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Ralph Shapey: Movements of Varied Moments

(Keywords: Ralph Shapey, Radical Traditionalist, Mother Lode, Perversion, Simultaneities, *Concertante No. 2*, *Evocation No. 3*, *Movement of Varied Moments for Two*, *String Quartet No. 9*, *Variations for Organ*.)

Abstract

Although the theoretical system of post-serial musical language has developed a common analytical method to examine compositions of the late twentieth century, it is practically impossible to de-code every musical creation in that style. In a documented analytical view, matters such as dimension, symmetry, hierarchy, and flux are of primary importance. The personalized-radical approach of such matters by the contemporary craftsman raises the need, on the part of the theorist, to devise an analytical technique that justifies and explains compositional choices.

Ralph Shapey (1921-2002) is one of the most significant American composers of the late twentieth century as well as an influential composition teacher. He is characterized as a 'radical traditionalist' and a 'prolific composer' by scholars, critics, and musicians. In Shapey's words: "*I radicalize the tradition… Composer is the architect in sound, time, space and flux*" (Shapey 2001: 4). Ten years after his death Ralph Shapey is still considered one of the most challenging composers as to the interpretative requirements of his compositions, the understanding of his choices in the treatment of rhythm and pitch material, the developmental procedures, and the resulting aesthetics.

This paper examines the music of Ralph Shapey with regard to trends in theory such as 'Mother Lode' and 'perversion transformations' that are largely associated with his text *Basic Composition*. The compositions that will be analyzed were crafted after 1970, during the most productive years of the composer's life, and reflect a solid technique which mainly lies in the good economy of musical materials as well as in the prolific handling of the form. Furthermore, the paper engages with analytical accounts such as pitch-class set theory and rhythmic analysis that examine the dodecaphonic procedures and the rhythmic foundations in various compositions by Shapey.

Various Moments

"I am a genius: so what? Big deal. There is something called posterity that will make that determination," Shapey said in an interview appearing in the Chicago Tribune Magazine on December 3, 1995. The interview was taken on the occasion of the composer's receipt of the MacArthur Foundation's "Genius Grant." Shapey continued, "this is my life, and I will done it- and do it- to the best of my ability no matter what period, for the remainder of my existence. I have written over 150 pieces of music and persist in writing six hours a day out of a compulsion to put dots on a paper. You must have a pretty big ego to think you can compete with Bach and Beethoven." In Shapey's self-acclamation, one can clearly detect his complex, and dynamic personality The evidence of Shapey's exposure to Schoenberg in early years is apparent in his technique. Shapey belongs to the post Schoenbergian School, relying on the row, but not treating it dogmatically (Kaufman and Canick, 1986: 206). His serially oriented compositional method is influenced mostly by his teacher, Stefan Wolpe (Schwartz and Godfrey, 1993: 478).

Shapey is an instrumental composer with special sensitivity to the violin, since had started studying the instrument very early in his life. He was raised in orchestral environments such as New York Philharmonic, and knew maestro Dimitri Mitropoulos personally.[1] He has also conducted the Buffalo, Chicago, Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and European Orchestras (Kaufman, 1995: 229). He was the assistant conductor of the National Youth Symphony Orchestra (1938-1947), and the founder of the Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago (Collins, 1992: 852). His preference for the use of traditional term-titles and forms in his work, such as "Variations," "Rondo," "Passacaglia," etc., as well as his faith in the traditionally established instrumental ensembles such as string quartet, or brass quintet, labeled him as a traditionalist. For example in his *Quartet No 7* for strings, the titles of the four movements are: I. Interludes and Fantasias; II. Scherzando; III. Song; IV. Passacaglia. The work was composed as a response to his deep love for Beethoven's last quartets (Watkins, 1986: 645). On the other hand, the radical side of Shapey is underlined by his choice on dissonant -almost 'cacophonous' harmonies, the exaggerated dynamics, the complex polyrhythms, and the constant change of time signatures in his works. "Shapey was among the composers, like Donald Erb and Alan Stout, who organized their pieces around large blocks of complex sound" (Brooks, 1993: 320). "His highly complex and carefully organized music has been described as 'abstract expressionism' " (Kaufman, 1995: 229).

