At the Conflux

by

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Stephen Jaffe

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William Seaman

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Music in the Graduate School of Duke University

2017
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

1. At the Conflux

At the Conflux is a three part musically driven time-lapse film that tours Japan by road and rail. It is an exploration of its sprawling nocturnal cityscapes crisscrossed by thruways, its urban grid illuminated by fiery-hued highways pulsing through the city like arteries circulating blood, its towering skyscrapers watching over all, unmoved—soaring sentinels of steel and glass, its patterns of people rhythmically engaging with the machinery of modern life. A spacious Japanese flavored soundscape contrasts with the frenetic energy of the imagery. Piano, violin, trumpet, trombone and upright bass lines are decorated with snippets of field recordings captured in Tokyo and Osaka.

2. Craft and Expression Entwined in the Music of Martin Bresnick

The music of Martin Bresnick is filled with allusions to literature, history, politics, and music of the past. These extramusical references are often combined with complex musical structures. Symmetries and serial operations are staples of his craft. These two aspects of his work often exist in different conceptual realms. However, from the early 1990s onwards, there is a trend in Bresnick’s music in which technical elements entwine with expressive aims. This short article explores the relationship between
compositional technique and referentiality through two exemplary works, the *String Quartet No. 2, Bucephalus* (1984) and *The Bucket Rider* (1995) with a brief exploration of the aesthetic of Arte Povera, an avant-garde art movement of the 1960s and 1970s Bresnick used as the title of the set of pieces to which *The Bucket Rider* belongs.
Dedication

*At the Conflux* is dedicated to my wife Michiko Tierney and my son Jonas Tierney.
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I would also like to thank the people who helped bring *At the Conflux* to life, this includes recording engineers, Artem Smirnov at Soundpure Studios, and Rick Nelson at the Duke as well as the recording musicians of the Deviant Septet, Karen Kim, Doug Balliett, Bill Kalinkos, Brad Balliett, Mike Gurfield, Matthew Melore, and Jared Soldiviero. I would also like to acknowledge those who lent their time, resources and wisdom to the project including the philosopher grandfather of non-narrative time-lapse
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Introduction

Time-lapse is the technique of using a camera as a time compression device. It reveals patterns and periodicities of our world that progress in timescales ordinarily too large for human perception. *At the Conflux* uses time-lapse to uncover the rhythm of urban Japanese infrastructure and the masses of people who occupy it. The music lends emphasis, weight, focus and an expressive interpretation to the images. It highlights and colors the visual patterns through sound.

Patterns are also paramount in the music of Martin Bresnick. Palindromes, canons and all manner of serial operations are staples of his craft. These formal patterns sometimes exist independently of other compositional goals, but in some of Bresnick’s recent compositions, they are coupled with extramusical references to literature, history, politics, and music of the past. A dazzling display of virtuosic compositional engineering is not the sole aim in Bresnick’s music. Rather, the patterns found in the craftsmanship are allied to the expressive goals of the music. The two elements combine to create an experience greater than the sum of its parts. Like the musical patterns used to highlight and interpret the latent rhythms of Japanese cityscapes, Bresnick’s patterns contribute to the explication and expression of his extramusical references.
1. At the Conflux
Instrumentation

Clarinet in Bb
Bassoon
Trumpet
Trombone
Vibraphone
Piano
Violin
Double Bass

Score in C. Double bass sounds one octave lower than written.
**Program notes**

1. *Aerial Arterial*

*Aerial Arterial* presents Tokyo from above. Its sprawling nocturnal cityscapes crisscrossed by thruways. It begins with shots atop the world’s tallest tower—the Tokyo Skytree—with the expanses of the urban grid illuminated by headlights below. It ends closer to the concrete with dizzying loops traced by traffic. In between these poles, the massive fiery-hued highways pulse through the wards of Minato and Shinjuku, like veins pumping blood. The towering skyscrapers watch over all, unmoved—soaring sentinels of steel and glass. Not a soul is seen. Only machines.

The music is minimal. The images need space to breathe. Tender Japanese flavored chords are accompanied by street beeps, night noises and satellite hums. After all, in the metropolis, the crickets are replaced by singing machinery. This is an ode to edifices of the great eastern capital. To its atmosphere and infrastructure. A static lullaby for a city on stilts.
2. *Tokyo Aglow*

Tokyo Aglow tours the Japanese capital by road and rail. Whereas *Aerial Arterial* explores the edifices of the city from elevated perches, *Tokyo Aglow* captures the city from the blacktop. The automated Yurikamome monorail flows through Odaiba and arrives downtown. A taxi whips to converging clusters of crowds in Shibuya. Scores surge, stream and swarm, tangle and scramble. Patterns of people, probabilities and periodicities, play. Weaving and knotting, the masses rhythmically engage with the machinery of modern life. Koto-inspired chords underpin the music of the piano. Trombone, trumpet and violin map to the patterns recurrent and emergent. Crosswalk chimes, chirps and cuckoos echo into the night.
3. *In Praise of Shadows*

*In Praise of Shadows* tours Japan's transportation systems in time-lapse. This runs the gamut from the massive monorails of Kobe and Chiba, the automated transit in Tokyo, and the trains of Osaka, as well as more mundane transport methods—escalators, taxis, crosswalks, rickshaws, and sushi conveyor belts. While the first two installments of *At the Conflux* are exclusively nocturnal, “In Praise of Shadows” begins at dawn. Twilight gradually approaches, shadows sweep the city, and night falls, concluding high above the city where *Aerial Arterial* began.

