

About *Guitar 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 the recently-deceased Earl Kim, 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 atematicism 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 this musical palindrome which began as *Palindrome* for solo piano, composed in 1984, a completely monophonic work which contained only seven different pitches that remain registally, rhythmically and dynamically the same throughout, and which carry equal weight. 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.

Nearly 20 years later, after hearing Dominic Frasca perform early process pieces by Steve Reich and Philip Glass on solo guitar, I was very curious about what he could do with this most austere early process piece of mine. To make *Palindrome* work on a guitar, I decided that I would have to transpose the piece and eliminate one of the pitches since the guitar has only six strings and I wanted to make sure that every pitch had equal emphasis. (At the time, I didn't realize that Frasca played a guitar with 10 strings and when he plays this piece, he ups the ante by doubling octaves throughout!)

So what began as a guitar transcription of an early piano composition of mine, actually morphed into something that is virtually a new composition. I created the *Guitar Palindrome* shortly after completing a solo harpsichord piece called *is 7* which was essentially a recomposition of an earlier solo harpsichord composition called *is 5*. Using transcription and transposition as compositional tools to discover new variations was a compositional technique in the West for centuries and remains common practice in musical traditions around the world. Ultimately, this process has made me both more suspicious and appreciative of musical transcriptions.

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