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Contemporary Theurgic Music: Possibilities and Practices

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Abstract

Many traditions understand sound as a potent means of revealing the ineffable and the numinous. Given this liminal nature, I have long wondered what type of musical structures would best engage this anagogic potential of sound. A solution came when I discovered the theurgic practice of the third-century Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus. Although the details of these rituals are now lost, we know they included the recitation of divine names known as *Voces Mysticae* (mystical voices). These recitation formulas have no semantic content, that is, they are meaningless. Iamblichus explains that these invocations transcend the limits of language. They were revealed by the gods and their power as divine symbols come not from their meaning, but from their sonic quality. The *Voces Mysticae* often have strictly ordered patterns of their component syllables and phonemes, and formal arrangement without semantic content comes very close to a definition of music.

My piece *Voces Mysticae* for solo saxophone explores the musical potential of these incantations in order to transform a concert into an imagined theurgic ritual. To do this, I have combined *Voces Mysticae* with transformational techniques derived from the Hebrew Kabbalah, itself a later monotheistic form of theurgy. By replacing letters with musical motives, these techniques generate music that encodes the *Voces Mysticae* and their transformations into the piece. The music, then, is not just inspired by theurgy, it is structurally

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theurgic. This paper will discuss the background, application, and implications of these ideas and will include an audio recording of my composition *Voces Mysticae*.

Keywords

Theurgy, Music, Experimental, Iamblichus, Kabbalah, Saxophone, Staal, *Voces Mysticae*

Contemporary Theurgic Music: Possibilities and Practices

My composition *Voces Mysticae* for solo saxophone is part of a series of pieces I have written exploring ancient Greek mysticism and magic. I encourage readers to listen to the piece to deepen their understanding of the essay that follows.[1] In these works, I have not pursued the traditional musical goal of emotional self-expression, rather, I have sought to access the anagogic potential of sound; that is, the idea that sound—in and of itself, before it is rhetorically shaped into music—is a means to participate in higher spiritual levels. In doing so, I hope to recast the modern concert from a medium for the communication of personal passions into a ritual experience, a form of theurgy. This goal grows out of my longstanding fascination with myth, ritual, and symbols, and is based on several intuitive ideas. First, that rituals and symbols are a means to engage with and give physical expression to non-physical or spiritual realities. Second, this symbolic engagement helps move us beyond the limitations and biases of discursive reason into more intuitive, visionary, or noetic states of knowing. And finally, that sound is a particularly potent medium through which to accomplish these goals.

The central question in writing *Voces Mysticae* was what type of music best achieved these anagogic goals. Or asked more bluntly, what should such music sound like? I did not want to create music that was simply inspired by the idea of theurgy or merely adapt "normal" concert music to a ritual context by attaching a theurgic label.[2] Instead, I wanted to embed ritual structures into the music itself. This was a vague notion at the outset, but as a working musician I was looking for a practical nuts-and-bolts answer to the question; that is, I was looking for a musical technique. Ultimately, the solution came from exploring the ritual use of language in Neoplatonism and the Kabbalah because these linguistic practices could be translated directly into musical systems.

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[1] Randall Hall, *Oracle* (Self-released, 2020), https://randallhall.bandcamp.com/album/oracle.

[2] Consider Alister Crowley's Rites of Eleusis of 1910. Here the music for the ceremony included works by Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and other figures from the Western art music canon. Adapting preexisting pieces like this was not my goal. See Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo* (North Atlantic Books 2010), 224.

What follows is not a comprehensive survey of anagogic music or of its ritual use—these are vast topics in themselves and there is certainly more relevant material than can be addressed here. Rather, this is a personal account of the specific ideas I encountered that led to writing *Voces Mysticae* and how those ideas shaped the musical procedures used in the piece. At times, it may read like a music theory paper as it discusses this in technical detail. But working out the technical procedures for the piece would ultimately highlight certain underlying elements of ritual structure, which, coming full circle, offered new perspectives on understanding the anagogic properties of sound. These insights include the importance of patterning and transformations as tools to break down discursive meaning and create an uncanny musical effect, as well as the importance of creative practice over the final created artifact.