In 1969 Shapey announced that he would no longer submit his music to anyone for performance or publication, a promise that he kept until 1976. Shulamit Ran, who studied and taught with Shapey at the University of Chicago, responded to his decision with a famous article "An Angry Composer Forbids his Music to be Performed" (Ran: 1977).

The admiration and appreciation for Shapey's compositions was too great by the composers and musicians of the international community, hence many of them placed his music next to that of Ives, Varèse, Beethoven and Messiaen. The gigantic sound masses at the beginning of his composition *Covenant* can be compared with Messiaen's *St. Francis of Assisi*, while Shapey's sonorous *String Quartet No 7* refers to the Beethovenian internality. As mentioned above,

[1] Conversation with Ralph Shapey on January 26th, 1996.

Shapey expressed great respect in the work of the masters of classicism and romanticism and recognized their enormous influence over his work. However, his sound was clearly personal and distinct, characterized by great dynamics and volume. These characteristics led Leonard Meyer and Bernard Jacobson to call Shapey 'radical traditionalist,' a sobriquet that Shapey accepted without reservations. Often in discussions he claimed that 'he radicalizes the tradition;' recreates tradition with radical - revolutionary methods and causes its reformation through a new perspective created by the cohesion of the new with the old. The *Musical Times* magazine in an article titled "in memoriam," says that Shapey admitted that his work combined qualitative data from different historic periods and styles and accepted the characterizations: (a) 'a classicist structurally,' (b) 'a romantic emotionally,' and (c) 'a modernist harmonically.' The *Musical Times* in an effort to describe all angles of Shapey's musical personality and style, besides 'radical traditionalist,' attributed additional characterizations such as 'romantic' and 'American original.' It is obvious that all of the above characterizations indicate the difficulty the specialists had to compress the dynamics of Ralph Shapey's music under one label. On the other hand we notice that Shapey himself finds it difficult to encode and to comprise his sound world in a category, but to the composer Shapey I think we should be lenient in subject to terms, because he has already been judged -and even very strictly- in the matter of sounds.

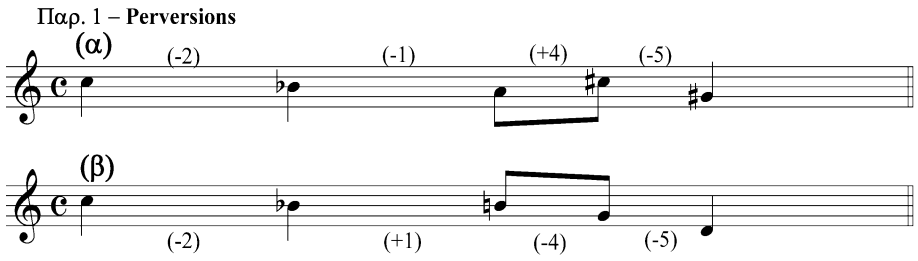
The Craftsmanship

In addition to the above, Shapey was known as 'atonal' or 'chromatic composer;' while often the term 'counterpoint' was added next to his name**.** In the above specifications Shapey was not indifferent but responded as follows: "While we all speak the same language we often understand things in different ways. For example: I believe that I am 'tonal composer,' which creates great surprise" (Shapey 2001: 4). The term 'tonality' reflects specific manipulation of the available pitch material in relation to historical periods. For example, the intervals of 3s and 6s that were originally considered as dissonances and avoided to be used in the organum polyphony were used by composers in later periods as a priority in contrast to the 4s and to parallel motion of voices. The vertical distribution, for example, of four or five pitches selected at random from the total of 88 notes of the piano creates a hypothetical simultaneity *A1* that might be extended throughout the piano tessitura. The re-distribution of the same pitches of the original simultaneity *A1*creates version *A2* which we can interpret as inversion. What's the difference between *A2* and the 1st inversion of a *dominant seventh chord* except that (a) the *dominant seventh* is distributed under one octave, and (b) the *dominant seventh* belongs to one or more tonalities? Obviously the two vertical structures, the *A2* and the inverted *dominant seventh* are elements of a tonal system, Shapey answered (Shapey 2001: 5).