The title stems from a 1933 essay by the Japanese author and novelist Junichirō Tanizaki. Tanizaki uses shadows (both real and metaphoric) to contrast the subtlety of traditional Japanese aesthetics with the gleaming light of the modern era. The music is brighter than the previous parts. Clarinet, upright bass, and violin chords and lines punctuate simple shamisen-inspired melodies of the piano. Field recordings of train announcements, monorail accelerations, crosswalk jingles, elevator chimes, conversing crowds, and summer cicadas decorate the texture.
At the Conflux Part One
AERIAL ARTERIAL

Justin Tierny
At the Conflux Part Two

TOKYO AGLOW

Justin Tierney

1. MONORAIL

espressivo e delicato \( \cdot = 66 \)

(enter tunnel)

Piano

\( \text{Pno.} \)

(enter tunnel)

\( \text{Pno.} \)

2. RAIL YARD

con sord.

solo, espress. con vibrato ma non troppo

\( \text{Vn.} \)

\( p \)
6. SHIBUYA CLOSE

Pno.

Vib.

Tpt.

Tbn.

Vn.

C.B.
9. OCHANOMIZU TRAINS

Tpt.

Tbn.

Pno.

Vn.

C.B.
At the Conflux Part Three
In Praise of Shadows

Justin Tierney

Clarinet in Bb

Bassoon

Trumpet in C

Trombone 1

Vibraphone

Piano

Koto

Violin

Double Bass

semplice $\frac{3}{8} = 66$

16
2. Craft and Expression Entwined in the Music of Martin Bresnick
Craft and Expression Entwined in the Music of Martin Bresnick

For Bresnick, composition has always been a tool for converting the intellectual into the emotional.
—David Lang¹

One of my favorite unknown Arte Povera works was by a guy I knew, named Paolo Icaro, in Italy. One day he saw that a little building ... was kind of falling down, so he went off and got his plaster and fixed this thing; and that was his piece. I thought, that’s what I want my music to be. ... Instead of marble and bronze, how about using concrete and grass and sand. That’s what I’m after in many of those pieces; they start from principles of a kind of music that is materially graspable, though in the piece it happens to be very complicated.
—Martin Bresnick²

Structures of great elegance are found throughout Martin Bresnick’s oeuvre. Palindromes, canons, symmetrical systems, rhythmic cycles, cryptograms, number games, and all manner of serial operations are hallmarks of his craft. These formal techniques are often coupled with extramusical references. Inspiration from, and allusions to, the riches of literature, history, politics, and music of the past abound. However, prior to the 1990s, these two threads—craft and referentiality—rarely intersected, existing in different conceptual realms with only tangential connections. This article explores the relationship between compositional technique and expression through two works. The first is Bresnick’s String Quartet No. 2, Bucephalus (1984).

Bucephalus is chockfull of both technical sophistication and extramusical associations, but the relationship between the two strands is artful rather than literal. This is true of many Bresnick works, in which the connection between craft and expression can be categorized as referential. The discussion of Bucephalus is conceived in comparison with the second work, The Bucket Rider (1995), where the relationship between the two aspects can be categorized as entwined, that is, the compositional technique of the piece is intimately connected with its expressive aims. This aspect of The Bucket Rider is preceded by discussions of kindred works and a brief exploration of the aesthetic of Arte Povera, an avant-garde art movement of the 1960s and 1970s Bresnick used as the title of the set of pieces to which The Bucket Rider belongs.

Bresnick’s String Quartet No. 2, Bucephalus, engages with topics associated with the historical figure of Alexander the Great. It offers several interactions between craft and reference through fanciful insinuations, nods, puns, and winks to the history of Alexander. The impetus for the allusions likely arose from the name of the ensemble that commissioned the work: The Alexander String Quartet. Bresnick himself quipped that he wanted to provide “a war-horse for the group.”³ The first terse movement, also titled “Bucephalus,” is a duet for the two violins set in a bright Lydian hexachord centered on A (set-class 6-Z26 [013578]). Its glissandi, imitative gestures and restless improvisatory rhythms perhaps point to Alexander’s interaction with his faithful war horse.

