioned sound. They feel 'viol' more familiar than unfamiliar European early music. Our regular audience expects, "what's new today?" They are not the people who want to hear a CD at home. I live for this kind of live communication; live concert let us live!

Jacob Bitinas

Do you notice any trends in twenty-first century composition related to old instruments that might not have been present in the twentieth century? In other

words, how do you think writing new music for old instruments has changed in the past forty years?

Yukimi Kambe

I do not compose, but in the twentieth century, I had an impression that contemporary music was based on abstruse, technical challenge, and perfection. It looked like the object was to achieve a sense of self-righteousness and accomplishment for composer and special players but not for audience. Until 2000, we, the YKVC, were persecuted because we did not play exclusively early music. They said that early instruments exist only for early music and not for other purposes. Our concert advertisements were often refused because the program included contemporary music.

In twenty-first century, I decided to lift the ban to appear more “with” contemporary music. In 2000s, we made several North American tours. I advocated for diversity and globalism, and my style as Japanese was accepted. Martha Bishop helped us very much. In the 2010s, we could continue on the same series in Japan. In 2020s, we are calmly waiting after covid 19.

Jacob Bitinas

Do you have any other thoughts or general advice about writing new music for early instruments?

Yukimi Kambe

Please write the piece which makes the instrument, player, and audience happy at the same time. Please do not omit the work with players until you think the sound expresses your intension. Train to make the most of your features together with the characteristics of instrument. Have good critics, fans, and colleagues. Please know that general audience doesn’t have as good ears as you, and please note the “gout” (sense) of audience. It is not always the same in a different country.

INTERVIEW WITH HEATHER SPENCE

This interview was conducted through video conference software on January 22, 2023.

Jacob Bitinas

Could you start by telling a bit about yourself and how you've been influenced to begin writing new music for early instruments?

Heather Spence

For me it wasn't like I set about one day, “Oh, I'm going to start composing for early instruments.” It's more that I started composing from a life-need to harmonize with my environment and create sounds that I enjoyed, so it’s this exploration of sound. The instruments I used were whatever was available. I started off singing in a choir, so I wrote SATB, I played cello, so I made some cello pieces, and I had a friend who played cello, so I made pieces for them. My dad played trombone, etc. I used whatever was around. When I started playing viol and getting into the viol community, obviously, I was going to write some music for viol. That's where I got excited about the unique properties of viol players, players that have the sensitivity to ask, “What is the music trying to tell you?” I always like giving minimal instructions to the player, like giving hints of directions or emotional ideas. More descriptive things rather than prescriptive things. That's always been something I like to do, because I like to give a lot of

power to the players to do what they want with it, like, “Here's a suggestion. Now you work like we're in a partnership, you take it the next way.” So, I thought, great, viol players… they don't need anything, they don't need bar lines, they don't need dynamics. It's going to be great. And that didn't work at all. I got into writing for viols because I love the community. I love the people, obviously the instrument sounds amazing. I started off writing very minimally, trying to make this partnership happen and then, over time, I've just ended up writing in every single little thing, “Here's exactly how to do this accent, every single note has a dynamic marking…”

Jacob Bitinas

So, you had an expectation that writing minimal instructions for early instrument specialists would be effective, and that came from the knowledge that Renaissance music has minimal instruction. You've written for a lot of combinations of different instruments like voice, cello, gamba, flute, etc. What do you find appealing about using early instruments? What characteristics do you like to exploit when you're writing for viol specifically?

Heather Spence

Mainly what I've written for is viol, that's really my focus. When I think about the viol, I think about the rich resonance that it has. To me, writing something where you can feel the unique tonal timbre that it has; that rich sound, I definitely want to showcase that. Also, when I compose, I think a lot about what is good not just

for the audience, but also what's going to be enjoyable for the players to play. I'm inspired by polyphony; viol players are used to playing parts where every part is important, and so I want to use that. With cello, you're going to play Pachelbel's "Canon" occasionally, and you just deal with it. But with viol it's like, "OK, let's make sure everybody has their moments and has something that's cool for them." When you're inside the piece, you feel how the different parts interconnect with each other and how you're a part of it. I think that's really fun. I think it's enjoyable to listen to as well, but I think it's important to be fun to play, so I pay a lot of attention to that aspect of how each part fits into the whole, and then I try to do things that evoke early music tonal sensibilities, but also take it a little bit in my own direction. I'm influenced by what I hear today, right? So, I don't write music strictly to pretend to be an early piece, but I'm writing them thinking about those early pieces of music and using some other things that I like as influence. Incorporating a little bit of Celtic music or movie soundtrack; things tend to end up being influenced within a piece because I think they work well with the early sound, but they also bring it a little bit more to what people are listening to today.

Jacob Bitinas

You've talked about the unique qualities of these early instruments like the viol's resonance and trying to showcase the polyphony so characteristic of Renaissance consort music. With early instruments that are associated with a specific historical

period and style, have you had any challenges in delivering new music? What have been the challenges of presenting performers a piece of new music?

Heather Spence

I'll start with where I've had more success. Even with viol players who love new music, I feel there's still an element of risk-taking. I think it helps to think about this as vocal music. I found a lot of success working with groups that are viol players and sing. I think that helps getting into that mindset like, “OK, we're singing, but with viol.” I mean obviously voices and viols work very well together; there's that historical connection, but I think that really helps people adapt to the “modern” mindset somehow. It's like a bridge: the early and the modern. Your voice is your voice, right? You can sing early stuff; you can sing late stuff. I think it makes that bridge easier to traverse. I think it really comes down to the people in the group and the experience of the group; it really varies depending on what somebody's experience is and what they bring to the music. For me it's harder to write for solo seven-string bass and later technique. That's a little bit more challenging than the kinds of music everybody plays at conclave after hours. Your typical Byrd and whatever six-part consorts. I tend to go more towards that direction, which I think is also a little bit more vocal related. That said, I also tried to stretch it a little bit, so I'll put in pizzicato and little things here and there. I guess the other part of it is that, when I'm writing for viols, I also have in mind that a lot of viol players also play a modern string instrument. I feel like

that factors in a lot to how people play the music, and I always have that in the back of mind. When players are reading modern notation and have a viol in their hand, they also have all that knowledge swirling around their head about how you apply modern notation to modern instruments.

Jacob Bitinas

Excellent point! We can go ahead and move on to something that I think you can provide a unique perspective on, which is working with modern instruments alongside early instruments. For example, you have worked with the Washington Saxophone Quartet and participated in other projects. Can you talk about the experience you've had doing things like this and the work you've done with "modern" and early instruments together?