Anagogic Sound

For years, I have been inspired by the many references to anagogic sound found across cultures. Indian thought distinguishes between *struck* sound (*ahata*) and *un-struck* sound (*anahata*), that is, between audible physical sound and sound which is immaterial and transcendent.[3] In Japan, the practice of "blowing Zen" uses the shakuhachi flute as a meditative tool to awaken higher consciousness, and the Theosophist Annie Besant associated sonic vibrations with higher subtle energies.[4] To these examples, we can add all types of mantras, chants, incantations, and medicine songs that serve as sonic bridges to both invoke spiritual powers within time and transport practitioners to the eternal.[5]

But it was ancient Greek myth and philosophy, especially the interconnected matrix of Pythagorean, Platonic, and Neoplatonic thought, that most caught my imagination and

[3] Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology* (University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 123-4.

[4] Christopher Blasdel, "The Shakuhachi: Aesthetics of a Single Tone." *Japan Quarterly*. 31, no. 2, (April/June 1984): 214-217; Annie Besant, *Religion and Music. Adyar Popular Lectures* (Theosophist Office, 1909); Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *Thought Forms* (The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905).

[5] See, for example, Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession* trans. Brunhilde Biebuyck (University of Chicago Press, 1992) and David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave* (Thames and Hudson, 2002).

became the focus for this project. Anagogic sound is foundational to stories about the legendary musician Orpheus and the teachings of the semi-legendary sage Pythagoras, both of whom used sound for physical and spiritual healing, as a means of initiation into sacred mysteries, and even to produce magical powers.[6] The liminal nature of music is central to the harmony of the spheres, the idea that the planets produce a great harmony as they move along the celestial spheres that make up the geocentric cosmos.[7] In his creation myth, Plato tells us that the World-Soul is constructed according to the same numerical ratios that form musical consonances and that individual human souls are made from this same harmonic material.[8] Thus the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm is established through musical-mathematical relationships. For this reason, Plato tells us that, "rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace."[9] Cicero emphasizes the anagogic potential of this cosmic music saying, "Gifted men, imitating this harmony on stringed instruments and in

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[6] Ancient sources on Orpheus include Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (x.1-85) and Pausanias, *Description of Greece* (9.30.4). Modern sources include Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife* (Routledge, 2007), 167-186; John Warden Hamilton, *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth* (University of Toronto Press, 1985); Martin L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Clarendon Press, 1983); W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Norton, 1966). The bibliography on Pythagoras is overwhelming, but K. S. Guthrie, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library: An Anthology of Ancient Writings Which Relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy*, ed. David R. Fideler (Phanes, 1988) contains a concise overview with English translations of many of the most important ancient sources, including the biographies by Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Diogenes Laertius. On anagogic sound in the European tradition in general, see Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth* (Inner Traditions International, 1995).

[7] Among the many ancient sources on the harmony of the spheres see Plato, *Republic* (614b-619b), and Aristotle, *De caelo* (II, 9, 290b-291a). James Haar, *Musica Mundana: Variations on a Pythagorean Theme* (PhD. Diss., Harvard University, 1960) remains a comprehensive catalog of and commentary on the ancient sources. Also see Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven* (1987).

[8] *Timaeus* (35b-36b); Francis Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus Translated with a Running Commentary* (K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1937), 57-136. The Demiurge builds the cosmos from musical intervals generated through simple whole number ratios, the simpler the ratio, the more consonant the interval: the perfect octave (2:1), the perfect fifth (3:2), and the perfect fourth (4:3). These are the only intervals in modern music theory designated as perfect—a contemporary echo of the ancient correspondence between music and the cosmos. Smaller intervals (whole steps and half steps) are derived from the perfect intervals and are arranged in different patterns to fill in the gaps between them. These different patterns create the various types of scales and modes (major, minor, Dorian, Phrygian, and so on).