³ Martin Bresnick, presentation on his music at the Yale School of Music, New Haven, CT, 04/12/2012.
The title of the fourth movement, “At Jhelum,” references the location (in modern day Pakistan) where Bucephalus may have been buried after succumbing to battle wounds. The loss of Bucephalus is evoked by an extended, elegiac viola solo with microtonal inflections and dotted rhythms evoking a funeral march.
The fifth, and final, movement takes its title from Kafka’s whimsical one-page story “The New Advocate,” which imagines Bucephalus in contemporary society, studying law (Fig. 3). The movement recalls much of the music of the preceding four movements, forming a kind of summation, like Kafka’s modern Bucephalus, who, long retired from battle and attending law school, “reads and turns the pages of our ancient tomes.” Some of the recalled passages are slightly reworked, while others are distinctly elaborated. For example, the piece ends with an echo of the very first grace note gesture that began the quartet in the first violin, E, D#, E in an extremely elongated form. (See Fig. 1 above and the top tones of violin 1 in Fig. 3 below.)

---


5 By a factor of 11.
Recall of opening gestures of the first movement in elongated form

*Fig. 3. Mov. 5, “The New Advocate,” mm. 48–52, String Quartet No. 2.*

*Bucephalus* also contains passages where the relationship between compositional craft and literary associations is more strongly allied. To give a more detailed example, the second movement of *Bucephalus* opens with a complex canonic passage. The title of the movement, “Around to the Sun,” alludes to the legend of Alexander the Great taming the wild Bucephalus. Perceiving that Bucephalus’s belligerence was triggered by fear of his shadow, the young Alexander turned him around to face the sun. Like the possible cryptogram in the opening melody of the movement (Bb, C, E, F – first violin, i.e. “Bucephalus”), as pointed out by O’Brien and Pickett, Bresnick uses this anecdote as a springboard for ideas related to Bucephalus and Alexander. The focus of the movement, inspired by the Alexandrian anecdote and translated into music by Bresnick, is on the idea of turning around. In embedding the movement with canons, Bresnick

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puns on the word “around” by evoking the common synonym for canon, *a round*. In addition, the canonic melodic lines in each instrument form palindromes. They proceed to their respective axis points and then turn *around* to the way they came. Bresnick scored the turnaround points of the palindromes for emphasis. The axis tones are agogically accented and reinforced by a crescendo and diminuendo toward and away from them (Fig. 4).

![II. Around to the Sun](image)

**Fig. 4. Mov. II, “Around to the Sun,” String Quartet No. 2.**

Palindromes, canons, and compound melody

These four palindromes are not the only ones sounding. Each instrument in the quartet presents two concurrent, but rhythmically distinct, palindromes canonically via compound melody. In the first violin, for example, the second voice begins in unison (Bb) with the first, but progresses an octave lower in augmentation at 10 times the duration of the top voice. Its second tone (C) does not sound until the penultimate tone
of the top voice is articulated, where it overlaps through an octave double stop. At this point, the top voice ceases sounding, while the bottom voice continues. This process is highlighted in the score below (Fig. 5).

![Score Image]

**Fig. 5. Violin I reduction from Mov. 2 from String Quartet No. 2, mm. 1–7**

The rhythmic relationship between the two voices in each instrument follows a summing system. Each melody unfolds in a unique series of uniform durations. The top voice of the first violin proceeds in sixteenth notes, while the bottom voice proceeds in durations equaling 10 sixteenth notes (except for the axis of the palindrome, which is doubled in duration for emphasis; see Fig. 5 above). The durational units of the two melodies in the first violin (one and ten) sum to the value of 11. This observation may appear dubious, but it is confirmed by the relationships presented in the other three instruments. The second violin’s faster-moving palindrome melody proceeds in durations of two sixteenth notes, while the slower-moving second voice proceeds in

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7 See O’Brien and Pickett (1999) for further discussions of the value of 11 in *Bucephalus*, including the discussion of the poetic metrical form of the alexandrine. In most of its iterations, the alexandrine consists of lines of 12 syllables (not quite 11) and more significantly, a medial caesura that serves a similar purpose to Bresnick’s rhythmic elongation of the central point of the palindrome.
durations of nine sixteenth notes. Likewise, the viola’s two lines progress at values of three and eight sixteenth notes, while the cello lines progress at four and seven sixteenth notes. Thus, each instrument presents a pair of palindromic melodies in a unique proportional relationship summing to 11, as outlined in Fig. 6 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Duration of tones in 16th notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vn. 1:</td>
<td>10:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vn. 2:</td>
<td>2:9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Va.:</td>
<td>3:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vc.:</td>
<td>4:7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 6. Proportional rhythmic relationship of melodic strands in each instrument mm. 1–7. *String Quartet No. 2*, Mov. II, “Around to the Sun.”