Heather Spence

Yeah, I'll start back earlier than that. One time, I was invited to fill in on a concert on viol for a sackbut. Everyone else was a sackbut except for me so, how does that work? The thing is, these pairings of instruments depend on a lot of factors rather than just early, late, whatever. There are a lot of things you must keep in mind with any group of instruments. Even viols. I've written stuff for four bass viols and I'm like, "this sounds great." People are like, "It sounds muddy." I'm like, "it's four basses, it's going to be a little muddy!" So, there's the taste aspect, there's loudness aspect, there's the timbre aspect. All that stuff actually worked out OK with the sackbut. I have this, like eBay special tenor viol that has all metal

strings. It even has fine tuners. It never goes out of tune, it's amazing! I played that (in the concert), and I was able to project enough that it was fine. So, I feel like the early/late thing is just even a more minor aspect compared to some of the other, bigger challenges that come when you pair instruments together. Another experience I had was a month-long artist residency. It was 2017, and this residency had a theme of science and arts together. There were around twelve of us up on a mountain in California overlooking an ocean; it was amazing! Anyway, I'm a marine biologist and a musician/composer. There was also a physicist who played the flute and a dancer who played the oboe. We were the main musicians in the group, and we all had instruments. I wrote a piece of music specifically for us to play as a group, which was interesting. In terms of instruments that go together, those are not actually that weird sound-wise. It wasn't that challenging; I think the sackbut-viol replacement is way weirder than this. Because of the dancer, we incorporated a lot of movement into the piece. It was ocean themed, because I am a marine biologist, and the physicist-flute player was an amazing flute player who could do everything, so I had to keep him from getting bored. Knowing who's going to be playing and being able to workshop the piece as we went made things so much cooler. It picked up elements from the personalities of people I was working with. So yeah, there was no real weirdness about the viola da gamba being part of that with other modern instruments.

Jacob Bitinas

Did you find challenges with the volume or anything like that holding you back? Were you at A440?

Heather Spence

I'm pretty sure we were at 440, and I had a loud gamba. I don't remember having any real issues. I knew I would need to play loud, but like that's OK. Along those lines, the flute and the bass viol are not really going to conflict. I did do some doubling of the oboe and the bass viol because that, that sounds interesting to have those mixing. You figure out where the tricky things are, and then you exploit them like, you make bugs into features, right? Don't know if I'm always successful, but I try.

Jacob Bitinas

And what about your saxophone project?

Heather Spence

So, I was listening to our classical music station, and I heard one of the Washington Saxophone Quartet's Christmas pieces, and I wondered what instruments were playing. And I was like, "oboe and bassoon? What is this?" And then I found out it was a saxophone quartet and surprised like, "saxophones can do that?"

Jacob Bitinas

Yes! I was amazed how much that the quartet sounded at points like a brass ensemble; their tonal diversity on that album is amazing.

Heather Spence

Yeah, that was my response. I had no idea you could do that on a saxophone. So, I looked them up and bought the CDs immediately. Soon after, I get this e-mail and it's this guy who's like, “Hey, I saw that you actually live around here, so instead of me mailing the CDs, how about I drop them off at your house?” And it turns out that this guy, Rich Kleinfeldt, is actually an announcer on the classical music station (WETA), and this saxophone quartet is his group, so he dropped off the CDs, we’d gotten to talking and he was like, “we're always looking for new repertoire. I'm like, “well…!”

Jacob Bitinas

“… funny you mentioned that!”

Heather Spence

Yeah, that's how that happened. So, we got into a conversation because, in *Equilibrium*, which won the Traynor competition in 2022, the gimmick is the “one note” that sustains throughout the piece, right? And so that got me into discussion with him about whether “one note” would be interesting on saxophone, or just really annoying. With that line, it's great if you want to have somebody who's not so great of a player just play the “one note.” That's fine, but I also think in the Purcell (*Fantasia Upon One Note*) or in *Equilibrium*, if you have somebody who's experienced playing the “one note,” it's still an interesting part to play. This is because, depending on the place you are in the piece, you're playing a different

role in the ensemble. I almost feel it gives you a chance to focus more on how you're playing rather than exactly what you're playing. More focus on the bow. More focus on ensemble dynamics. It's like playing an *In Nomine*. Right? Some people love playing the *In Nomine* part, and some people hate it. The people love it because you get to really focus on those other aspects. He said he probably wouldn't mind it, but he thought it might also be interesting if that "one note" got passed around and he said he'd like to see what that would look like. So, my main adaptation, aside from transposing, it was making that "one note" part move around the different saxophone parts, which actually is an interesting process.

Jacob Bitinas

I look forward to hearing it! So, the audience for an early music concert usually consists of people expecting something vaguely polyphonic and Renaissance in style. When you have modern pieces on a program alongside early music, how does the audience generally react?

Heather Spence

My pieces only really get performed at Conclave, honestly. And in the Conclave crows, some people like it and some people don't. I think there is a barrier there, maybe so much so that integrating new music into an early music concert is not something I'm even trying to do. Maybe that's wrong, but nobody's clamoring for it either, right? It's a hard one, because I think it would be a lot easier to program an actual early music piece into a "modern" concert, than it is to program a

"modern" piece into an "early music" thing. I think part of the difficulty lies in people expecting early music of a particular genre. People don't like all kinds of early music periods, either. This is something that we've talked about, from the (VdGSA) New Music Committee, because all modern music is not created equal. We don't really have good descriptors about what it's going to be, so it's this big unknown. Are you going to make the effort to go out of your house and pay money to go sit for an hour or two and listen to something when you have no idea what it's going to be? I think that's part of the challenge: it's the great unknown.

Jacob Bitinas

Do you have any last bits of advice for composers or performers concerning new music for early instruments?

Heather Spence

I'll start with the performers. One of the great things about playing pieces by living composers is that you can talk to the composer. It's OK to talk to the composer, I think I speak for most composers when I say I love to talk about my compositions. Also, I think there is this handoff that occurs. Yes, the composer composed the piece, but I feel like there's a lot of worry from players like, "Oh, am I going to get it right?" I don't think that's the right question. If the composer cared about you getting it "right," they would create a digital composition. They would compose it, and they would produce it, and they would make it exactly the way they wanted, and then it would be a recording where you could listen to it

exactly the way they wanted. The end. This act of creating sheet music means that you are transmitting written instructions to somebody else, where, after its released, is theirs. This is just a starting point, and I wish more players would embrace that partnership where, it's now your turn to make it your own. If you interpret it differently than the way that the composer was intending, that is fine. Discover something new in it. It's just the starting point. Also, even though it might be a new piece, don't throw out everything you know about early music. Keep all those things you know in your head and in your body and maybe that will help you play your instrument that's so good at those things.