Basic Text

Shapey expresses directly his general perception of music and teaching methodology in his text titled '*Basic Course of Music Composition*' that he completed with the help (editing) of his pupils: "No likes and dislikes is allowed. …… we deal only with 'to know'." And he continues: "Composer is an architect in sound, time, space and flux…. rhythm is design, …. shape and

even structure to music" (Shapey 2001: 4-6). Through the critical study of Shapey's compositional style, we see parallels with that of Elliott Carter. Both composers invented rhythmic techniques that enable them to compose music that flowed severally of the hierarchy of regular meter, often associated with metric modulation and the juxtaposition of simultaneous rhythmic complexes. The multi-layered contrapuntal textures in the works of Carter and Shapey increased the density and produced thick and high intensity textures and polyrhythmic episodes. On the other hand the 'harmonic' language of each of the great composer was the result of traditional operation procedures (such as transposition, inversion, rotation, permutation) as well as idiomatic/personalized manipulations. Ralph Shapey having at his disposal an initial set of pitches (e.g., tetrachord) created by random choices, was further enriching it through relevant reproductive processes with those of Carter, producing simultaneities with specific interval content. However, the real difference between the two composers in handling the production/reproduction of the pitch/interval materials lies in Shapey's 'perversion' technique, which I prefer to call 'shifting technique' or 'indirect inversion.' Specifically, perversion operation enables the composer: (a) to retain the interval classes of a set or line, (b) to shift freely the direction of the intervals.



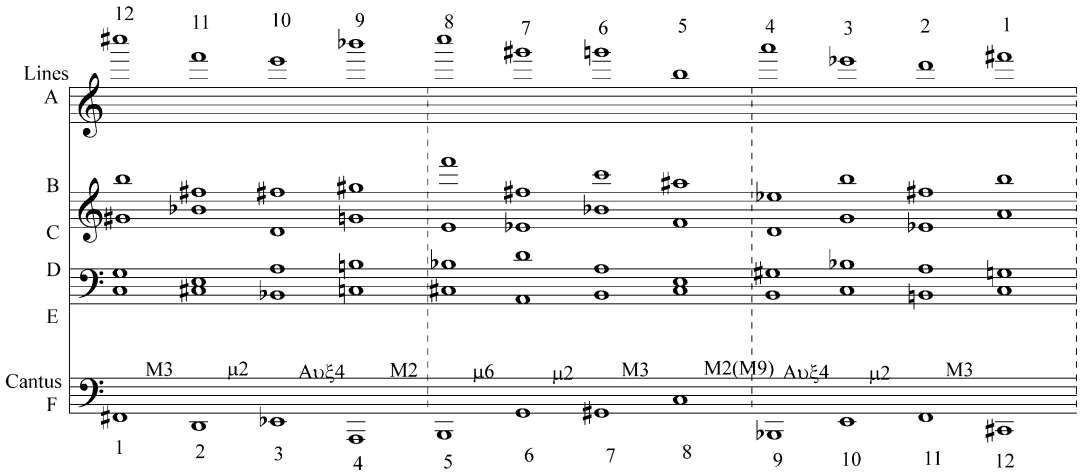
In this case phrase ***a*** is reproduced and enriched with new pitches without perishing its interval topography. With perversion, the composer takes a great deal of flexibility in handling issues regarding the reproduction of interrelated pitch/interval material as opposed to the mechanistic reproduction capability of inversion. Shapey had systematized his teaching method –as it appeared in his text *Basic Course in Music Composition*-, in the following chapters: Sound Structures-Vertical, Sound Structures-Horizontal, Counterpoint, Inversions and Perversions, Four-Tone Circulations and Combinations, Metric Modulation, Extended Key Centers.

'**Mother Lode**'

The term 'Mother Lode' was created by the composer, and combines three characteristic structural elements: (a) Cantus Rhythm, (b) Row, (c) Simultaneities. 'That is, Shapey's last forty-one consecutive works were written from a single row and its associated simultaneities and (often) rhythms" (Finley, 1993: 127).