In a presentation on his work at the Yale School of Music in 2012, Bresnick discussed his search for means of creating coherence without the trappings of tonality. In a vivid comparison, he stated that “functional tonality is like Kurt Vonnegut’s Ice-9 [a fictional substance from *Cat’s Cradle*], it turns everything it touches into ice or a desert.”

This comment was made amidst a broader discussion of Bresnick’s relationship with modernism in the late 1970s through the early 1990s and the rallying cries of Gertrude

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8 Bresnick, presentation on his music at the Yale School of Music, 2012.
Stein to “kill the nineteenth century dead, dead, dead,”⁹ and Ezra Pound’s injunction to “Make It New!”¹⁰ For Bresnick, “making it new” included returning to the basic physics of music—to sound itself—to sine waves, which he described as “inverted palindromes.” The sine wave was used as a model for pattern creation and symmetry because its “symmetry remains intact through transformations” such as transposition and inversion. Likewise, Bresnick sought to create symmetrical structures in his music that persist through transformations, “like the transformational symmetry of H₂O—clouds, water and ice,” different states with the same underlying structure. These comments were made just after Bresnick had drawn a diagram on the blackboard outlining the rhythmic summing system shown in the right half of Figure 6 above. The aim of such a system, in his words, is to “achieve the logic of anticipation and expectation.” This is facilitated by the in-built predictability of the system, by pattern completion. More importantly for this passage in Bucephalus, like the palindromes and the canons, the rhythmic summing system adds an extra element of reflexivity—another mirror, another way around. Similarly, on a larger scale, this entire opening passage returns in (a transposed, but rhythmically exact) retrograde form beginning at measure 8. By the end of measure 14, the music returns to where it began—again, another way of turning around.

⁹ Wars I Have Seen (1945)
¹⁰ Make it New (1935)
Fig. 7. Retrograde of the opening of Mov. II, 
“Around to the Sun,” String Quartet No. 2

The technical achievements of this passage, though imposing, do not aim to explicate the story of Alexander and Bucephalus. Rather, the compositional techniques of canons, palindromes, and retrogrades spring from linguistic playfulness, punning (around/a round) on a phrase from lore describing Alexander’s taming of Bucephalus.
The references are coded; they must be interpreted to be grasped. The title of the second movement (and of the quartet as a whole) is what bonds the craftwork with the extramuscial references.

This is true for other works as well. *ONE* (1986) for orchestra, composed for Orchestra New England (hence the acronym), in which Bresnick sustains *one* note in the middle of the texture throughout the 10-minute piece, is one example. *Wir Weben, Wir Weben* (1978) for string sextet, is another. The title stems from a refrain in Heinrich Heine’s poem *Die Schlesischen Weber (The Silesian Weavers)* (1844), penned in support of a German textile-workers’ strike. Bresnick presents micropolyphonic textures throughout the three movements. These textures, and their construction, call to mind both the monotonous labor of the weavers and the patterning of the fabrics they wove.
Fig. 8. Mov. III mm. 73-76 (end), Wir Weben, Wir Weben
To give one example, the sextet ends with an exquisite seven-bar codetta. It abruptly cuts off the preceding climax built up over the past six and a half minutes and serves as a kind of denouement. The overlapping voices of the ensemble weave in and out within the constricted range of a major sixth (G to E) with just six tones sounding (set-class 6-33 [0 2 3 5 7 9]). Instruments of the same kind swap phrases back and forth. Each tone is mapped to a duration, as if each musician were a weaver provided an algorithm for creating a certain textile. All the Ds last for four eighth notes, while all Bs sound for five eighth notes, etc., as shown in Fig. 9 below.

![Fig. 9. Wir Weben, Wir Weben, III codetta; tones mapped to durations](image)

The way the techniques (canons, drones, palindromes, symmetry, inversion, repetition, micropolyphony) are deployed in all the works above makes them largely referential. The relationship between craft and the extramusical ideas is metaphorical; it is not programmatic. Such a relationship offers abstract coherence and artful connections to the world beyond the musical context of the work, and contributes to Bresnick’s goal
of “surround[ing] [his] work with meaning.” This approach invites multiple interpretations. As Bresnick states in an interview with Robert Auler on his work For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise, “Some of the naïve one-to-one relationship is what I intended. I wanted to provide the listener with a very layered response. So they can view it all the way through if they want, or they can think about relationships at another level. If they really want to take time to think about it, they will get even more out of it.” Bresnick thinks of these varied literary references and the technical ingenuities as different strands one can follow while listening to his music. He compares the strands to “chum in the water when you’re fishing. I throw these little fish heads out there, and if people are really interested, they’ll come and grab the bait and then they’re hooked.”

In these pieces, for the most part, craft and expression exist in different realms that are related only tangentially. And, Bresnick cautioned against placing too much weight on the extramusical, saying, “I want to think that this music is sensibly related to the material—at the same time, I want the music to be autonomously rugged enough to stand on its own.”