[9] *Republic* 401de.

singing, have gained for themselves a return to this region, as have those of exceptional abilities who have studied divine matters even in earthly life."[10]

Despite the importance placed on sound as a liminal substance, the Greek accounts provide remarkably little information about practical music making. These sources explain the importance of anagogic music but not how to make it. The harmonic ratios create musical intervals that can then be organized into a scale, but in no way tell us what to do with that scale. The descriptions of the harmony of the spheres are silent about the nature of the great cosmic song and do not provide practical techniques for imitating it.[11] While this freed me to work from my imagination, I still wanted to maintain some kind of continuity with the ancient sources. But increasingly the Greek model seemed to lead to a dead end.

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10 Marcus Tullius Cicero, "The Dream of Scipio" in Joscelyn Godwin, ed., *Music, Mysticism and Magic: A Sourcebook* (Arcana, 1987), 9-11.

11 Menelaos concludes, "Ancient literary sources are not particularly helpful when it comes to defining the precise qualities of Orpheus' music." They do not specify, "whether the power of his singing was due to its content or to its form." When the ancient documents describe, "his singing they usually employ the adjectives traditionally associated with descriptions of beautiful sounds," but unfortunately, "without being more specific" (Christopoulos Menelaos, "The Spell of Orpheus [Orpheus and the Orphic Religious Movement]." *Mètis: Anthropologie des Mondes Grecs Anciens* 6, no. 1-2 (1991): 205-222, 214).

Pythagoras was able to imitate the harmony of the spheres by "divinely contriving mingling of certain diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic melodies." These are the basic genres of ancient Greek music, describing the available tuning systems. The equivalent in modern music theory would be something like saying he created melodies using major and minor scales, which is not particularly helpful. Further explanation that the melodies were, "The result of dissimilar and varying sounds, speeds, magnitudes and intervals arranged with reference to each other in a certain musical ratio, producing a convoluted motion most musical and gentle," does not provide any more practical guidance (Iam.VP 15 in Guthrie, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook*, 72).

Plato famously endorses the Dorian and Phrygian modes as promoting bravery while rejecting the Lydian and Ionian modes for promoting slothfulness and softness (*Republic* 398e-399a). Plato tells us which modes to use, thus providing a collection of notes, but not how to use them. There is no discussion of how to shape the melody, organize rhythm, etc. (We also need to keep in mind that these ancient modes were not the same as our modern modes with the same name.)

Presumably, the music these writers had in mind was simply the music they normally heard. Thus, their comments do not provide insight for specific anagogic musical practices distinct from their "regular" music. While the Greek sources do not provide this, this is not to say that such guidelines cannot be found in other ritual traditions. However, in this project, I stayed focused on my own area of expertise, namely the broad currents of Platonic thought and the European musical tradition, in order to avoid cultural appropriation.

Iamblichean Theurgy

The turning point came when I discovered the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus (245-325) and his treatise *On the Mysteries.*[12] Here he presents the philosophical rationale for theurgy.[13] Literally meaning "god work" theurgy refers to ritual practices designed to purify the soul and lead it to direct experience of the divine. Iamblichus wrote *On the Mysteries* in the style of a Neoplatonic debate with his older contemporary (and possibly his former teacher), Porphyry. The debate centered on the question of whether or not contemplation alone was enough to accomplish the ascent of the soul or whether the ritual aid of the gods was required. Iamblichus is adamant that philosophical contemplation must be supported by ritual practice. Since regular discursive thought is based on the division of knowledge into categories and sequential strings, it is in fact a hindrance to the divine encounter which, "is too excellent to be divided into knowledge."[14] Rather, Iamblichus tells us we need to transcend the limits of reason and enter a pre-conceptual state of unknowing receptivity through theurgic ritual.[15]

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12 The original title given by Iamblichus was *The Reply of the Master Abammon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo, and the Solutions to the Questions it Contains*. However, its Renaissance translator, Marsilo Ficino, instead named it *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum*, or *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and Assyrians*. Thus, it has come to us as *De mysteriis* (*DM*). The modern English translation is *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*, ed. and trans. E.C. Clarke, J.M. Dillon, and J.P. Hershell (Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) and is used here except when otherwise noted.

