

six of one, half a dozen of another

Most people who have heard *six of one, half a dozen of another*—which received its premiere performance from Rebecca Pechefsky and Robert Heath at a concert of the Miami Bach Society at Founders Hall in Coral Gables, Florida, on January 11, 2004—have professed that this duo for two harpsichords is some of the happiest music I have ever written. Ironical, they claim, since it was created during an extremely rough period in my personal life.

However, a close listen to *six of one, half a dozen of another*, reveals that the piece employs two competing overlapping rhythmic patterns: 3/4 which accents every second eighth note or three to a measure; and 6/8 which accents every third eighth note or two to a measure. Melodically and harmonically, it is constructed from series of six out of seven pitches in two competing major scales which are a tritone apart, which are as far away as any two scales can be in our standard tuning of 12-tone equal temperament. The tonic chords in the “more home than the other” key are presented in “second inversion” (with the dominant in the bass) which is supposedly very tonally unstable and which was only used during Europe’s so-called “common practice” period of tonal music as a leading chord to a resolving cadence. So, actually, this piece is largely about instability without being morose. The future is uncertain, but why not make the most of the present!

The relentless West African-sounding cross-rhythm created by superimposing 3/4 and 6/8, which a nonmusical mathematician might assume are equivalent ratios, was actually inspired by a bratty remark from the flamboyant pianist Vladimir de Pachmann (1848-1933), whose interpretations were the polar opposite of “historically-informed performance practice” and who is said to have chastised an audience member at one of his recitals saying: “Madame, I am playing in 3/4 and you are fanning in 6/8!” He seems an unlikely inspiration for a composition involving harpsichords, but his remark seemed to beg the question: “How does accenting a phrase two different ways affect the way it is perceived?” which seemed best-suited to an answer involving two instruments of the same quality where lines could be quickly discerned, hence two harpsichords using two different but equally characteristic registrations to provide maximum contrast.

In addition to this cross-rhythm, the composition also employs the concept of metrical modulation where one rhythm transforms into another rhythm either faster or slower than the original. All tempo changes are strictly governed by this principle which was largely developed in the 20th century by the American modernist Elliott Carter (b. 1908) who employed the harpsichord in two of his compositions which sound very different from my own work. I deeply admire Carter’s music, but it is frequently perceived as difficult by many listeners. I wanted to write a piece using metrical modulation that would be much simpler and whose tempo shifts would be much easier to perceive. The super fast final section of *six of one, half a dozen of another*, is the result of the first harpsichord, which plays in 6/8, playing its two accented beats per measure (the dotted eighth) in the tempo that the second harpsichord, which plays in 3/4, originally played its three accented beats (the quarter notes) and that second harpsichord then having to play that much faster in order to remain in synch.

The title *six of one, half a dozen of another* is a reference to the 1967 British television series *The Prisoner* in which a man is held against his will in a mysterious place only identified as “The Village.” We never learn his name. Everyone there is identified by a number and he is only identified as “six.” When he rejects this appellation, his captors jeer at him saying “six of one, half a dozen of another.” *The Prisoner* is an extremely thought-provoking parable of how an individual can function in society and its blurring of inner and outer realities seemed at apt parallel to the way the two harpsichords interact with each other in this composition.

—Frank J. Oteri