For composers. I just wish that there was more support for the challenge that comes with writing something that's different. I think that probably goes for anything, right? It doesn't fit neatly into a category. There is no genre or radio station that you can go to like, “Oh I love modern music on early instruments. Let me go hit that up on the radio.” This gets to the fundamental thing of intersections of disciplines, intersections of perspectives, cultures, et cetera. Anytime you have that intersection, there are going to be more challenges associated with it. But I also think there are potentially more rewards. Still, if you put on a level playing field, something that fits in a category, and something that doesn't, and you don't address that imbalance in some way, the thing that fits in the category is going to win out every time. So, I think there needs to be more active support, recognition, et cetera, for the people who are going out there with the risk of the things that

don't fit neatly in a category, because that's the only way that they're going to be able to really thrive. And by thrive, I mean going from a super niche thing that only a handful of people are talking about to something that gets to be a little bit more widely recognized and appreciated. There are so many cool things that can happen from bridging the now, and the old. Not just in music, but in other things as well. And so, let's embrace that, but I do have to say that it's certainly it's certainly a challenge.

Jacob Bitinas

Well said! Thank you, Dr. Spence, for all your advice!

Heather Spence

My pleasure.

INTERVIEW WITH LIAM BYRNE

This interview was conducted through video conference software on February 16, 2023.

Jacob Bitinas

How were you influenced to begin supporting and performing new music for early instruments?

Liam Byrne

My interest in new music developed before I became a viola da gamba player. I was a double bass player as a teenager, and I started playing the viola da gamba at age eighteen with Wendy Gillespie. Also, I had the great fortune of going to a public high school in North Carolina that had some really passionate music teachers who exposed us to a lot of great contemporary music, and we even got to do some workshops with composers. I loved it. So, new works were always something that appealed to me. When I fell in love with the viola da gamba at eighteen, I was having this kind of crisis. I was sort of realizing that I didn't want to be an orchestral musician. I liked the bass, but it wasn't the thing for me, and I had fallen in love with the viola da gamba, but I was a little unsure about taking the leap. It was very much the fact that Wendy herself was such an active performer of contemporary music in the context of Fretwork and other groups. That gave me the kind of reassurance that this was actually something that I could

also do. I mostly fell in love with the viola da gamba because of the instrument itself and the way it felt. I loved the historical repertoire, but it was the fact that I saw a possibility already kind of existing, to keep on playing new music. That made me feel comfortable taking that leap, as an eighteen-year-old, to switch to being a viola da gamba major at college.

Jacob Bitinas

Can you talk a little bit about your recent collaborations with composers like Alex Mills and Nico Muhly and how those came about?

Liam Byrne

I don't really know how my life works, generally speaking. I think that some part of my subconscious is almost guiding my career. The way that it feels for the last eighteen years or so, since I stopped studying, is that I just kind of bumble along through some kind of chaos and say yes to every opportunity that comes up. I think that, by virtue of having made certain things important to myself, I'm just living my life in such a way that I meet certain people. You know, I met Nico because I was working as a waiter in his favorite restaurant in London, and it was just before I was about to join Fretwork. But we just became friends, and right before, Fretwork commissioned a piece from him. So, I got to kind of know him in this totally other context before we started working together. But through that, and him, came the introduction to the community and this just very large, incredibly broad and inclusive family of people who are interested in making

interesting, new music. Let's say, if there is something unifying, it’s people who are interested in making new music that really speaks to audiences; music that really kind of grips people.

Jacob Bitinas

In my conversation with Nico Muhly, he mentioned that the bulk of the repertoire that is being written for early instruments typically comes from commissions where ensembles or specialists are seeking more contemporary music for their ensemble. Do you find that to be the case? Or do you know of any other situations, where composers are seeking out new sounds and have started delving into early instruments to achieve them?

Liam Byrne

I think it's a little bit of a mix. I do know of some pieces where a composer wanted to write for early instruments, and then had to find a performer. And I know that also happens more in a kind of academic context, and it happens even more as the existing repertoire increases. But yeah, Nico is right. A lot of stuff is commission-based and this is actually something that I find both great, but also a little bit difficult that. There are more and more people who are interested in performing new music on old instruments, and there's not as much centralization to this movement. Because of that, everyone kind of ends up only commissioning. I think it's great to keep commissioning; it really is an important thing to do and part of your responsibility as a performer. But we need to sort of try to centralize

and share more pre-existing repertoire, too. As much as possible. So that viol players, whether they're soloists or consorts or mixed ensembles, don't always have to go through the arduous and expensive process of commissioning and so that works enjoy broader lives. I've shared a couple of the solo pieces that had been written for me with my colleagues, and only a couple of times has someone performed one of them, but it makes me so happy. I don't feel any sense of possession about the works that are written for me. I want as many other players to play them as possible. One of the other things that I have heard Nico urge young composers and young performers to do is just make music with your friends as much as possible and become friends with people whose music you like. Some of my some of the best works that I play were not commissioned by anybody. They came from a composer wanting to write a piece for me, even though I didn't have any money to put into it, and it was not really in a time frame that applying for funding made sense. But I offered to premiere it during a really important concert at an important venue. It turned out the music director of the venue was there and loved the piece. He then gave the composer week-long residency with funding to workshop his next opera, so even though many of us may be poor, that doesn't mean that things can't happen. I'm not saying try not to pay your composers, but at the end of the day, if people want to do things, you figure out ways of making them happen. Performance is like this all the time. You

might do something that's poorly paid because you know that, through that same contact, some other project will come.

Jacob Bitinas

I agree so much with your point about the accessibility issue. Having an easier way to find and disseminate new music in a collective place would be so beneficial.

Liam Byrne

Yeah, very much so. I have some colleagues over here in Europe who like the idea of playing contemporary music, but they literally don't know where to begin. It is kind of are typing the word “composer” into Google. Of course, that isn’t helpful. One other thing that is important to performers is to be aware of who hires you to play concerts. Be aware of who is hiring you and what their institution’s financial and aesthetic landscape is like. There may be some concerts that you get booked for which don't necessarily come with a new music requirement, but where the institution could very easily be convinced to drum up some money for a commission. This happened to me once with a museum. With many concert series, it's very possible to be able to say, “Oh, it would be amazing if you paid me *this* much money to play a recital, but it would be really amazing if you paid this composer *this* much money to write a piece of music based on this piece of art that's on the wall.”

Jacob Bitinas

Very neat; I didn’t realize things could work out like that! For this next question, feel free to talk from either the perspective of a composer or performer. What do you think composers can gain from using early instruments in their compositions? What are some idiosyncrasies that groups of early instruments share that composers could find appealing?