13 On theurgy see Crystal Addey, "Assuming the Mantle of the Gods: 'Unknowable Names' and Invocations in Late Antique Theurgic Rituals," in *Sacred Words: Orality, Literacy and Religion*, ed. A. P. M. H. Lardinois, J. H. Blok, and M. G. M. Van Der Poel (Brill, 2011), 279-294; Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism* (Ashgate, 2014); Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (Penn State Univ Press, 1995); Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (Études Augustiniennes, 1978); Georg Luck, "Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism," in *Religion, Science, and Magic in Concert and Conflict*, ed. J. Neusner, E. S. Frerichs, and P.V.M. Flesher (Oxford University Press, 1989), 185-225; Charles Stang, "From the *Chaldean Oracles* to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*: Theurgy Between the Third and Sixth Centuries," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture,* 5 (2011): 1-13.

14 Iamblichus *DM* 7.4 (255.7-11), quoted in Addey, "Assuming the Mantle", 283. Cf. Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 207-9.

15 Shaw writes, "For the theurgist, it is not what we know, it is not our thinking that unites us with the gods *but our capacity to enter states of not-knowing receptivity*: an almost impossible task for those who pride themselves on intellectual sophistication" (emphasis in the original). He continues to explain the challenge this presents to modern thinkers, saying, "This may be why Iamblichus and theurgical Neoplatonism remain elusive subjects, especially for those who find themselves described in Iamblichus' tirade against the Greeks", i.e., those who

While *On the Mysteries* provides a rationale for ritual practice, one that is still compelling today, it is similar to ancient accounts of the harmony of the spheres because it does not provide us with descriptions of those rituals. Unfortunately, the details of what actually happened in the Neoplatonic rites are largely lost to history. Theurgic rituals may have included sitting for long periods in silence, perhaps in the dark—or alternately various lighting effects may have broken the darkness. Magic tools like the rhombus of Hecate, a bejeweled bullroarer, may have been used. Participants may have worn vestments inscribed with special symbols. Hallucinogens may have been ingested. These are all techniques used to induce trance or ecstatic states.[16]

However, we do know a key element of theurgy is the use of symbols, physical objects that contain immaterial properties of the gods within their material form. That is to say, the symbol does not just represent the god, it manifests the divine presence—the symbol and the god are ontologically linked. These symbols can be things such as colors, images, plants, metals, and—most critically to this project—words and sounds. Iamblichus explains, "Various melodies…correspond through their motions to certain gods, who are […] the sources of these motions. These gods […] are particularly present in the melodies that they particularly correspond to," meaning, the god *is* a specific musical formula. He continues, "The cause of this inspiration is not so much man's passion aroused by music as it is the correspondence of music to a god, through which the god is naturally present […] so that the whole man ascends under the aegis of this or that god according to the properties of [particular] melodies."[17] Thus, we are not moved by our emotional or psychological response to hearing music, nor

attempt to nail down the divine encounter into rational systems and subordinate it to those systems (Gregory Shaw, "Containing Ecstasy: The Strategies of Iamblichean Theurgy," *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 58-9, including note 29).

16 Luck, "Theurgy and Forms"; Ruth Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles: Text and Translations* (Brill, 1989), 25-30; Addey, *Divination and Theurgy*, 31. For a modern-neurological assessment of ecstatic techniques see Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*.

17 *DM* III.9, translated from Ficino's Latin version in Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 146. On the musical representations of gods and their relationship to ritual, see Rouget, *Music and Trance*, 323.

are we moved by the beauty or expressiveness of the sounds as we expect in traditional music, but rather by the divine presence within it.

