...who can recall the past lives..., for large ensemble
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By

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Abstract

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…who can recall the past lives… is a musical composition for large mixed ensemble with optional amplification. The work explores the idea of translating a personal aesthetic of transformation, reincarnation and hybridity into music.

In this work, different types of harmonic materials, such as spectral, microtonal, and equal-tempered harmonies, are superimposed and juxtaposed while transforming as they constantly move into each other’s harmonic domain. Pure sounds and complex sounds also intertwine with instrumental sounds and real sounds from the world, thus creating a kind of sonic hybridity. Sonic materials are also composed in such as way that, strangely, they are reincarnated.

…who can recall the past lives… is inspired by the film “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives” of Apichatpong Weerasethakul.
Notes on composition

Feature films such as “Mysterious Object at Noon,” “Blissfully You,” and the internationally acclaimed “Tropical Malady” by Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul move away from mainstream cinema and show us innovative style, technique, and narration in cinematic art-making. I was fascinated by his approach to spiritual existence as it was intersected and projected through the screen.

Discovering the film “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives” was life changing to me as an artist. The film was inspired by the book A Man Who Can Recall His Past Lives and written by an author known only as “Boonmee.” In his final days, the protagonist Boonmee witnesses his past lives as a series of living creatures. The narrative elements of the film concern hybridity and the coexistence of variant forms of life including humans, animals, and mythical creatures such as an old princess, a monstrous hybrid man/monkey, a talking catfish, and others. I was interested in the theme that all forms of life are inextricably intertwined (a principle in Buddhism and reincarnation), as well as the idea of the boundless transformative properties of a wandering soul in the afterlife.

Inspired by the narration of the film, I attempted to translate the actions of the ‘transformative,’ ‘reincarnated,’ and ‘hybrid’ into music. My composition, titled with a similar name, is constructed with a variety of spectral, microtonal, and equal-tempered harmonic materials that are constantly moving into each other’s harmonic domain. Pure sounds and complex sounds also intertwine, creating a kind of sonic hybridity. Sonic materials are also composed so that, strangely, they are reincarnated.

“…who can recall the past lives…” is composed for eighteen musicians and is approximately fifteen minutes in duration. Optionally, it requires amplification which radically alters the ensemble’s timbre.
**Instrumentation:**

- 2 Bass Flutes
- 2 Bass Clarinets
- 2 Bass Trombones
- 2 Percussionists (identical set for both players—except Thai gongs):
  - Tamtam (prepared with aluminium foil)
  - Suspended cymbal (prepared with aluminium foil)
  - 2 Thai gongs (pitches should be different for both players)
  - Bass Drum
  - Large Gong
  - Crotales (2 octaves, C5-C7)
- Unconventional objects: D.B. bow
- Piano
  - Unconventional objects: aluminium foil, glass (with flat-base), wire brush, compact disc player
- 4 Violins
- 2 Violas
- 2 Cellos
- Double Bass
  - Unconventional objects (for strings): aluminium foil

**Groups & Spacing:**

- Group 1: Bass Flute 1, Bass Clarinet 1, Bass Trombone 1, Violin 1, Violin 3, Viola 1, Cello 1
- Group 2: Percussion 1, Percussion 2, Piano, Double Bass
- Group 3: Bass Flute 2, Bass Clarinet 2, Bass Trombone 2, Violin 2, Violin 4, Viola 2, Cello 2

**Amplification:**

- Amplification is optional.
- For non-amplified situation, the Bass Flutes are always amplified and the speakers should be placed as close to musicians as possible.
- Panning to stereo channels are corresponded to the instruments’ position on stage.
- The amplification is applied in order to achieve radical timbre’s alteration.

**Equipment:**

- microphones as necessary to amplify (included compact disc player)
- mixer, 32 XLR inputs
- 2 speakers on stage
Notes on performance

General:

Oscillation:
* "Oscillation" is used throughout the piece as rhythmic pulsation instead of "classical vibrato".
* [osc. very slow] = 1 oscillation per beat,
  [osc. slow] = 2 oscillation per beat,
  [osc. med.] = 3-4 oscillation per beat,
  [osc. fast] = 5-6 oscillation per beat,
  [osc. very fast] = 7 or more oscillation per beat

Speed of activity:
* changing the speed of gestural activity; for instance, the speed of tremolo or indicated movement
  * The dotted line indicates changing from one state to another. It is also applied to other timbral transformation.

