

Hey-oh-way

Hey-oh-way was composed for my General Exams concert at Princeton, one of the requirements for my PhD. The assignment each year is to choose a composer about whose work the student is curious and write a composition that “responds” to it. The composer is not meant to be someone whose musical style is in the student’s comfort zone, but one that will stretch or challenge the student in some way. As the graduate handbook reads “The goal is not imitation so much as dialogue: one composer responding to, or adopting, or adapting another’s ideas.”

I chose to respond to the vocal polyphonic folk music of the republic of Georgia, an ancient and rich musical tradition. I had been singing in the Princeton Georgian Choir since the previous fall and found myself increasingly fascinated by this repertoire of music. In my response, I focused on several aspects of Georgian vocal polyphony, which informed both the musical material I used and the process of composition and performance.

In terms of the musical material, I was drawn, first, to the idea of vocal resonance, expressed so beautifully in Georgian music. This resonance comes about through open fifth- and fourth-based harmonies, which are colored with different vowel sounds to change the brightness or broadness of the tone. I explored this resonance by borrowing and expanding on characteristic Georgian harmonies and by experimenting with the resonance properties of different vocal vowel sounds.

Secondly, I was drawn to several characteristic Georgian melodic and polyphonic shapes, and sought to distill these patterns into their elemental forms. For example, especially in the chant literature, phrases often begin with the voices fairly widely spaced, becoming tighter over the course of the phrase, and meeting in a unison at the cadence. I distilled this gesture into a stack of fifths that slowly glissandos directly into a unison. In a similar manner, I took the tendency for Georgian singers to do a brief, grunt-like “fall” from the final note of a phrase or song and stretched it out and exaggerated it, with notes glissandoing downward and devolving into non-musical grunts and noises. Finally, I took the practice of repeating and varying short cells of material (not all that different, as it happens, from some of the post-minimalist procedures I already employed in much of my music), and made it more complex by

layering Georgian-like melodic cells in different meters that would cycle at different rates.

In addition to adapting Georgian sonic qualities, I also wanted my response to inform and challenge my own composing process. First, I decided to compose as much as possible using my own voice, rather than the combination of piano and midi playback that I usually rely on. Though I still used the piano to come up with some of the chord progressions, I always recorded myself singing everything as soon as I had figured it out, and composed much of the piece by vocally improvising layers of polyphony into pro-tools. Second, I stayed away from traditional Western notation as much as possible during the composing process, trying to limit its influence on my musical thinking. I composed instead by cutting and pasting the recorded sounds of my own voice, only later figuring out how to notate the sounds I had come up with.

Finally, I wanted to teach the music to my singers as much in the style of an aural tradition as I could. My ideal would have been to teach the music entirely by ear, but this proved to be unfeasible considering the amount of time we had to learn the piece. I ended up settling on a hybrid system, where I notated the more complicated and difficult-to-remember passages in Western musical notation, used “word sheets” – the written out words, but without musical notation, a technique we use frequently to learn music in the Princeton Georgian Choir – for other sections, and used written out or verbal instructions for others. I also made a mock-up of myself singing the piece in pro-tools and encouraged my singers to listen to it and get it in their ears as much as possible. The resulting “score” for the piece is in no sense a complete set of instructions for realizing the piece, but, as in the Princeton Georgian Choir’s “word sheets” or a jazz chart, consists of the minimum amount of information needed to jog the singers’ memory about what happens next.

The resulting piece is certainly quite different from anything I have written before, and I am grateful for the new horizons the project opened up for me, both in terms of musical material and compositional process.