Iamblichus' idea of the ritual activation of symbols in theurgy now provided me with a conceptual framework for the initiatory concerts I had been vaguely imagining. Viewed through a Neoplatonic lens, I discovered that I had in fact been seeking a way to create theurgic music where certain symbols (namely the repertoire performed) transform the concert into a ritual experience. While I had no pretense of manifesting the gods, I pursued the more modest goal of organizing a concert *as though* it invoked the divine presence.

Voces Mysticae

An even more targeted use of sound in theurgic ritual is the recitation or chanting of invocations and divine names, also known as *voces mysticae*—mystical voices.[18] As we will see, this would be pivotal in creating musical techniques that embed ritual structures. The *voces mysticae* are collections of phonemes, the smallest unit of human speech making, ranging from long strings of vowels to densely packed clusters of consonants. They often have very precise formal organization. These words (or perhaps more precisely, word-like strings of sounds) appear to be without semantic content or external referent—in other words, the *voces mysticae* are nonsense. These recitation formulas appear in various cultic practices from the ancient Mediterranean. In addition to Neoplatonism, they are found in Judaism, Christianity, Hermeticism, and Gnosticism. They also bear an uncanny resemblance to Vedic mantras.

The question of their meaning is a point of debate. Strictly speaking, some of the *voces mysticae* carry at least traces of lexical meaning. Scholars have uncovered fragments of Greek,

[18] The literature uses a variety of terms for this phenomenon: *voces magicae* ("magical voices"), *onomata barabara* ("barbarian names" in Greek) or *nomina barbara* ("barbarian names" in Latin). Iamblichus himself refers to them as divine or sacred names. I chose *Voces Mysticae* for the title of my piece for practical reasons. I reckoned that most anglophones could work out the translation as "mystical voices" better than the other options. I anticipated that this would give the audience at least a little programmatic grounding without foreknowledge of theurgy.

Latin, Hebrew, Egyptian, and potentially even Aramaic and Babylonian words within them.[19] Nonetheless, it seems to be their semantic ambiguity that distinguishes them from regular language.[20] Iamblichus explains that the divine names were revealed by the gods and must never be translated or altered because it is their sonic quality, not their meaning, which empowers them as divine symbols, symbols that manifest the divine powers they invoke.[21] He also reminds us that what is meaningless to us is not meaningless to the gods. As Addey explains, the *voces mysticae*, "signify and communicate" linguistically, but do so, "in a way that is appropriate for the gods," meaning, "the divine language is non-discursive, paradoxical and enigmatic: it cannot be reduced to logical propositions."[22] In other words the *voces mysticae* operate on a supra-rational level beyond the limitations of human thought. Following this line, Versnel argues that whatever the historical reality about their etymologies may be, it is their lack of clear meaning that gives them their otherworldly, uncanny quality and creates their ritual potency.[23]

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19 Etymological findings are often contested. As Brashear reports, "Occasionally a relatively sound case is made interpreting a word in a language, only to be invalidated by someone who advances a similarly sound argument identifying the word in another language." See William M. Brashear, "The Greek Magical Papyri: an Introduction and Survey; Annotated Bibliography (1928–1994)," in *ANRW* II.18.5, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini (Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 3436. A given invocation may have once had a meaning that is now lost, or it may never have had any meaning. The challenge is determining which is the case for each example. See H. S. Versnel, "The Poetics of the Magical Charm: An Essay in the Power of Words," in *Magic and the Ritual in the Ancient World,* ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 107–110.

20 This ambiguity seems to have been intensified by the exchange of sounds and word stems between languages, such as bringing Hebrew elements into a Greek or Demotic spell. This transfer seems to have been made in order to intensify their strangeness. See Brashear, "Greek Magical Papyri", 3429–3438.

21 Consider Cassirer's discussion of magical language: "[E]very magical view of the world is permeated by this belief in the objective character and objective force of the sign." This is based on the idea that "word and name do not merely have a function of describing or portraying, but contain within them the object and its real powers. Word and name do not designate and signify, they are and act." See Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* Vol. 2*, Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Yale University Press, 1925 [1955]), 24, 40. Quoted in Patton Burchett, "The 'Magical' Language of Mantra," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 4 (December 2008): 810.