The first composition, resulting from the Mother Lode, is *Evocation* No 3 for viola and piano (1981). Only three compositions written after1981 do not rely solely on this method: *Soli for Solo Percussion* (1985), *Two for One for Solo Snare Drum* (1988) and *Soli for Percussion Duo* (1989).

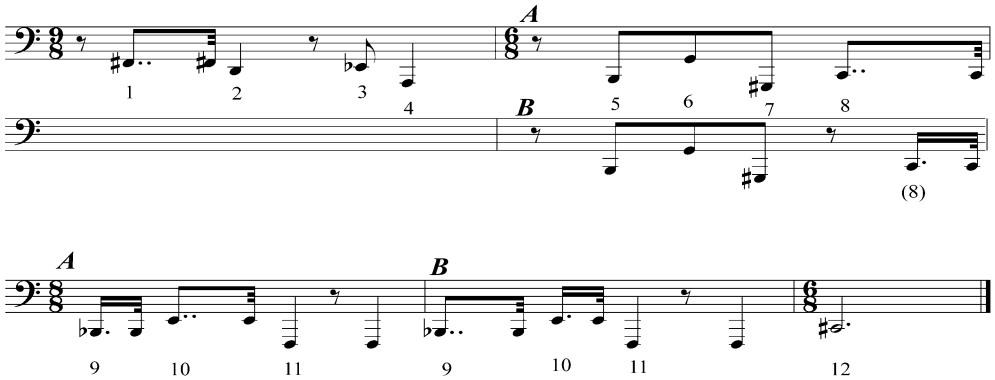
Mother Lode: Simultaneities



Simultaneities: assigned aggregates

In Mother Lode Table, on the external voices we see the rows P0-Cantus F, and R0-Line A (horizontally), while simultaneities are the 'assigned aggregates' of lines A, B, C, D, E, F (vertically). The term 'assigned aggregate' was given by Ralph Shapey and involves at least a 3rd, a 5th, and an augmented 4th. The simultaneities share common tones for consistency, creating a strong harmonic pull. Also, in order to ensure a smooth progression between the last and the first simultaneity, the two external ones (simultaneities 12 & 1) differ only in one pitch.

Mother Lode: Cantus Rhythm



'Cantus Rhythm' functions like a basso ostinato in numerous compositions; it is a serial distribution of rhythmic motives of various note values. In Shapey's words: " There's not much to say about this rhythm except that it is the rhythm of the cantus that I thought it up from the very beginning" (Finley, 1993: 127). The rhythmic phrase of 'Cantus Rhythm' is four measures long labeled by letters A and B. The rhythmic motives of A and B were used selectively to bring variety into the rhythmic line. In Shapey's compositions triplets play a very important (structural) role; however, in 'Cantus Rhythm' they are not found, nevertheless are implied by the rhythmic pattern of the measure in 6/8s.

Shapey's Prime Row is carefully designed; it is comprised of pitch classes that reflect the following series of unordered pitch class intervals (dyads): i(4, 1, 6, 2, 4, 1, 4, 2, 6, 1, 4).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Po:	**F#**	**D**	**Eb**	**A**	**B**	**G**	**G#**	**C**	**Bb**	**E**	**F**	**C#**

Notice the interval between 12th and 1st pitch of P0: i< 5 >, which creates the illusion of V - I. The simultaneous juxtaposition of P0 with R0 creates a series of 8 minor 2nds: i(1), that are framed by a minor 3rd/Major 6th: i(3), and a Perfect 4th/Perfect 5th: i(5) –on both sides.

	(1, 0)	(2, 8)	(3, 9)	(4, 3)	(5, 5)	(6, 1)	(7, 2)	(8, 6)	(9, 4)	(10, 10)	(11, 11)	(12, 7)
Po:	**F#**	**D**	**Eb**	**A**	**B**	**G**	**G#**	**C**	**Bb**	**E**	**F**	**C#**
Ro:	**C#**	**F**	**E**	**Bb**	**C**	**G#**	**G**	**B**	**A**	**Eb**	**D**	**F#**
	P5	m3	m2	m2	m2	m2	m2	m2	m2	m2	m3	P5

The two hexachords of P0 (1st and 2nd) are not inversionally equivalent. If we reverse the order of pitch classes B-G in the 1st hexachord and create the order F#, D, Eb, A, G, B, then the two hexachords would be inversionally equivalent.

