במדבר

(B'midbar)
(Numbers)

Part 1
1.
2. Dance
3.
4. (another canon for farwell)
5. Slowly (song)

Part 2
6. Song
7. Chorale
8. Dance (51 events)
9. no luck around the house
10. Stamp (for Lou Harrison)
11. Canon in 2 voices (slendros)
12. Song (with whistler)

Part 3
13. an anti-war round
14. for piano left hand
15. 102 Chords
16. piano lesson
17. "Prayer for the Nations"

במדבר *(B'midbar)(Numbers)* is a set of 17 short pieces with optional accompanying introductory statements. במדבר was commissioned by the pianist Sarah Cahill, for her Sweeter Music project, in which composers were asked to write a piece about war. The pieces may be played in any order, or in any subset. Any text may be read before any piece, by the pianist, a friend, an audience member, or anyone else. The 17 pieces are organized into three sections: 5–7–5. Each section has a different character, and over the course of the three sections, more unusual pianistic ideas are introduced. A common theme is "mode" (especially in the first set). Five of the pieces are settings of songs, one is a round, two were written with the help of the computer. Several have optional parts for other instrumentalists, singers and pianists. במדבר is modular, Sarah Cahill premiered and played several of them on tour. Rory Cowal played the entire work for the first time on May 1, 2012, in Pasadena, California.

Larry Polansky

Notes on selected pieces

4. *(another canon for farwell)* is a reference to Farwell's extraordinary limited range fugue, to one of my four voice canons, and out of respect for Farwell's place in the history and wilderness of independent composer-publishing.

5. *Slowly (song)* is two different scores for independent hands, one player, out of time. The pianist reads the two scores simultaneously: one for the right hand, one for the left. The melody is a familiar one.

6. *Song* is a set of three variations on *The Patriot Game*, an Irish ballad written by Dominic Behan. The third variation is an expanding and contracting waltz. Behan's song is "sung" by an IRA volunteer killed at the age of 20 during a raid in 1957.

8. *Dance (51 events)* is one measure to be repeated many times. With each repeat, a pitch may be replaced by a percussive sound. This process continues until all pitches have moved to percussive sounds. The rhythms are derived from the pitch ratios in the harmonic series, in a kind of human "rhythmicon."

9. *no luck around the house* is a setting of a traditional Scottish song attributed to Jean Adam, *There's Nae Luck Aboot The Hoose*, about a sailor's wife and the safe return of her husband from the sea.

11. *Canon in 2 voices (slendros)* is dedicated to Moondog, and his beautiful piano canons.

12. *Song (with whistler)* is a setting of *Johnny has Gone for a Soldier*. The pianist whistles in one key while playing in another.

14. *for piano left hand*. The performer chooses someone who has died in war, learns to sign (in American Sign Language or any sign) their name, age, date of birth, place of birth, date of death, as well as the signs NAME, AGE, BORN, WHERE, and DIED. The latter signs can be done with two hands. The other signing should be done with the R.H. while the piano part is played with the L.H.

15. *102 Chords* is a computer-composed piece using a simple harmony algorithm for generating a chorale, in F# mixolydian (harmonic minor).

17. *Prayer for the Nations*. From the Canterbury Shaker Hymnal, this is one of the less common Shaker songs in four-parts. This setting morphs through many parallel modes, all in Ab, and, by use of a computer algorithm to "time stretch" the score, the tempo constantly changes. The physical length of each measure determines the speed: the longer the bar, the slower the tempo.

Notes by Rory Cowal and Larry Polansky

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(B'midbar)
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Larry Polansky

solo piano (and invited speakers)
for sarah cahill

Rory Cowal, piano

May 11, 2012
University of California, Santa Cruz