22 *DM* 7.4; Addey, "Assuming the Mantle", 282-3. Cf. *Hermetica* (XVI.1-2).

23 Versnel, "Poetics of the Magical Charm," 144-156. Cf. Malinowski: "all magical verbiage shows a very considerable coefficient of weirdness, strangeness and unusualness." See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic,* Vol. 2, *The Language of Magic and Gardening* (Dover, 1935[1978]), 221-2. Brashear catalogs the available etymologies of the *voces mysticae* in "Greek Magical Papyri", 3577-3603.

As we look at a few examples of *voces mysticae*, I will not linger on questions of their semantic content, for which I am dependent on the findings of philologists. Rather, I want to pay special attention to the formal arrangement and transformation of these incantations. I will use the term syntax to describe both their micro and macro-organization, although I will do so somewhat idiosyncratically. Strictly speaking, syntax describes the ordering of words into phases, clauses, and sentences. However, the *voces mysticae* are often shorter, consisting of only a single word or a small group of words. This might make morphology (the internal structures of individual words), a more appropriate term. But morphology specifically deals with words and their division into meaningful and grammatically functional units. This would seem to negate its applicability to the nonsense *voces mysticae*. Phonology (how the sounds of a language are made, organized, and perceived) is another option, but this fails to capture the way the *voces mysticae* organize sound units *as though* they form meaningful patterns. Indeed, the problem of choosing terminology reflects a key characteristic of the *voces mysticae*—their ambiguous position between meaningless words, words that seem to carry a veiled higher meaning, and regular language. As we will see, it is the very quality of suggesting meaning without explicitly stating any that makes these incantations so much like music.

This question of large- and small-scale organization is also relevant to music. Musical form usually refers to the large-scale pattern of repetition and contrast of phrases, periods, or other large divisions, like thematic sections and key areas, that make up a whole movement or piece. But we can also look at the organization of smaller motivic units, the component parts from which phrases are built. If we compare this to linguistics, the musical phrase is roughly equivalent to a sentence, while the motive is more similar to the component words of that sentence, and individual notes to the individual sounds of the words. Consider the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Viewed linguistically, the famous four-note opening (the individual phonetic sounds) creates the initial motive (a small meaningful unit or morpheme) which is repeated and varied to build the subsequent phrases that generate the entire movement (well-formed syntactical groups of words making sentences). However, any such

application of linguistic terminology to music can only be approximate because music, just like the *voces mysticae*, is not meaningful in any conventional sense of semantics—a point to which we will return later. What is important to notice now is the way very small units can be grouped into progressively larger units in both language and music. To simplify things, I will simply use the term syntax to refer to both the large and small-scale organization of language, pseudo-language, and music. With these qualifications in place, I will briefly analyze a few examples of the *voces mysticae* to explore their musical characteristics.

Iamblichus does not offer a record of any of the *voces mysticae*, but we can turn to other ancient texts to find examples. An important source is the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM) or Greek Magical Papyri.[24] This is a magic book written in the Greek and Demotic languages and compiled in Egypt during the first-third centuries CE. It contains spells and rituals for everything from turning invisible, to success in business, to erotic binding. It includes our first example, ABLANAThANALBA (PGM XIc. 1-19). We can quickly determine that it is a palindrome, the same forward and backwards. This feature is easier to see than to hear:

A	b	c	d	c′	b′	a′
AB	LA	NA	Th	AN	AL	BA

Musical palindromes are too numerous for a full accounting here. One notable example is the crab canon from J. S. Bach's *Musical Offering*. Here, Bach provides a single melody which works when played forward or backward. But the melody can also be played by two voices simultaneously, one moving forward and the other backward, such that the second voice is the mirror of the first. Or, looking at it another way, at the midpoint, the lower voice forms a palindrome with the upper voice and vice versa. The first movement of Anton Webern's Symphony, Op. 21, is an exact palindrome. Halfway through, the entire movement is stated

24 Dieter Betz, Hans, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including the Demotic Spells: Texts*, Vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

in reverse, creating a perfect mirror image of the first half. Webern keeps the instrumentation and register of each pitch the same in the second half to emphasize this reversal. [25]

The second example is also from the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM X. 36-50). It includes all seven of the Greek vowels and undergoes a clear process of rotation, which makes further analysis redundant.