Liam Byrne

I think I have to bring up another point before answering this. I could answer it specifically related to the viola da gamba by telling you the technical things that it does beautifully: it has very pure natural harmonics, it sustains close interval especially beautifully, it can voice low thirds in a harmonious way, where on cello, it would sort of have like fighting beats et cetera. To advocate for the use of historical instruments in general is an interesting one, because one of the things that I really dislike about contemporary music for historical instruments is when the instrument becomes historicized. When the early instrument represents what we imagine it's old history, or old voice to be. And so, when I talk to composers, I actually go as far as to ask them not to write anything that is audibly recognizable as a quotation from an old piece of music or in an old style. I know there are other composers and viol players who feel very differently about that kind of thing, but I feel it exploits this very historical idiom of the viol and it's something I don't like. Other people are free to do it, but it makes me feel very limited. It makes me feel like I'm wearing a historical costume. I'm very interested in the instrument as

a historical object, and often people are surprised by how strict I am with the authenticity of my setup in terms of the kind of strings, the insistence on bows with a clip-in frog, and the curvature of the bridge. Presumably because I play so much contemporary music, people presume that I would have some kind of hybrid setup. For me, though, the historical accuracy of the object is central to everything about my own artistic practice, whether I'm playing baroque or contemporary music. This is something that I kind of wrote about in my own PhD, which I'm going to publish soon. For me, one might even say that the historical setup is almost more important than some other specifics of historically informed performance. So, if I'm encouraging a composer to use early instruments, I am hesitant to describe them all under any umbrella because it then quickly turns into this historic fixation. There are two different groups that I work with that sometimes do standard historical repertoire, arrangements of popular songs, or new repertoire on groups of old instruments. One is this group Continuum in Berlin and the other is this group, B.O.X (Baroque Orchestra X), in Antwerp. What both have to offer is a diverse palette of sounds and ways of music making that aren't necessarily rooted in just the execution of notation.

Jacob Bitinas

The composers you work with might not always be familiar with your instrument or early instruments in general. What are some of the challenges of performing new music on instruments like the viol that composers should be aware of? Do

you find yourself having to guide composers away from or towards a certain set of guidelines?

Liam Byrne

The more conversation that you can have with the composer during the process, the more sketches that you can see, even if the sketches are tiny, the better the piece ends up being, almost universally. Especially when it's the first piece they're writing for you. One of the challenges is that every viol player is using a different historical instrument. As you know, historical instruments are incredibly varied, and then modern schools of viol playing are also incredibly varied. One person might have a small English six-string viol and another person has a big Judith Craft French viol with a with a stiff a snakewood bow. They're hugely different instruments, and I tell composers that the viola da gamba bow doesn't leave the string, but Vittorio Ghielmi would say something opposite. So, I think something else that’s important to stress to the composers is that we have this great diversity, which is not a bad thing. It's another reason why the conversation with the performer needs to be sort of centralized, because we have this huge diversity of technique, historically and from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and it's important to not force that to become standardized. I remember having a conversation with Halla Steinunn Stefánsdóttir, an Icelandic Baroque violinist who runs this group called Nordic Affect, which are huge commissioners. She commissioned so much for her ensemble. She found it really frustrating that,

when she was trying to help composers understand what a Baroque violin was, she found herself only being able to talk about a narrative of limitations. With the viol, we're a little bit lucky because we have all these things that we can do that nobody else can do. Still, when I talk to composers, you have to kind of exaggerate some of these points. One of the great pitfalls you can make is suggesting that you can do something that's really unidiomatic. You end up with this thing that doesn't make anybody happy. So, I think if you have to subtly guide the process when you have your first conversations about the instrument, what it can do, what it does well, and be a bit more conservative about how you present it. I don't know how many times I've told composers this; I used to say we can sort of do glissandi, but it's complicated, which is the answer. Then it so often resulted in so many glissandi that were totally undoable. And so, I just started saying we can't do them and then even still people write them. There's little haggling involved, but I think it's very important to, first and foremost, get the composer to have a concept on a kind of aesthetic character of the instrument and how you, yourself, play it. Like when you talk about range, for example, it's not enough to say what the highest fret is and what the highest reasonable note is. You have to kind of go in a little bit deeper and explain how, when you go up on the high string of a cello, it becomes more powerful, it becomes more like a tenor, it becomes more projecting and cantabile. When you write solo cello music, you have this understanding how its tessitura works. The viol's richness is in its

middle range, though, and when the viol goes up the top string, it starts to sound like a boy soprano when we go up above the frets. It is not just because of the intonation challenges, there is, sonically, a much more limited range of colors and ways of behaving that are available to us there. In Fretwork's repertoire of commissions, there are some pieces that were created without a lot of detailed conversation or varying levels of detailed conversation on what the instrument could do well. There are some pieces which just have the treble viols running around up to above the frets all the time in this very violinistic way because someone told them that they could play those notes. But if you if you really sit down with the instrument and play those notes for the composer... almost every time I've played on the French seven-string and gone up to a 4th above the top fret, almost every composer says, "Oh yeah, I'm not really going to use that." Obviously, some people do, and sometimes it works beautifully, but being in the same room or on the same zoom call makes it much easier to notice that. The piece of advice that I would give is to try and speak positivistically as much as possible about what it is that you love about the instrument and let that become the source of inspiration.

Jacob Bitinas

To speak about what something can do well rather than its limitations is a great outlook to have. David Loeb mentioned the same thing as he answered this question. Introduced composers to all the wonderful things the viol or early

instruments can do so uniquely and beautifully and let that overwhelm them and become excited by it instead of giving them a list of things that can't be done or wouldn’t be effective.

Liam Byrne

I start by speaking about my core understanding of the viol as a sound concept. I say that we really are halfway between a bowed instrument and a plucked instrument, because we play with decay of sound as much as we play with creation of sound. We play with the creation of the sound, but we play a lot with the secondary resonance as well. Play a little bit of Tobias Hume, or whatever, to demonstrate this. Play something that really shows that aspect of the instrument so they hear that and go, “Ah!” Then they understand why we can't have the same kind of accented down bows like a cello and why we don't do spiccato; people see you don't really need it. There's of course a little more detail. Things like, if someone wants a hard attack, then you suggest that they write a double stop. A hard attack on a single note is not going to hit on the viol the way it will hit from a cello. We accent more effectively by adding notes. And you know, you mentioned at the beginning the chord thing. Many times, it’s been the case where the piece is written, and then there's a session where you sit down and there's a sort of chord negotiation. Very rarely does someone write only playable chords for the viol. I tell people to get a guitar and tune the guitar like a viol, and then mess around on it. If people are religious about that, they come up with mostly playable chords.