However, from the early 1990s onwards, there is a trend in Bresnick’s music in which technical elements entwine with expressive aims. Particularly in more recent works inspired by literature, a coalescence of technique and affect arises that

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11 Bresnick, presentation on his music at the Yale School of Music.
12 Robert Auler, “Martin Bresnick’s For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise: Analysis of a Multi-Media Composition” (electronic dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2006). This was stated in the context of a work with visual projections, which create another layer of meaning and interpretation.
distinguishes them from the free associations of *Bucephalus* and others outlined above. A hint of this development is found in the delicate utterances of the altissimo cello in the first, second, and fifth *Songs of the Mouse People* (1999). Constrained to just the four chromatic tones between G and Bb, the soft, fitful squeaking is also restricted to melodic motion by half-step.

![Songs of the Mouse People](image)

*Fig. 10. Songs of the Mouse People, “1. Common Squeaking (made apparent by its delicacy),” mm. 1–2. Restrictive range and motion*

The limits imposed on both register and melodic motion (along with the timbre and rhythm) help conjure the world of Josephine, the mouse diva of Kafka’s valedictory
The two marimba soloists in *Grace* (2000), responding to one another in inverted and/or imitative gestures throughout the three movements of the concerto, provide another example of this idea. In its simplest form, the exchange consists of minor thirds doubled in fifths or fourths passed back and forth at contrasting dynamic levels (Fig 11, below).

![Fig. 11. Grace, mm. 9–16 [reduction].](image)

**Dialog between the two marimba soloists**

Heinrich von Kleist’s *Über das Marionetten Theater* (*On the Marionette Theater*) (1801), which was the inspiration for the music, presents a Socratic park bench dialogue between two acquaintances concerning the nature of grace through the lens of puppetry. One is a well-known professional dancer, Mr. C, who attends performances of a marionette troupe and compares the volition of a dancer’s movements with that of puppets. Mr. C argues that human dancers should aspire to the grace of the wooden puppets, which are subject only to natural laws and the will of the puppet master. The

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other is the narrator, who is as skeptical of the art form as he is of the idea, and rejects the notion that a puppet could have an advantage over a human dancer. The music is a translation process from the literature. Bresnick’s use of inversion and imitation along with the theatrical elements of the concerto help evoke the idea of the dialogue, of give and take, expressed in Kleist’s short story. As the first movement develops, the narrator (marimba 2) responds with more tentative gestures, and in spots is unable to keep up with the more philosophically nimble dancer represented by marimba soloist 1 (see Fig. 12 for example).

![Fig. 12. Grace, mm. 48–50 [reduction]. Dialog between the two marimba soloists](image)

*The Bucket Rider* (1995) provides perhaps the most fitting example of a technical phenomenon contributing to expressive aims. It is the seventh installment of the 12 works that comprise *Opere della Musica Povera* (*Works of a Poor Music*) composed between 1990 and 1999. The idea, in Bresnick’s words, was to “assemble a large composition from
numerous small ones ... composed between the chaotic spaces of my responsibilities.”

He began by collecting short phrases on the topic of poverty—of all kinds—until he had more than 50, which in his own words ranged from “original formulations to common expressions and literary quotations.” The final collection of works engages with an assortment of literary and philosophical references from William Blake, Kafka, Melville, Collodi’s Pinocchio, and the biblical Psalms, to Walter Benjamin and the I-Ching. These references form but one layer of Bresnick’s conceptual tapestry in the Opere. Bresnick explains how he built up the conception of the collection in tiers. It begins with

a music of the sounding world itself—water splashing, wood creaking, chains rattling, machines squeaking, people talking. From that base I moved outward toward literal, purely musical presentations—band playing, bells ringing—to symbolic musical representation of the physical world—singing birds, swimming fish, flickering flies—and the sensations of motion—walking, following, rising, falling, riding, flying. Then, carrying the emerging totality further, I expanded the Opere della Musica Povera to musical configurations that by analogy or metaphor evoked state of mind or mood—joy, sorrow, fear, anticipation, confusion, contemplation, consolation. And I arrived, finally, at the speculative patterns that afford, through music, the sensuous experience of thought itself—cascading waves of energy, precarious balances, forces and gravitations, symmetries, inversions, reversals, dispersions—and found there the abstract and the material joined together—the music mundane within the Musica Mundana... a music of noises and voices, of birds, of pigs and fishes, of angles, travelers, and puppets, but also of purely musical speculations and abstractions.