α:_____ **β:**_____

	(1, 0)	(2, 8)	(3, 9)	(4, 3)	*(5, 1)*	*(6, 5)*	(7, 2)	(8, 6)	(9, 4)	(10, 10)	(11, 11)	(12, 7)
Po:	**F#**	**D**	**Eb**	**A**	***G***	***B***	**G#**	**C**	**Bb**	**E**	**F**	**C#**
	(-4)	(+1)	(6)	(-2)	(+4)	**(-3)**	(+4)	(-2)	(6)	(+1)	(-4)	

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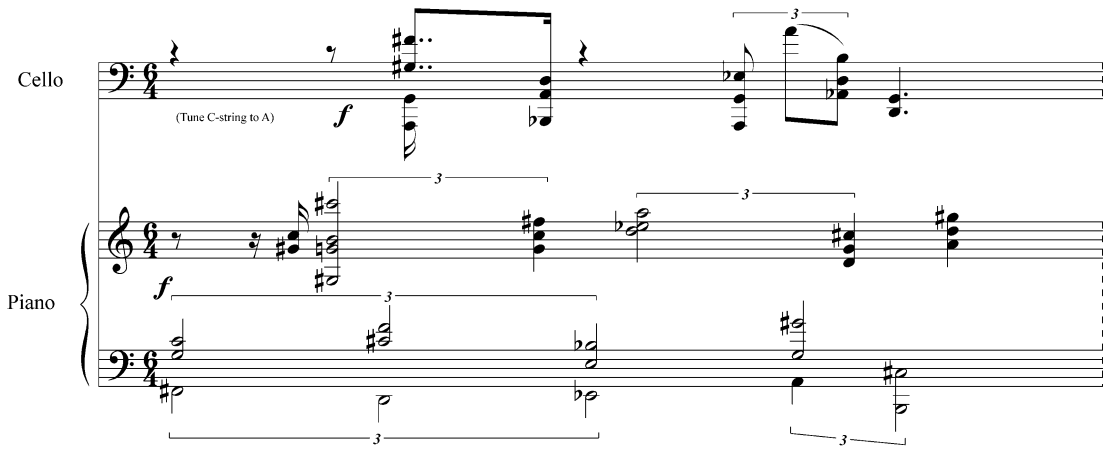
Sonorous Result

Kroslish Sonate for cello and piano (1987)

Kroslish Sonate consists of three movements and was written for Joel Krosnick, cello, and Gilbert Kalish, piano, whose names reveal the title of the piece (Schwartz & nominee 1993: 478). The Sonata has excellent clarity in structure and flow. It is based solely on the pitch material of 'Mother Lode' while rhythmic fluctuations are presented from the very beginning. The piano is realizing simultaneities 1 - 12, while the cello performs multiple stops with P0 forming its highest horizontal line. The lower cello pitches are extracted from the simultaneities of the Mother Lode, forming aggregates based on the implementation of the instrument (Table 3).