AEĒIOYŌ	abcdefg
EĒIOYŌA	bcdefga
ĒIOYŌAE	cdefgab
IOYŌAEĒ	defgabc
OYŌAEĒI	efgabcd
YŌAEĒIO	fgabcde
ŌAEĒIOY	gabcdef

This type of rotation is less common in traditional music. But, Igor Stravinsky uses an identical process of pitch rotation (along with transposition) in the "Lacrimosa" movement of the *Requiem Canticles*.[26] These first two examples clearly suggest intentional patterning and transformations, a common feature in the *voces mysticae*.

The final example is a line from the so-called Orphic gold tablets. These are small pieces of gold foil inscribed with short cryptic texts associated with various Orphic religions. These were distinct cultic groups, their primary (and perhaps only) connection was a shared focus on the mythological figure Orpheus. The tablets were found in graves and presumably

[25] This is a twelve-tone piece. It is based on a specific series of all twelve pitches called a row which can be transformed through transposition, inversion, retrograde, and retrograde-inversion. In this piece Webern uses a double cannon, each of which has its own pair of rows such that four rows sound simultaneously. The first half of the piece has three pairs of rows in each canon, the first two related by inversion, the final one by transposition. At the midway point all of the rows are stated in the retrograde of their original form.

[26] For a basic explanation of Stravinsky's technique here, see Miguel Roig-Francoli, *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* (McGraw Hill, 2007), 221-226.

provided some type of instruction or protective charm for making the underworld passage after death. In this example, the *voces mysticae* are embedded within regular language:

> To Protogonus TĒMAITIETĒ Earth Mother EPA Cybele Maiden-daughter OSENTAIĒ of Demeter ĒTITATAITTAPTA[27]

Here, the *voces mysticae* are less systematic, but we can still discover something about their formal arrangement. If we look at each syllable of the first word, TĒ-MAI-TI-E-TĒ, we find the following pattern:

a	b	a′	a
TĒ	MAI	TI-E	TĒ

If we compare this to O-SEN-TAI-Ē, we see the introduction of new sounds along with varied repetitions of sounds which have already occurred:

c	d	b′	a′
O	SEN	TAI	Ē

This process continues with ĒTITA-TA-IT-TAP-TA, which now includes retrograde statements and variations of earlier combinations:

a (retro)	a′′	a′′	a′ (retro)	a′′′	a′′
ĒT	TA	TA	IT	TAP	TA

[27] Words in all caps are transliterations of the *voces mysticae* while the remaining words are translated from Greek. The proper name Protogonus refers to Phanes, the Orphic primordial god of creation, the "maiden daughter" is Persephone, daughter of Demeter, and Cybele was associated with Rhea, the great mother goddess. This example is in the Museo Nazionale in Naples, inv. no. 11464. See Graf and Johnston, *Ritual Texts*, 10-11.

These three examples have a "main motive" based on T, placed either before or after a limited number of recurring vowels (TĒ, ĒT, IT, TA). This is varied by adding a consonant (TA becomes TAP), infixing an additional vowel (TI-E), or substituting a new consonant (MAI becomes TAI). If we take the three words together, they create something of a composite ternary form:

A				B				A′					
A	b	a′	a	c	d	b′	a′	a (retro)	a″	a″	a′ (retro)	a‴	a″
TĒ	MAI	TI-E	TĒ	O	SEN	TAI	Ē	ĒT	TA	TA	IT	TAP	TA

The forms of the last three examples are certainly not as clear as those of the palindrome and rotation examples. Admittedly, their analysis could be approached in a number of different ways and is complicated by the fact that these words are embedded within regular language (not to mention that EPA is something of a wildcard). Nonetheless, they still demonstrate the standard musical practice of varied restatements of limited material. Any musical theme can be analyzed in this manner by looking at the relationships between its component parts. This means the syntactical features of the *voces mysticae* can be understood using musical principles, which, in turn, means that these incantations can be used to organize musical sounds.