When Nico wrote these beautiful motets for choir and solo viol with a lot of chordal writing in it, I remember the two of us got together and spent half an hour going through every single chord. I think at the end of the day, it's really important to stand up for yourself as a performer and make sure that the things are idiomatic enough will work. There's a difference between hard music that is just never going to work and hard music where you can see the value in learning it as written. With pieces like Donnacha Dennehy's *Tessellatum*, for example, I had to develop a new technique to be able to play the licks in the piece, but it was so clear that it would eventually be possible and that there was such a strong need for it to happen. And so, there is this kind of little negotiation that happens. Offer constructive solutions, and sometimes it might be what the composer wants.

Jacob Bitinas

When you are preparing a recital or concert and deciding on the pieces to program, what is on your mind when balancing the program? How do you decide what style of pieces should go on it? Do you find it effective to balance new and old pieces on the same program, and what are you considering when mixing new and old music together, as I know you have done many times in the past?

Liam Byrne

There's a different point I want to make before I answer the question, which is that I'm interested in classical music generally moving away from a program centered way of structuring the concert experience. I think it's to the benefit of

everyone involved if we start to develop stronger characters as performers. It's kind of like when you go to see a band play and you presume that the band is going to play pieces from their new album as well as their big hits, but you don't know what they're going to play. You go to see them play because you like who they are as musicians. This doesn't work in every context, but I think, especially for soloists, it is something that is possible. When I play concerts, whether it's old music, new music, or both, I like to come up with the blurb of what the concept behind the concert is. If it's an old music program with a concept behind it, and we'll then list a couple of composers and a kind of genre so you know whether it's going to be French music or something else. If someone just wants me to play a solo recital, that will kind of be the end of the conversation and I will try and get them to promote the show with the bio of me and maybe name drop two composers or something. Oftentimes with solo recitals, I won't decide what I'm playing until the day of this show. I'm kind of into this way of working that has kind of come into my world through performing with non-classical musicians, and I think it's amazing. It's one of the other great things about having an iPad; you can be sitting there in the dressing room and think to yourself, “Oh, what does this room feel like? What are the acoustic properties of the space that are surprising?” Or like, “Actually, no, that chaconne is not working here. So, what do I want? Is it raining today? Do I want to start with a piece in A minor because it’s cold and gray? Is it a beautiful, sunny lunchtime concert? I can't start with that A minor

prelude!" My approach to programming, generally speaking, is to try to get people to not make me program. Obviously, the bigger the group gets, the harder it gets to do that. What some people do is commission new works to sit alongside historical works. It's OK, but it also becomes kind of limiting. To me, it just sort of has to do with thinking about what fits in the space, what suits the repertoire, and whether it is going to feel nice in the room with the people with it.

Jacob Bitinas

I love that way of thinking about concerts with more spontaneity. Find what fits the day, the time, the people in the room. I think that can communicate on a much more personal level. Have you noticed any changes in the last 20 to 40 years concerning new music for old instruments? Do any twenty-first century trends come to mind like a particular aspect of composition or performance that is happening more or less?

Liam Byrne

I don't know if I can generalize. The trends in composition are all over the place. There is a lot more classical music that is influenced by timbre, microtonality, texture, et cetera. And that, of course, opens a huge door for all sorts of historical instruments. Composers are thinking about sonic aesthetics in live sound and recorded sound. I feel like there's a burgeoning interest in innate, inherent materiality of the old instruments, but I might be projecting. That's one of the things that I like. On the subject of amplification, there's that is a very important

point to make. I bought my first microphone about 10 years ago. I started performing amplified, and it changed everything about my sound. I was playing on a very loud stage and couldn't hear myself, so I had to have this monitor that had my own sound in it. And then, you're hearing, quite loud right in front of your face, the sound that the microphone on your bridge. And this was kind of fascinating. Our (early) instruments are quite soft, and historically, they performed mostly in domestic settings and small spaces. When we try to play them in the large spaces built for modern classical music, we push. So, we've kind of developed this modern playing technique of the viola da gamba that incorporates projection in the sound more than it probably historically was. And so, when I started playing amplified in this new music setting, I began realizing all this bow noise and stuff that gets picked up by the microphone that I needed to take out of my playing. So, the first thing that started happening was that I began trying to find the softness, transparency, and subtlety of color in the sound by working with the microphone whether it was in the recording studio or in a live context. This was fascinating because, after doing this for several years, it made me slightly softer, but not much. It did, however, unlock so many more colors in my playing and in my historical playing because, by virtue of using amplification, I basically deleted the ahistorical practice of projecting. And so, by doing something very modern, I accidentally made my practice more historical, and that was very important to me. I even have this very nice, small, portable acoustic

instrument amplifier, and I sometimes bring it with me when I play in very large spaces and turn it on at an imperceptibly low level. Something that just makes the instrument have three decibels more so that the sound gets transported. I don't always do this, and I don't always love playing amplified. I kind of prefer this local amplifier solution to plugging myself into a big sound system. Of course, artificially loud is also fun sometimes. It's amazing to be in a huge concert hall and play Abel with a microphone and just have it wail! But amplification is not a single thing, it's a spectrum, and there are lots of different ways of doing it. I primarily try to view amplification not just, as a way to necessarily make something louder. Definitely not making something *feel* louder, but amplification for me is a means of transmitting intimacy that would otherwise not physically make it through the space.

Jacob Bitinas

I'm so glad you rearticulated some of the points you made in your interview with *The Strad* about amplification! What has your experience been with playing an early instrument in, in ensembles of modern orchestral instruments or folk instruments?

Liam Byrne

It's been very varied, and a lot of it depends on who the players are and what the composer has written. I tend to find that modern instrument players who play a lot of contemporary music are more open minded and flexible with their own sounds,

so it is much easier to blend with the, than it would be to play with a cellist who plays a lot of romantic music, for example. There's a cellist, Claire O'Connell, who I work with a lot in the UK, and she's never touched the Baroque cello. She has no preexisting notions of what Baroque music is supposed to be like. But she's a contemporary musician with a very sensitive ear and a very flexible sound. We've performed Couperin viol duets together, and, everything about it, she plays very beautifully. There is also a trio that I perform with that includes viol, modern cello, and bass clarinet, and that works very well together. We have done some fifteenth-century consort music as well as commissioned. The group doesn't have a name, but it's part of an ensemble called Chroma. Donnacha Dennehy, who wrote *Tessellatum*, also added a viol part to one of his operas. It's called *The Second Violinist.* It's one-on-a-part strings and a couple of winds, pianos, and percussion. Three singers, a small chamber opera, and he just wrote this viola da gamba part into the orchestral texture, sitting between the viola and the cello. It was just this extra hybrid voice. It's not a solo thing like the solo viol part in George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* (2012), where he writes this kind of oratorio style solo viol part, and the viol otherwise just sits there the whole rest of the opera. In Donnacha's one, it's really very fascinating that he took the viol and inserted it into the section. The string writing in general is a bit glassier, and there's a lot of ponticello, and the whole ensemble is amplified, so it kind of evens things out. But we rehearsed a lot without anybody being amplified, and it even