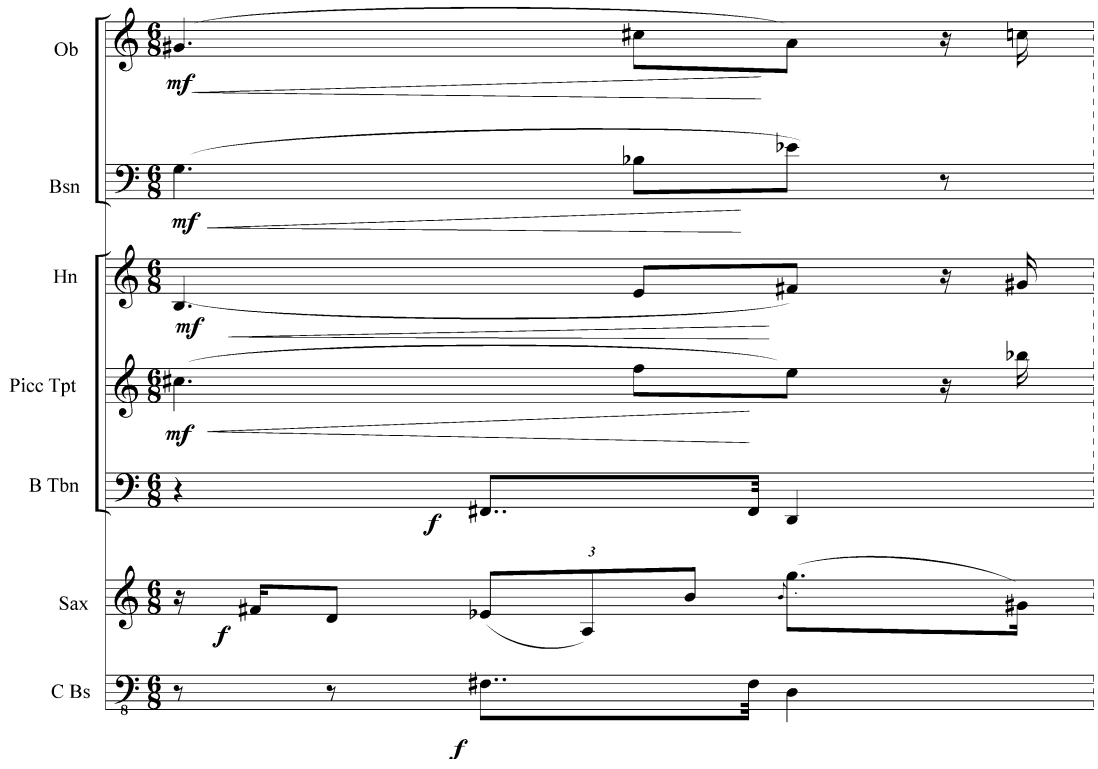
The 1st and 3rd movement in *Maestoso* balances well with the *Delicato* 2nd movement, with the endless lyrical cello melody and the quiet 'bell-like' piano chords. The choice of Theme and Variations design for the 1st movement, underlines Shapey's preference for traditional forms; while, the 2nd movement is based on an open/free form, a decision made by the composer to link the two opposite poles in a common sonic goal: high structure versus freedom in the architectural plan. The 3rd movement consists of three distinct subsections: A-B-A´ & CODA. Motivic materials revive from the 1st movement at the beginning of the 3rd, which are exposed in 12 bars, hinting the structural function of the number 12. *Kroslish Sonate* is a dramatic work and extremely challenging as to quality interpretation requirements.

Concertante No 2 for alto saxophone and fourteen players (1987) is in three movements: I. Variations, II. Rondo-Scherzo, III. Passacaglia. It is a sectional harangued piece with

melancholic episodes and narrative postludes in every movement. Distinguished for its long phrases and gestures, its dense polyrhythms and forceful dissonances –it has the qualitative characteristics of a romantic concerto.