For Winds:

Breath, air sound: Blow into the instrument without pitch. The letters L (low), M (medium), and H (high) are referring to timbral register changed by adjusting the oral cavity.

With Voice:
Singing and playing at the same time.

Multiphonics: Over blown pitches and fingerings are at the discretion of the performer. However, written fundamental note should be sounded. In a situation when it is written with an arrow, the performer should try to get the highest over blown pitches as much as possible. For Bass Flutes, some multiphonics are fully written with fingerings (taken from Pierre-Yves Artaud’s “Present Day Flutes”).

Overblowing: Play the highest note on the instrument as much as possible by producing harmonic.

Percussive sound: (for Bass Trombone); Producing various non-pitched percussive sounds at the discretion of the performer.

For Percussions:

Preparation on Tamtam & Cymbal: Tamtam & Cymbal should be partly wrapped with a piece of aluminium foil so that the aluminium foil is always resonating against the instrument’s body.

Circular movement: Scrape the surface of indicated instrument in circular motion (usually with wire brush).

Bowing Crotales: Beginning at measure 113, Crotales are bowed with D.B. bow. Depending on musical phrases, bow direction can be changed at the discretion of the performer. However, the sound should be constantly resonating.

Choosing mallets: In any places where mallets are not indicated, the performer should use certain types of mallet that fit to the context of instrument. For instance, using Gong mallet for Thai gong.
For Piano:

Pedal: Sustained pedal should be stepped on for the entire piece. It is also possible to put a heavy object on the pedal as well.

Lid: The lid should remained off for the entire piece.

Preparation with aluminium foil: Pieces of aluminium foil should be scattered on the area of lowest register inside the Piano. The aluminium foil should be always resonating with the strings.

With Brush: Scrape the strings with wire brush at the area of lowest register.

Hand’s strumming: Strum the strings at the area of lowest register quickly as much as possible.

Glass:

1. Rotate a glass from side to side on the low strings (indicated “circular motion”).

2. Scrape along the low strings up and down firmly with the bottom of glass (indicated “vertical motion”). By pressing the glass firmly against the low strings, which is also corresponded to dynamic, it should create a high raspy sound with overtones.

Preparation with Blu-Tack: Put the Blu-Tack on the strings (lower staff) to obtain the written harmonics (upper staff).

Compact Disc Player: A compact disc player with internal or extended speaker should be placed as close as possible to the pianist (see the diagram on the instrumentation’s page). The compact disc should contain a pre-recorded sound of any quiet and noisy environmental sound approximately 2 minutes 20 seconds in duration, with the sound being faded away toward the end. The sound file can be obtained from the composer or recorded by the performer. Beginning at measure 112, the performer press a button to turn on the compact disc player. In non-amplified situation, the volume of the compact disc player should be balance with the overall dynamic of the ensemble.

For Strings:

Bow placement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.s.t.</td>
<td>alto sul tasto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.t.</td>
<td>sul tasto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ord.</td>
<td>ordinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.p.</td>
<td>sul ponticello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a.s.p.</td>
<td>alto sul ponticello</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Scratch Tone: Increasing bow pressure to obtain non-pitched and noisy sound.

Breath, air sound: Mute the strings with left hand while bowing. It should create sound that is akin to “white noise”.
**Vertical Bowing:** Bow the indicated string in vertical direction while muting the strings with (from a position ‘close to the left hand’ to ‘near the bridge’). The changing of bow’s direction is at the discretion of the performer.

**Multiphonics:** Find a place on the indicated string (usually slightly above or below a harmonic node) to produce a multiphonic sound.

**On the bridge:** Bow exactly on the bridge so that it creates non-pitched and noisy sound.

**Con sord. aluminium foil:** At measure 145, use aluminium foil to mute the strings at bridge’s position. It should create raspy metallic sound. For all strings—except the Double Bass, it is possible to begin to mute the strings at the beginning of measure 139. For Double Bass, the strings should be muted with aluminium foil for the entire piece.

**Scordatura on Double Bass:** The low E should be tuned down to low C for the entire piece.

Other unconventional notation and extra explanation is written in the score.

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...who can recall the past lives...

Extremely slow, immaterial

Thuthathum Shropac
accel. \( \Rightarrow \) \( \begin{array}{c} \text{f} = 52 \end{array} \) \( \Rightarrow \) \( \begin{array}{c} \text{f} = 40 \end{array} \) \( \Rightarrow \) \( \begin{array}{c} \text{rit.} \end{array} \) \( \Rightarrow \) \( \begin{array}{c} \text{f} = 33 \end{array} \)