all worked acoustically. There is a composer called Conrad Winslow who I'm working with at the moment, and he just wrote a beautiful duet for piano and viola da gamba. It's a lot of holding down a chord and plucking some strings, or playing the insides of the piano or damper pedal resonance tricks, and he wrote beautifully and very idiomatically for the viol. There are lots of double stops and harmonics and things that create really specific resonances, but the piece is all about the center of the resonance Venn diagram between the piano and the viol. Which is not something we necessarily think of as being very large, but the way that he uses both instruments kind of occupies this resonant space together that also kind of works acoustically, which is really fascinating. I think you shouldn't at all be afraid of working with any kind of instrument. For me, I'm comfortable with an amplification setup, so I sort of think that if push comes to shove, I can always plug in, but in a lot of different contexts, it's not even necessary, especially when people are willing to be malleable with their own sound.

Jacob Bitinas

Thank you so much for everything, Liam! Is there anything else you wanted to share that wasn’t covered yet?

Liam Byrne

One of the things that I hear from a lot of viol players is a little bit of fear of the unknown when they speak about contemporary music, as it being this difficult thing. I sometimes notice people speaking about contemporary music as if it's like

a thing, and it's not at all. It's not all technically difficult. It's not a scary thing. The act of playing contemporary music is, at its core, simply just helping to create something new, and I think one of the reasons why it's nice when things happen in conversations between composer and performer as much as possible, because then it ends up making sure that new creation is something that works for both people.

INTERVIEW WITH NICO MUHLY

This interview was conducted through written questions and audio responses on February 15, 2023.

Jacob Bitinas

How were you influenced to begin writing music for early instruments? When and how should you start?

Nico Muhly

Because of my background in choral music, particularly music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and before, the presence of early music was always there. Even when I was 10 or 11, I would have listened to albums of Gibbons, Dowland, etc. Also, I think awareness of the music and awareness of the instrumentation comes at the same time. I was lucky there were a couple of early music ensembles in Providence, RI, where I went to high school. Boston wasn't that far away, and it didn't feel outrageous or that weird to know about early music. I didn't realize it was anything hyper-specific, which, of course, it is. Once I indicated that I was interested in doing it, people began approaching me. The first large-scale project was a collaboration with Teitur (Lassen) called *Confessions*, a ten or eleven-movement song with historical instruments written for the Holland Baroque.

Jacob Bitinas

What characteristics of early instruments do you find interesting that aren't present in standard, "modern" orchestral instruments?

Nico Muhly

I don't think it's necessarily timbral. I think it has to do with performance practice. Let's take string playing as an example. The way that bow speed, vibrato, and phrasing work relates so much more to vocal music than the way that Romantic string playing does.

Jacob Bitinas

Can you speak about how you have successfully delivered emotional impact through your music using historical instruments?

Nico Muhly

Working with historical instruments is like working inside an architecture we don't often see. I think for instance, as an American, the oldest post-contact or colonial things that we have are quite new in the scale of things. As an American, when you start spending time in Europe, you realize that things from the 1100s or before have enormous power. The ability to connect with music pre-Bach has an emotional resonance with me, and it's like finding ancestors you didn't know you had. The mechanisms of music making and how hyper-specific they were to the Burgundian court, for instance, itch an interest in history in me that contains emotional content in the same way that being in a very, very old space does more than being somewhere in Boston. If you think about it this way, your job as a

composer of sacred music is not necessarily to call attention to yourself or to virtuosity or whatever. Similarly, with a piece of ecclesiastical architecture, you walk in and should be filled with the sense of something meditative or whatever. Some people feel quite small. Some people feel really connected or grounded. Some people feel really oppressed. I think with historical instruments, one thing I would urge anyone very, very strongly against is to sort of essentialize the things. We don't want to turn this into the way that people talk about Bach, where it's an intangible thing. They're instruments just like any other thing.

Jacob Bitinas

How can composers avoid a shallow sense of pastiche or simple imitation and instead create something unique to the twenty-first century?

Nico Muhly

You have to learn everything there is to know about the instrument. Learn as much repertoire as possible, work with as many players as possible, and then forget about it. Know that well enough that you can make your own way through. Often, the commissions I see floating around for historical instruments are sometimes a little bit limiting because they'll say, "Can the work react to this piece of Ferrabosco" or something. I've done a few of these commissions myself, but honestly, I think with composers, you have to understand as much as possible about the instrument. There's a way that people essentialize Latin in the same way. They treat it as this magic connection with the past and an invisible

religiosity. I've heard composers set Latin only aware of the effect of the language rather than what is actually being said. So, I think that's a great example; you don't want to ever treat early instruments like setting text in a language you don't speak. I think it's clear if someone is treating the viola da gamba like a big cello, just as it's clear if you hear someone set Latin text where there's no awareness.

Jacob Bitinas

What kinds of groups or performers are playing this music?

Nico Muhly

You have specialists who just play historical instruments, people who do a bit of both, and then you have people who come to historical instruments later in life. If you're dealing with a harpsichordist who only plays harpsichord, I think that's different than a pianist who dabbles in harpsichord. It's different if you're dealing with people who are comfortable reading off Ferrabosco manuscripts versus people for whom they would need it transcribed into modern notation. These things are all challenging. I've worked with some fantastic lutenists who would prefer their parts intabulated and people who would, without thinking about it, add octaves and re-space chords. I think that's great, but you need to learn the physical and mental vocabulary of your collaborators.

Jacob Bitinas

Do you notice any trends in twenty-first century compositions that use early instruments? In your experience, who is commissioning and writing music for these groups?

Nico Muhly

If you look at ensembles who have decided to commission new work, that's where the new work comes from. Fretwork is a great example; they have commissioned a ton of music. When I wrote a piece for them for the very first time, I did the thing that I always do, which I said, "Can you send me ten examples of contemporary pieces that you've played that you love, ten examples of contemporary pieces that you found challenging, and could you tell me why?" Within fifteen minutes, they sent me a gigantic PDF with a staggering amount of music they had commissioned. What you could maybe say is a flourishing of composers writing for historic ensembles comes from the players themselves. If a quintet of dulcians wanted to have more contemporary music, they would find the composers. For composers working in a traditional commissioning structure, it wouldn't be practical to say, "OK, you've commissioned a five-minute orchestral opener? That's awesome. I'm also putting a shawm in it." Something that I try to be really clear about is that my job as a composer is to make a document that will work for posterity. If someone likes the piece that I wrote for a specific lute player, others need to be able to play it without having to call the performer and

ask them questions about how to do this or that. From my end of things, there is a premium on notation.