In terms of the large-scale “musical configurations” and the “speculative patterns,” the set of 12 pieces is conceived as a set of six pairs. Each of the short works

\[\text{\textsuperscript{15}}\text{Martin Bresnick, in liner notes to Martin Bresnick: \textit{Opere della Musica Povera}, CRI CD 868, 7.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\text{In a discussion about the \textit{Opere della Musica Povera} with Bresnick, Frank Oteri describes how Bresnick’s depth of knowledge comes into contact with his humor: “First, he’ll start discoursing about a group of twentieth century Italian sculptors who purposely created works with very cheap materials to show how art belonged to everyone. But eventually, with a mischievous smile, he’ll chime, ‘Actually, some of these works were the result of a relatively small commissioning fee!’” Frank Oteri, Martin Bresnick: A Poor Man’s Riches, liner notes in Martin Bresnick, \textit{Opere della Musica Povera}, CRI CD 868, 10.}\]
connects to another in the set in several ways. Each of the Opere emphasizes a harmonic center, most progresses a tritone away and return to the initial center in an ABA structure. Tucket and Angelus Novus, the only two works for orchestra, and The Bucket Rider and BE JUST!, share a tritone axis but begin and end at the opposing poles. The harmonic motion of The Bucket Rider, for example, is A to Eb to A, and that of its companion piece, BE JUST!, is Eb to A to Eb.

![Diagram of Opere della Musica Povera pairings](image)

**Fig. 13. Opere della Musica Povera pairings**

The paired pieces often share instrumentation (with some exceptions), but if one piece is fragile, slow, and soft (like The Bucket Rider), its companion is aggressive, fast,

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17 Chart adapted from Bresnick’s liner notes to *Opere della Musica Povera CD*
and loud (like BE JUST!). Likewise, both these pieces are inspired by Kafka. The Bucket Rider addresses the plight of a victim, while BE JUST!, with a title taken from the final line of Kafka’s In A Penal Colony, in a conceptual inversion, deals with the guilt of an aggressor.\footnote{Likewise, the two pieces are dedicated to the three founding members of the Bang on a Can All-stars. The Bucket Rider is dedicated to Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe while BE JUST! is dedicated to David Lang.}

The unifying topic of the Opere is impoverishment in the most expansive sense of the word. Bresnick explains that each work “has a title that evokes a sense of poverty: poverty of means, of spirit, or wit.”\footnote{Martin Bresnick, notes on the Opere della Musica Povera, Carl Fischer, back cover.} The inspiration for the Musica Povera collection lies in the Arte Povera movement in the Italian visual arts of the late 1960s and 1970s, which Bresnick had been exposed to during his stay in Rome under the auspices of the Rome Prize Fellowship (1975–76). The term “Arte Povera” was coined by the Genoese art critic and curator Germano Celant in 1967.\footnote{Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Arte Povera. Phaidon, (2005) 17.} The movement had a diverse set of objectives. One theme that runs through many Arte Povera works is the use of mundane materials for construction. Luciano Fabro’s “Floor Tautology” (1967), for example, consists of sheets of newspaper laid across an art gallery floor to protect its polish. Michelangelo Pistoletto’s Muretto di straci (Rag Wall) (1967) consists of two sets of rags, some piled in a mound, others wrapped around common construction bricks and stacked to form a wall. Both examples reject luxurious art materials (marble, oils, canvas) while elevating the significance of disposable everyday objects.
An element of subversion runs through both the Arte Povera movement and Bresnick’s *Opere*. It often manifests itself in the juxtapositions between high and low. Another Pistoletto work, *Venere degli stracci (Venus of the Rags)* (1967–1974), contrasts a classical statue of the Roman goddess of love and fertility with a heap of multi-colored rags. The statue faces away from the viewer, into the rags, and presses lightly against the cloth pile. In its original form, the artist purchased a stock Venus statue from a garden supply store and piled up his own discarded canvas cleaning rags to form the composition. The work draws attention to the opposition of high and low art, of respected and disregarded material. The hard, monochromatic marble of Venus is set against the soft, multi-colored rags. The fixed is set against the flexible, the historic against the contemporary, the one against the many, the special against the common, and the humble against the opulent. These themes manifest in Bresnick’s *Opere della Musica Povera* primarily through the juxtaposition of elements of learned style—and its high art connotations (canons, palindromes, symmetry, etc.)—with austere textures, unadorned surfaces, and extreme economy of means often inspired by literature on the neglected, disenfranchised, and downtrodden. Bresnick states in the notes to the set of *Opere della Musica Povera* that “the political implications of the Arte Povera, in that politicized time, were obvious” and that he thought he “might try something similar in music—a *Musica Povera* whose source ideas would include, along with the usual, brutal poverty of means, any and all other kinds of poverty.” Along those lines, in his program

21 Christov-Bakargiev, 157.
notes to *The Bucket Rider*, he stated that part of the impetus of *Opere della Musica Povera* was “to create something out of very little material and make it seem splendid: an invitation to the necessary pleasures of austerity.”