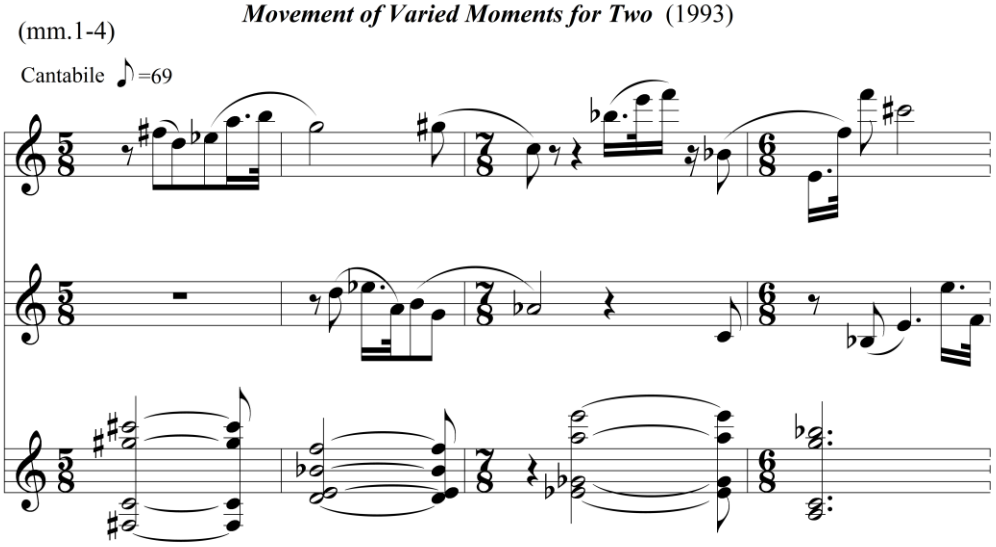
There is a constant increase of great tension and complexity between 'the part' and 'the whole' at every level of the musical ritual, in structure and in interpretation; an antagonistic interaction between the concertino-, and the concertante figures, with the solo alto saxophone part being obviously more complex than the other parts. Unity in the piece is achieved not by motivic development, but through the gestural transformation that relies on the techniques Shapey proposes in his composition text and in 'Mother Lode.' The whole composition is based on rows P0, R0, P5, P7, and R7 and the simultaneities of the Mother Lode. The selection of rows at the transposition levels of 0, 5 and 7 refer to Schoenbergian perception of 'pitch unity' and 'extended tonality,' that had investigated a more or less 'functional' treatment to dodecaphony. In the fundamental structural level we come across ratios 6:4 and 7:5 that control and dovetail all different parameters of the composition such as the number of instruments, the section and subsection lengths, the time signatures, the motivic patterns, the pitch materials, etc., and create a solid and well balanced sound structure. (Zervas, 1998: 55).

Concertante No 2 (m. 1)

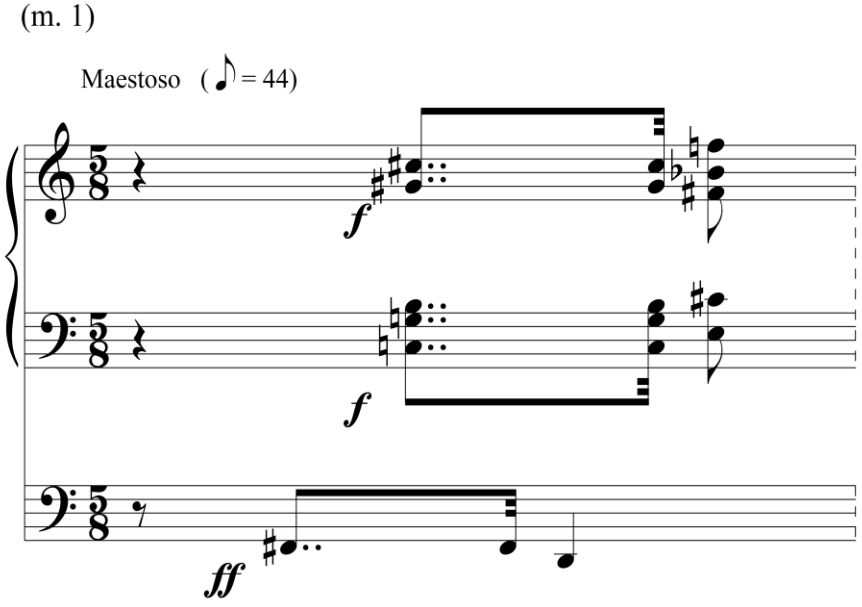


Variations for Organ (1985) and ***Movements of Varied Moments for Two*** for flute and vibraphone (1993) are two compositions quite different in style from *Concertante No 2, and Kroslish Sonate.*

Movement of Varied Moments for Two (1993)



Variations for Organ (1985)



Both compositions are sectional and rely on motivic unity to the extent that they can be viewed as mono-motivic structures. The pitch and rhythmic materials are based on the Mother Lode like

all the above compositions. In these two pieces the composer amplifies further the coloristic idiosyncrasy of the instrumentation through the pitch selection/distribution, creating vibrant sound structures of virtuosic character.

Infinity and Flux

Concluding my short text about the great composer, maestro, and teacher Ralph Shapey, I believe that he offered a great deal to music and to the world. We should always remember his words: Composer is the architect in the sound, time, space and flux. Rhythm has shape, form and structure. A great work of art turns a momentary situation timeless -infinite.

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