Jacob Bitinas

How can a composer's writing enable performers to make this delivery effective? Are you dependent on performers infusing historically informed style into your pieces, or is it helpful to write more specific notation and musical directions (sans vibrato, micromanaging hyper-specific dynamic contour, etc.?) What traps or pitfalls have you worked to avoid?

Nico Muhly

Specific notation and musical directions are a very fine-edged sword. I don't think it's just about historical instruments, either. I am very old-fashioned about this, but I believe there is a sweet spot between over-notation and under-notation. You want to make sure that your scores contain a seat for the player to sit in, a space for the player to exist where they can bring their own sensibilities to the music and not treat them like a robot and not evaluate them as if their primary function is to just execute your vision. That isn't to say that you shouldn't ask for what you want, and that isn't to say that you shouldn't notate in a very detailed way. But I think this is a question that applies to all music. Certain composers include an incredible amount of notational detail because they know what they want and how to get it. You, of course, have seen scores where really, it's just a kind of sadistic pleasure in, say, dividing the instrument into 19 zones, the degree of ponticello,

and whatever. That's also fine, but I think there is a sweet spot. In the same way for me, writing for the countertenor or writing for the treble has a specificity to it, where it feels hyper unexchangeable with other instruments that could play those notes at the same time. For me, the connection between the viola da gamba and the voice, for example, is that the viola da gamba is the most cantabile of instruments because it was used in that way. For me, it's like finding an object that does something I've wanted a single object to do but have never actually been able to find it. So, it's something where it takes four steps to get a specific sort of sung, nasal, and round tone out of out of contemporary instruments, those other instruments just know how to do it. This is a useful conversation to have, but it isn't a one-way street. You can't expect composers to necessarily be able to ask questions they don't know what questions they should be asking. So, it is important for players of historical instruments to be good ambassadors for what they can do and not to be exasperated with the idiocy of people who don't know how it works. Sit with them and show them literally what you have to do to make this chord or why a different spacing might be easier. Something that I find really interesting is that, if you take orchestral string players, very few of them would have played the music of Gibbons or Byrd, and I think that's a problem, too. I have this piece that's a sort of fantasy on a Gibbons verse-anthem, and I've made some arrangements for clarinet quintets, and it's amazing when you're talking to musicians in the finest conservatories there are and they've never played a note by

the man. That itself is very interesting. If you write out a phase exactly as it appears in Gibbons's hand, and then you give it to a player, it sounds so different because they just have no exposure to that performance practice. So, in that sense, if there is a general awareness of what this stuff is, both as a composer and a performer, just in the atmosphere of your musical education and life, I think that is really important. I think the same goes for vocal music where, if you're in a gigantic choir with an orchestra, and generally what you do is the Brahms Alto Rhapsody, Mahler symphony, or whatever, you probably won't have the experience of singing the Byrd four-part Mass, which I think you should have. So, the awareness of the instruments, music, styles, and problems doesn't just need to be on the composition side. I think it needs to be on you, specifically, you, Jacob, to be an ambassador for your work and for the music of the time that you're interested in. When I write for those ensembles, I want to meet you halfway, and I want to write a piece that addresses or that acknowledges, in some way, why it is that you went into playing early music. And I think that's something the composer should be really aware of, is that when you're writing for any instrument, no matter what it is, there's a huge power that belongs to the player who spent more time learning that instrument than you have spent writing for it, and that's something always good to keep in mind.

Jacob Bitinas

Do you have any thoughts or general advice?

Nico Muhly

> The main thing is to work with players. I would say, selfishly, as a composer, make the player take the time with you to work on notation for posterity; I think that's really important. If your colleagues in one-hundred years were to say, "Let's look at the music that was being written for historical instruments in the past 23 years," it would be nice if that music were easily interpreted. Work with players and have them in your house to show you things you wouldn't know. If I'm going to give a really rudimentary piece of advice, it would be to figure out the ways in which the instrument that you're writing for is totally not the thing that it looks like in the contemporary universe. So, figure out the ways in which the viola da gamba is totally not a cello. Sometimes, if you look at student work for instance, you can tell that their relationship to the historical instrument is based on the thing that closely resembles it in the modern orchestra or general ensemble. The harpsichord really is not a piano. The recorder is definitely not a flute. Same with many instruments. Working with players, figuring those things out, and being really collaborative, is important, and respecting the fact that these musicians have spent a great deal of time with their noses in the music of the past, most likely way more than you have. Meeting them halfway is a good thing.

INTERVIEW WITH LISA TERRY

This interview was conducted through written responses received through email on March 1, 2023.

Jacob Bitinas

How were you influenced to begin performing/ supporting new music for early instruments? When, how, and why did this become a focus?

Lisa Terry

I got involved with contemporary classical music when I was in undergraduate school. Don Freund was head of the composition department at Memphis State in those days and held a large new music festival every year at our school that brought in very well-known composers and gave student composers a chance to shine. I loved trying absolutely anything out on the modern cello. Then when I moved to New York I worked with Dinu Ghezzo at NYU and again performed tons of new music there – I was working full-time but played in the NYU student orchestra on Monday evenings and got to meet Dinu, who was the conductor of the orchestra. I started playing Viola da Gamba a lot and started getting work in Baroque groups and sometimes was hired by the New York Consort of Viols. Since I was a player with strong technique, Judith Davidoff would use me

whenever she did her contemporary music programs, since that rep could be quite challenging. Judith of course was a huge proponent of new music for Viol Consort, and the New York Consort was the group used for the Traynor competitions every time those rolled around. That meant I got hired for those conclaves! Once I got involved with Parthenia in the mid-nineties, we all continued an interest in contemporary music for consort because of our training with Judith. And because of our backgrounds at our own colleges. And because we knew composers who were interested in writing for our instruments. Parthenia took on a very active commissioning schedule, making sure that we did some new music every year and eventually adding these pieces to our ongoing repertoire – we would program a new piece mixed with a concert of Renaissance music. One time we were working with Kristin Norderval on a piece about Queen Elizabeth the first that we commissioned her to write, which used electronics sounds both pre-recorded and created and manipulated during the concert. We decided to have Kristin add some of those electronic sounds to the opening number on the concert, which was an Elizabethan dance suite. The reaction was stunning – people HATED hearing the electronic music added to their beloved Renaissance music it shocked the hell out of them. I guess we could've warned them but… I really would love to do that exact concert again and do the same thing and see how it goes over now. Our most recent CD is completely by living women composers. Personally, I am now commissioning works for solo Viola da Gamba that I want

to perform and record over the next few years. I'm interested in including extant works, also.