“Austere” is an apt adjective for *The Bucket Rider*. In Kafka’s eponymous tale (“*Der Kübelreiter*”) of 1917, a penniless protagonist scrapes along the city streets with his empty bucket, pleading for coal on a frosty evening. When his repeated entreaties are ignored by the coal dealer’s wife, he “ascend[s] into the regions of the ice mountains and [is] lost forever.”

Bresnick’s writing in *The Bucket Rider* is exceedingly sparse. Commissioned by the Fromm Foundation at Harvard, and written for a sextet of members of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the work never rises above a dynamic level of piano. This, in a way, subverts the typically loud, amplified rock-infused music that the Bang on a Can All-Stars champion. The form of the work is a set of 11 variations on the intervallic material of the opening eight bars. The texture is one of hushed solos and homorhythmic duets and trios broken by protracted rests, and underpinned by drones. After an extended, sustained unison on the tonal center of A on the bass, cello, electric guitar, bass clarinet, and bowed cymbal, the bass clarinet emerges. Straining at the extremes of its upper register, it sounds a series of three solemn phrases that present the material for the remainder of the piece (Fig. 14).

22 Bresnick, *The Bucket Rider* and *BE JUST!*, program notes.
Fig. 14. The Bucket Rider, mm. 1–5.
Opening, with the first of three bass clarinet palindromic phrases

In addition to the spare texture, restrictive rhythm, and pinched timbre, the layout of the lines in unadorned, anti-dramatic palindromes contributes to the sense of impoverishment.

The first two bass clarinet palindromic phrases are related by tritone inversion (T6I, omitting the E in the second phrase). They both recur throughout the movement in literal fashion. The third clarinet phrase (mm. 7–8), recurs less often as a line in the piece,
but the collection of interval classes intoned (3, 4, and 5) forms the basis for nearly all subsequent music (Fig. 15, below).

Fig. 15. *The Bucket Rider*, mm. 3–9 [reduction].
The first three bass clarinet palindromic phrases

A few examples will make this clear. The first phrase of the bass clarinet and cello duet beginning at rehearsal B (mm. 15–18) present a variation of the opening solo bass clarinet phrases.

Fig. 16. *The Bucket Rider*, mm. 15–18 [reduction].
Retrograde inversion in the bass clarinet and cello lines related to the opening bass clarinet phrases

The bass clarinet intones the same phrase (1) with which it began the piece, but at the axis point of the phrase sounds an inverted form (T^6I) of the retrograde rather than at pitch, which corresponds to the notes of phrase 2 of the opening. In addition, the (re-
ordered) interval classes of phrase 3 of the opening are re-created here harmonically between the cello and bass clarinet. In short, all three of the opening bass clarinet phrases are embedded in this single phrase, demonstrating an extreme economy of means.

This emphasis on intervallic consistency is indicative of a larger trend in Bresnick’s music, which roughly coincides with the advent of the *Opere della Musica Povera*—that of the move away from modality. Interval patterning has always played a large role in Bresnick’s music, but prior to the 1990s, the patterns were usually contained within a mode. This is true of *B’s Garlands* (1973), *Wir Weben, Wir Weben* (1978), the *Trio* (1988), as well as *Bucephalus*. The modes employed range from tetrachords to octachords, often with symmetrical properties. They are usually reminiscent of tonal scale fragments and often have a Lydian bent. In these works, all symmetries, systems, and serial techniques are contained within the modes. The modal approach to composition provides Bresnick with a connection to the folk music of Russian-Belarusian-Jewish ancestry, to Bartok, to a scalar and sonic familiarity without, in Bresnick’s words, the “straightjacket [of functional harmony] that inevitably leads to a certain kind of thing.” Bresnick’s *Trio* (1988), for example, is built upon pitch and rhythmic symmetries contained within an eight-tone mode (set-class 8-26). One brief example is from the beginning of the final passage of the fourth and final movement. Each of the three instruments plays in its own rhythmic cycle in a kind of mensuration.

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24 See O’Brien and Pickett (1999) for a detailed discussion of modality in *Bucephalus*. 
canon. The ensemble starts together, but the violin sounds triple-stops on every third eighth note, while the cello sounds every five eighth notes and the piano every seven (all prime values).

Fig. 17. Trio, Mov. 4, “Ardente, Sperduto,” mm. 25–42
After each instrument completes its sequence of eight tones (the top voice of the strings descend linearly by octave from D to D through the mode, while the bottom voice ascends), the process repeats with a different set of (prime) rhythmic values. The violin is in values of 13, the cello 11 and the piano 9. These values are designed by Bresnick to realign on the downbeat of a measure on unison Ds after 16 bars (rehearsal E). The process is repeated in further elongated form, but Bresnick cuts off the piece one measure before all the instruments would realign. Bresnick describes Trio as “very abstract music.” It is true that there are no direct literary, historical, or political references in Trio. Its formidable technical ingenuities are hermetic. But while the piece may not be referential, the fortississimo outbursts of each instrument, surrounded by ever-growing silences in the final passage, are extremely expressive. Bresnick provides a hint of what is being expressed, marking the final movement “Ardente, Sperduto” (“Burning, Lost”). The interaction of the rhythmic cycles, offset and periodically aligning, in an ever-expanding void is both technical and expressive. Indeed, the expressivity of the passage is made manifest by technical means. Performed live, the ending of the piece, cut off just before the final expected unison alignment, is devastating.

