

# what if?

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I often write pieces with some kind of question in mind. That question can be just about anything, but sometimes it is simply “what if?”

Some musical ideas beg to be pursued for their own sake, on their own terms, just to see what happens. Asking the right questions—fecund, clear, as profound and ramifying as possible—is important. But the hard work for a composer is to ask elegantly, poetically, transparently, and above all, musically. There are many interesting questions, far fewer interesting pieces.

If a question is pursued with integrity and confidence, the consequences can lead to difficult pieces: difficult for the composer to realise, difficult for the performer to play, difficult for others to understand. It’s true that curiosity can cause problems, but for a composer a lack of curiosity is the more serious problem. If we are to “keep it new” we must take the consequences. Change is hard, but it is everything. The hope is that if we keep sticking our noses where they don’t belong, they will, eventually, detect something new.

## THREE PIECES

I include three of my own pieces as examples: *Christian Music* (four rounds) (2007), *days, weeks, months, years* (for solo pianist) (2006), and “for piano left hand” (#14 from the piano piece במדבר [B’midbar] [Numbers]) (2008).<sup>1</sup>

The idea of *Christian Music* is simple: what if the conventional axes of musical notation—x and y, pitch as a function of time—were reversed? If we “flip” the axes, say, displaying time as a function of pitch, difference and similarities in pitch become those in time and vice versa. Simultaneity in time becomes equality of pitch (and vice versa). A steady rhythmic pulse becomes a chord.

The pencil sketch for *Christian Music* shows this clearly. The “melody” in black noteheads is written in the conventional way, left-to-right, with time along the y-axis. Each “box” is something like a measure. Superimposed on that is the melody in white noteheads transposed by a ninety-degree rotation (counter-clockwise). In other words, the white-notehead melody is written as if the black-notehead melody were rotated to the left, and written in a  $2 \times 3$  grid (or “two measures” per line) rather than the  $3 \times 2$  of the original. Two representations of pitch versus time (or time versus pitch) combine to make something

<sup>1</sup> A video illustration of במדבר [B’midbar] [Numbers] may be found online at <http://www.orpheusinstitut.be/en/anthology-repository>

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new, interpretable in a number of ways. It's a round at the two-measures, and at the pitch/time inversion (rotation) as well.

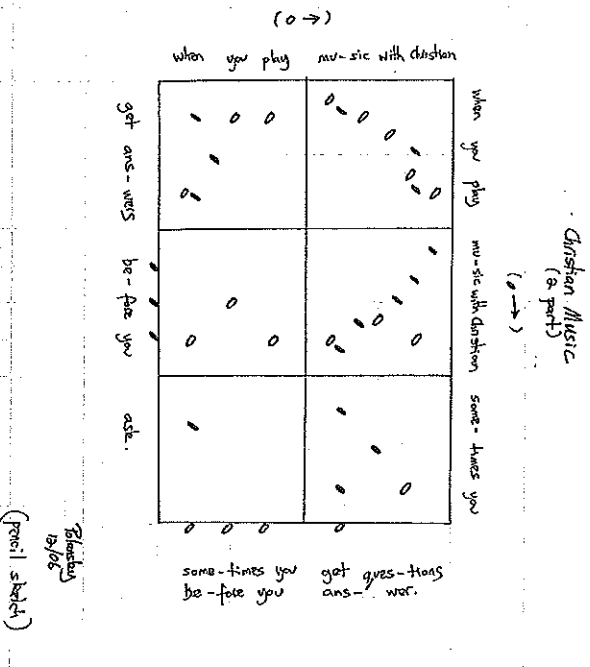


Fig. 1

The final version of the piece consists of four postcards (designed in collaboration with Laura Grey). Different colours designate different voices of each round. Five hundred postcards were made, which I give away. Each set of four is given a unique "numbering" (out of five hundred) that has nothing to do with the order of the "edition," but refers uniquely to the recipient.

The three two-part rounds are successive ninety-degree rotations (inversions around the axes to different quadrants). The four-part round combines all four rotations. No indications are given to performers—time and pitch (and anything else) may be realised in any way they choose, based on the notation. Apparent pitch or time simultaneities, when the score is considered in conventional notation, are free to be treated as such, even though they result indirectly from the notational idea. The lyrics (a homage to my friend and bandmate Christian Wolff) may be sung or not. If they are sung (these are rounds, after all) the idea of text occurring in the vertical is completely open to performer interpretation. In *Christian Music*, I ask the musicians to ponder my own question, the "what if" of the piece, in their performance.

*days, weeks, months, years* requires a daily activity of the performer like practising. But it precludes what is most often the direct result of practising: performance. Like many of the most important things in life, this piece is difficult in the long term, relatively straightforward in the short. Both *Christian Music* and *days...* are quite personal. But the intent in the latter, inherent in the communication between composer and performer, is not only one of respect, friendship,

and I hope, good humour, but also an audacious challenge to follow the rules: it asks the performer to follow an almost three year process. Since several things change along differing time cycles, the performer must carefully keep track. To me, the piece is a hybrid of diary, meditation, and ordinary daily instrumental practice. By necessity, any realisation is a private one.

"For piano left hand" is from a larger solo piano piece, 1117121, commissioned by Sarah Cahill as part of a collection of anti-war pieces. 1117121 consists of seventeen short pieces (in three sections of 5-7-5). Each is optionally preceded by a short, spoken text. 1117121 may be performed in its entirety, or its individual pieces may be done in any combination. Several of the pieces are songs (the pianist sings), one is a round (involving the audience singing), one is a "piano lesson" (with volunteer pianists from the audience), and one can involve any number of other instruments to play with the pianist. Most of the pieces require the pianist to do something out of the ordinary.

My reason for this structure was simple: if we truly hope to not have war, we can't just do what we usually do. We are xenophobic by nature. How we modulate that fundamental part of our makeup with the intelligence also handed to us by evolution is what might make it possible, as the round (#13) in 1117121 says, to "put our hands together/and try to make something better."

In #14, "for piano left hand," the pianist is asked to learn the rudiments of a new language: sign. This comes from my own experience: I have been involved in the culture of American Sign Language (ASL) for the past ten years. But the pianist may learn *any* sign language (they are as different from one another as spoken languages are). The pianist is asked to find a teacher (preferably Deaf) and learn how to do a few signs ("dead," "where," etc.), simple spelling (for names and places), numbering, and dates. These can generally be done with one hand, so the piece is a song *sung* by the pianist in sign, accompanied by the left hand. Signing usually favours the dominant hand, so a left-handed pianist might play this piece with the right hand. Only one performer (Rory Cowal) has performed this particular piece (#14). He found a Deaf teacher to instruct him in ASL, and not only enjoyed that experience, but also became friends with this teacher, someone from a radically different community than his own. Rory told me he was transformed by the experience.

In wonderful polarity, music can be said to be sound without meaning, sign to be meaning without sound. The question "What if we could have music in sign?" was part of the impetus for this piece, as was "What if a pianist's hands did meaningful things other than playing the piano, or even making sound?"