Jacob Bitinas

Are there specific early instruments you are drawn to perform alongside? As a viola da gamba player, what other early or modern instruments that compliment or contrast well with your instrument?

Lisa Terry

I love gamba and theorbo together, I love gamba and harpsichord together, and I love accompanying good singers. I guess playing in Viol Consort is the ideal – there's nothing like the blend and the polyphony. I work a lot with violin and flute or recorder, too, in baroque music that uses viola da gamba. Very nice. Interestingly, I am not a big fan of playing a recital with Harpsichord and another gamba accompanying. I really prefer just the theorbo or the harpsichord or both. And not another bowed Bass. But I love Viol duos… Recently I've programmed a 19th century work for Viola da Gamba and Piano, a theme and variations by Franz Chwatal. I'm surprised as heck that this piece works fine with a modern concert grand – especially in the hands of my collaborator, who is extremely sensitive. And I play in English country dance bands frequently with all sorts of instruments - always piano, and then a treble instrument which can be Flute, Clarinet, violin, concertina, Recorder. Hands-down, the blend of a Viola da Gamba (I am on a microphone) with Clarinet is an outstanding combination!

Jacob Bitinas

How do you think composers can benefit by incorporating early instruments in modern ensembles? What characteristics or quicks are present in these instruments that can contribute to a more engaging or effective presentation of their ideas?

Lisa Terry

Trumpet player Randy Sandke hired Parthenia to be the background strings for one of his CDs – it's still available, called TRUMPET AFTER DARK. The final mix isn't great, so the balance is way off, but the idea was very cool to have his usual combo of trumpet piano and drums merge with the beautiful blend and sustain of a viol consort playing the string arrangements - it could've really worked. I just wish he had mixed the album better. The thing that inspired Randy was our performance one time of Dowland's Can She Excuse, where we did a very upbeat tempo with lots of pizzicato and strumming (from me on bass) on the final section. He had us play that on the record, and then he did a jazz riff on the tune which is just excellent. When I do the Passion solos with modern orchestra, people's breath is just taken away with the incredible difference of timbre of my instrument compared to the lush modern orchestra. I think having more experience with the openness of the sound articulation of a baroque stylist - the use of the bow to create the passionate phrases instead of depending on vibrato -

all of that can affect people's brains and emotions and open their creativity to explore other ways of creating music. At least I wish I could have that effect.

Jacob Bitinas

What are some of the challenges of performing modern music on instruments like the viola da gamba, that are traditionally tied to a specific historical period and style?

Lisa Terry

Harmonics are really hard. We usually tell composers just to find the pitch on the instrument that you want, that viols can naturally sound like what a harmonic sounds like on a modern string. Chromatics are really hard with the frets, it's just it's harder to shift up and down the neck of the instrument chromatically, and sometimes it is hard to figure out a fingering when you have to go to so many different strings to find the pitches you need in a passage that has lots of flats or sharps. Composers generally don't write double stops well. We have worked with composers to change up the sharing of pitches that they want so that the double stop fits better on any one instrument at a time. Certain techniques like very long trills (or very long fluttery left hand oscillation things - usually thirds) or very long sections of tremolo are super annoying on the Viola da Gamba. OMG, I absolutely hate tremolo with an underhand bow grip! Dynamics. So many composers don't understand that our dynamic range is, to their ear, piano to mezzo forte. And they write "ppp" or "fff" for us it just make us sound stupid if

we try to overdo it. So, we're always having to tone our dynamics down but also, we strive to make a true difference between the soft and the loud range, a difference that sounds good. We work hard on matched articulation and that helps. Counting can be really hard with frequent changes of meter. We've developed the technique of counting to each other, nodding to each other when you've reached a new bar, all sorts of interactive cues and help. But working on new music and dealing with these challenges makes Parthenia a stronger ensemble. It's really good for us!

Jacob Bitinas

Have you had any experience performing early instruments alongside or within a "modern" ensemble? What challenges did you have to overcome?

Lisa Terry

I talked about this a lot already. In English country dance band, I have a microphone so that really helps me be heard, but it doesn't necessarily help me blend well with the other instruments. Until I heard myself with Clarinet and then I fell in love. I was stunned that I could play with a 9-foot grand piano and really enjoy the mixture of sounds. But I think that is because my collaborator is so incredibly talented at being sensitive. In the Bach passions I'm accompanied only by Harpsichord or Organ and one cello, so that's not a problem for balance. I like it when the modern cellist works hard at being a good accompanist and makes an effort to blend with my sound. I played a concerto with a modern orchestra once,

and with good positioning of my chair and careful dynamics from the orchestra the blend worked out just fine. Articulation always helps - if they are doing baroque music - because if they put more air in their sound it gives my sound more time to come through.

Jacob Bitinas

Do you notice any trends in 21st century composition related to old instruments that might not have been present in the 20th century? In other words, how do you think writing new music for old instruments has changed in the past 40 years?

Lisa Terry

I'm not sure about old instruments in general, but we have had some composers who actually borrow a viol from us, take lessons on it to figure it out a little bit, and then write extremely well for it with interesting use of the chordal nature of the viol which I really like, especially for solo music. But David Loeb was doing that 40 years ago. Tawnie Olson's THORNS has long passages of beautiful arpeggiated chords, and Frances White makes very good use of chordal arpeggiation – that nobody executes better than Ros Morley! Another thing I notice is an interest in helping a Viol Consort sound like a viol consort instead of trying to make it sound like a string quartet. But a lot of that comes from how we work with our composers - we try to get it across to them that we want to make good use of the natural way we play our instruments.

VITA

Jacob Bitinas received his Bachelor in Music Education from The University of Alabama in May 2014. During his undergraduate, Jacob became interested in early music through his mentors, Gesa Kordes, Don Fader, and Gail Ann Schroeder. After completing his degree, he began teaching orchestra in Cobb County, Georgia and became involved with the Atlanta Early Music Alliance and the Atlanta viola da gamba community. Encouraged by Martha Bishop and Chrissy Spencer, he served as President of the Atlanta Early Music Alliance beginning in 2020 and became head of the Viola da Gamba Society of America's New Music Committee in 2022. In 2021, Jacob entered the Graduate School Stephen F. Austin State University and received the degree of Master of Music in May 2023.

Permanent Address: 498 Embry Ln
Marietta, GA 30066

The style guide for this document was *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* by Kate L. Turabian (9th Edition).

This thesis was typed by Jacob Bitinas.