25 Like the rhythmic summing system discussed above in the opening of the second movement of Bucephalus, the relationship of the durations of the first rhythmic cycle to the second sum to 16: 3+13, 5+11 and 7+9.
26 Martin Bresnick, presentation on his music at the Yale School of Music, New Haven, CT, 04/12/2012.
27 See Justin Tierney (2007) for further discussion of Trio
The focus on modality began to take a backseat in Bresnick’s work—with a few exceptions, such as the third String Quartet (1992)—to an intervallic approach to unity. A set of interval classes and their transformation became the focus rather than a modal container. This is true for Grace, where interval classes 3 and 5 are the focus, many of the Opere della Musica Povera, and The Bucket Rider, which is further discussed below.

Throughout The Bucket Rider, the collection of three interval classes first presented in the bass clarinet not only recurs continually, but also often in the same order (45353|35354). Even when the texture shifts to tremolando solos when the piece reaches its tritone axis (Eb) for the first time (mm. 27–30), this succession of palindromic interval classes is sustained (Fig. 19, below).
The same interval class succession prevails in the limping, syncopated triplet passage at rehearsal E, the final cello and bass clarinet duets (rehearsals H–I), the piano’s concluding brittle and stratospheric ascent, and remarkably, even in the piano’s grace note gestures “marked out of time” (rehearsal J). A passage like this, which evokes the rhetoric of improvisation, is still tightly controlled (Fig. 19, below).
Bresnick has set up a system in *The Bucket Rider* where not only must each phrase inexorably retrace its path, but also it must do so with the limited resources of only three interval classes, often restricted to the same order and a single rhythmic duration. These technical restrictions, these purposefully *impoverished* means, along with the spare orchestration and restrained dynamics, artfully project the deprivation experienced by the protagonist of Kafka’s *Bucket Rider*.

This level of correspondence and clarity in the relationship between craft and expressivity was something new for Bresnick in 1995. His music had always been crafted with structural tautness, and always possessed ambitious expressive aims. This is reflected in Bresnick’s statement affirming, “I have a spinal cord and a cerebellum—
make sure both are functioning.”28 But in *The Bucket Rider*, the persistent palindromes, restrictive interval content, and the economy of means are not simply elements of craft, they refer also to something outside of themselves. John Halle is right to state that “Bresnick’s quest for structural perfection is worlds away from the art-for-art’s sake self-absorption or academic pedantry.”29 Halle’s conclusion that Bresnick’s “painstakingly engineered and elegantly constructed works represent a species of homage—the selfless dedication of the master craftsmen to his calling, and its traditions, a Marxian commitment to value derived from labor over market determined price” is only part of the picture, however. Bresnick’s craftsmanship in *The Bucket Rider* contributes to the sonic explication of the poverty of means and spirit conveyed in Kafka’s tale. The sense of sparseness and impoverishment is evident without knowledge of Kafka or his protagonist’s predicament. This contrasts with the referentiality found in *Bucephalus*, where compositional techniques find their inspiration in linguistic games and historical details. As Bresnick indicates in the epigraph, “these pieces [Opere della Musica Povera] start from principles of a kind of music that is materially graspable, though in the piece it happens to be very complicated.” Although it may appear as a result, the dazzling display of virtuosic compositional technique is not the aim in *The Bucket Rider, Songs of the Mouse People*, or other works in *Opere della Musica Povera*; rather, craft in *The Bucket Rider* is wedded to expression in order to serve an expressive function.

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28 Bresnick, presentation on his music at the Yale School of Music
References


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Biography

JUSTIN TIERNEY is a composer of concert music and a time-lapse filmmaker. His music was declared “superb, robust, and grand” by the Boston Globe, who described how his “dark-hued music had polished, ominous richness… and sound-worlds that were cogent and immediate.” His most recent project, *At the Conflux*, described by the BBC as “a futuristic roller-coaster ride… a breakneck front seat to the gorgeous streets of the planet’s biggest urban centre,” combines time-lapse images and original music in a film exploring the rhythm of Japanese cityscapes. *At the Conflux* won both 1st Place in the Cityscape category and BEST-IN-SHOW at the 2016 Time-lapse Film Festival in Los Angeles. Tierney was born in New Haven, CT (1984) and holds degrees from the University of Bridgeport, (BM 2007) Tufts University, (MA, 2010), the Yale School of Music (AD, 2012), is currently completing a Ph.D. at Duke University.