

## About *Palindrome*

A palindrome is something that is exactly the same forward and backward. (E.g. The phrase “Able was I ere I saw Elba” is a famous example of a palindromic sentence as the letters are identical forward and backward.)

Palindromes have been a common device in music for centuries, inspiring great music from Guillaume de Machaut to Anton Webern. In fact, even some more contemporary composers—most notably Earl Kim (1920–1998)—have devoted much of their compositional output to exploring palindromic forms. However, as wonderful as much of this music is, it is almost impossible for most people to hear the palindromes.

One of the chief criticisms of Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method is that the majority of listeners and even a good many musicians are unable to discern retrograde (backward) forms of musical phrases and to associate them with the original musical phrases. That the use of retrogrades have been a fundamental part of a musical theory that led to music which aspires to athematicism and moment form, seems somewhat ironic. It seems to me that the desire to explore retrogrades in the most satisfying and musical identifiable way is at cross-purposes with attempts to subvert tonal relationships and thematic development. Rather, the more identifiable the phrase, the more likely listeners should be able to identify it if they hear it in reverse. Strict minimalism seems the best compositional approach.

Hence *Palindrome* for solo piano, composed in 1984, a completely monophonic work which contains only seven different pitches that remain registrally, rhythmically and dynamically the same throughout. I was an undergraduate at Columbia University in 1984, which was the time when integral serialism was in its final stage of academic ascendancy. The music I wanted to write at the time was diametrically in opposition to the music my professors wanted me to write, or so we all thought at the time. *Palindrome* is as minimalist and as diatonic as you can be—every pitch of the composition is in the key of *Db* major (or perhaps *Eb* Dorian)—yet, as in serialism, no pitch here is ultimately more important than any other and an analysis of the compositional process according to the rules of functional tonality would be completely misguided and incorrect. Although the pitch content is diatonic, there are no resolutions and, ultimately, there is no tonic. Rather the seven pitches hover in space in a realm beyond resolution. In fact, twenty years later, it is quite clear that while the music sounds nothing like serial music, its underpinning structural logic (e.g. permutation, retrograde) belies a similar aesthetic. The overall musical variety eschewed in *Palindrome*, I hope is replaced by the joy of being able to clearly hear a palindrome emerge from hearing a short melodic cell expand and contract over time.

—Frank J. Oteri