



## A Postscript on Process

Elizabeth McNutt



*Received February 2005*

---

[1] A comparison of the processes of analysis and performance of LF illuminates Babbitt's work in ways that could not be incorporated into the foregoing essay on compositional and performative virtuosity. Such a comparison would require a full-length paper in its own right (and one well worth writing!); but the following brief comments may provide a useful context.

[2] From the very first steps, flutist and theorist approach the piece from seemingly opposite directions. The flutist begins essentially without a map: she must discover how to apply a vast and varied toolkit to the task of learning to play each gesture and line of LF. The theorist, in contrast, has at least some well-defined starting points: Babbitt's compositional techniques are well-documented and consistent. The flutist must painstakingly master each detail before she can move toward a larger framework; the theorist more rapidly achieves an overview of the piece.

[3] Having translated the relatively concrete artifact of the score into the well-ordered abstractions of letters, symbols, diagrams, and graphs, the theorist can begin to examine the intricate web of connections LF presents. From the flutist's perspective, however, the abstract notations of the score must be manifested as physical gestures. This process of mastery gradually gives way to the detective work of relating local patterns to a larger framework, explicating the composer's notational strategies, and in general moving from scattered individual clues to a coherent interpretation.

[4] Once the theorist's abstracted map is complete, her perspective shifts as the analysis hones in on specific examples. The performer's experience, conversely, moves from specifics to generalities. With intensive score study and hours of practice, connections between patterns and passages emerge and evolve. Rather than mechanically rendering Babbitt's notated instructions, the flutist traverses an increasingly complex mental map of the work and its significant relationships.

[5] At this point, the viewpoints of performer and theorist start to converge. There is no guarantee that the significant features they discover are the same; but at any rate, both move from the objective facts of the score to a subjective understanding of the work. Both theorist and performer begin to identify personally with a particular perspective on the music. Both create a highly individual plan for performing the work: the one as text and diagrams, the other as sounds.

[6] There is an important difference, however. While both seek a greater understanding of the work, the theorist must at some point choose particular issues and examples to discuss: there is only so much room in a journal article, and even less in the real-time performance of a lecture. Many exciting discoveries are left behind as a unified vision of the work is prepared for public view. Seen as performance, the theorist's interpretation of the work is bizarre: it is as if a flutist were to fast-forward through a series of significant notes from various points in the work, followed by a few particular sections

repeated several times in different ways! Analytical writing requires the theorist to choose a well-defined and carefully restricted perspective on the piece. This inevitably presents both a burden and a liberation.

[7] The performer has a different burden: she cannot omit, repeat, or recontextualize anything. Performance is intrinsically holistic: the entire work must be performed from start to finish. In this real-time experience, connections and generalities are infolded as relationships of timbre, articulation, phrasing, pacing, and so on. The flutist conveys her conception of the work through calibrated nuances instead of reasoned explanations. No detail can be ignored or glossed over in this process; every part of the score must be dealt with at the same level of intensity. Where the theorist has the luxury of focusing her interpretation on pitch sets, rhythmic structuring, references to Tchaikovsky, and other particular dimensions of the music, the flutist cannot do this (imagine how dull a performance would be in which the flutist focused only on rhythm).

[8] LF presents particularly difficult challenges in correlating theoretical and performative perspectives. It is inconceivable that any performance could even begin to elucidate the intricate architecture of pitch-class and time-point arrays a theorist discovers in this work. The dichotomy between approaches is also expressed in the pacing of analysis versus performance. In this project, both authors were surprised to find our work out of synchronization throughout much of the process. This was especially awkward toward the end of the process, when DL was ready to draw final conclusions about the work; EM, in contrast, required further performances to internalize LF more fully and assimilate the kaleidoscope of musical features and relationships it contains.

[9] It was thus with great excitement that we discovered our perspectives on the work showed strong similarities. A number of specific examples of these convergences are given within the text. This means, of course, that they are seen from the perspective of theory. Glimpses of the performer's experience of the work are set within the more cohesive thread of theoretical discourse. The authors have had to leave out many exciting observations that would have made the paper too diffuse; they were not needed, and cluttered the text.

[10] The “hidden virtuosity” of performance requires a similar freedom from clutter: in this case, the clutter of the performer's conscious consideration of pitches, rhythms, patterns, fingering, breathing, pacing, articulation—in short, the thousands of details that form the mechanics of playing the piece. Over the course of several performances, this mental chatter is gradually silenced. At last the act of performing becomes a natural flow of music, an unconscious celebration of the piece—much as one expects a performance of Bach, Mozart, or Brahms to be. This experience itself conclusively refutes the notion that the rigor of Babbitt's music precludes expressivity—and yet it is nearly impossible to justify this statement through any reasoned discourse!

[11] The virtuosity of analysis tends toward conscious elucidation, while the highest level of performative virtuosity moves toward an unconscious flow of experience; the meeting of the two is exciting, but necessarily fragile. As Karlheinz Stockhausen has written, “The most profound moments in musical interpretation . . . are those which are not the result of mental processes, are not derived from what we already know. . . . When this state is achieved; when you become aware of what happens through you, even for short moments, you will be quite astonished. You become a medium.” (Karlheinz Stockhausen, “Intuitive Music,” *Stockhausen on Music*, 125)

---

Elizabeth McNutt  
University of Colorado at Boulder  
College of Music, 301 UCB  
Boulder, CO 80309–0301  
[elizabeth.mcnutt@colorado.edu](mailto:elizabeth.mcnutt@colorado.edu)

---

## Copyright Statement

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for Music Theory. All rights reserved.

[1] Copyrights for individual items published in *Music Theory Online* (MTO) are held by their authors. Items appearing in MTO may be saved and stored in electronic or paper form, and may be shared among individuals for purposes of scholarly research or discussion, but may *not* be republished in any form, electronic or print, without prior, written permission from the author(s), and advance notification of the editors of MTO.

[2] Any redistributed form of items published in *MTO* must include the following information in a form appropriate to the medium in which the items are to appear:

This item appeared in *Music Theory Online* in [VOLUME #, ISSUE #] on [DAY/MONTH/YEAR]. It was authored by [FULL NAME, EMAIL ADDRESS], with whose written permission it is reprinted here.

[3] Libraries may archive issues of *MTO* in electronic or paper form for public access so long as each issue is stored in its entirety, and no access fee is charged. Exceptions to these requirements must be approved in writing by the editors of *MTO*, who will act in accordance with the decisions of the Society for Music Theory.

This document and all portions thereof are protected by U.S. and international copyright laws. Material contained herein may be copied and/or distributed for research purposes only.

Prepared by Brent Yorgason, Managing Editor and Rebecca Flore, Editorial Assistant