These musical characteristics are always present in language; however, we are generally unaware of them because we immediately translate their sonic qualities into semantic meaning—we hear the ideas that are being communicated, not the sound of the words, syllables, and phonemes that convey them. As a quick test of this principle, compare the experience of listening to a language that is understood to one that is not. When we do not understand what is being said, we are more likely to listen to the sound patterns of the words, their rhythm, intonation, and alternation between consonants and vowels. But when we understand a language, we tend to stop hearing these sonic qualities because we are so

focused on the semantic content. With the *voces mysticae*, the sonic components of the words become clearer for the very reason that they are freed from any semantic obligation. We will return to the interplay of syntax, meaning, and non-meaning later. But for now, it is important to note that the *voces mysticae* are models for organizing and transforming sonic content. Thus, they provide patterns which can be applied to music. This inherently musical quality made the *voces mysticae* a fitting starting point to develop a contemporary theurgic music.[28]

Kabbalah

The idea of incantations naturally led me to consider the Kabbalah. Often described as a later monotheistic form of theurgy, Kabbalah includes meditation practices based on words and their transformations. Most importantly for this project, the Kabbalah includes specific techniques for these transformations that can be adapted to music.[29] A historical link between Kabbalah and Neoplatonic theurgy is a tantalizing possibility but an uncertain one.[30] Making any such determination is beyond the scope of this study, but neither is it necessary. The phenomenological similarities between the *voces mysticae* and the Kabbalah, regardless of the existence of any historical connections, is enough to suggest their combined applicability to music. As a creative artist I have a luxury not afforded to the scholar: I can freely combine

28 I am not the first person to look at the *voces mysticae* musically. Scholars have transcribed these invocations into music using the traditional assignment of planets, Greek vowels, and musical pitches. In these attempts, a vowel is simply replaced by its corresponding pitch. Since this approach only deals with vowels, it cannot be applied to *voces mysticae* that include consonants. This approach yields rather incoherent melodies that are not musically compelling. This makes it highly unlikely that any such systematic correspondence between the letters of the *voces mysticae* and pitch existed. See Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography* (The Clarendon Press, 1961), 64-77; Diane Toluates, "Nonsense syllables in the Music of the Ancient Greek and Byzantine Traditions," *The Journal of Musicology* 7, no. 2 (Spring, 1989): 231-243.

29 Hasler has explored musical applications of the Kabbalah, although he has pursued it in different ways than I do here, nor does he connect it to the *voces mysticae*. Johann Hasler, *Towards Hermeticist Grammars of Music: A Proposal for Systems of Composition Based on the Principles of the Hermetic Tradition, with Musical Demonstrations* (PhD. Diss., University of Newcastle upon Tyne School of Arts and Cultures, 2011).

30 Such a direct link has been argued by Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar and Iamblichus," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6, no. 18 (2007): 95-100.

ideas according to my imagination, independently of any historical or causal relationships—in brief, I can exercise my artistic license.

It should be clarified that I have not drawn on the rich theological, theosophical, and cosmological speculations of the Kabbalah, only on its techniques for word transformation.[31] Also, as fascinating as ritual music from around the world is, I chose not to use the music of other traditions due to the risk of misrepresentation and the potential for appropriation.[32] Since I am trained in the Western art music tradition and a self-identified experimental saxophonist, I decided I would use musical content idiomatic to that instrument and musical vocabulary; that is, I would remain within what can broadly be considered the European avant-garde.

In *Voces Mysticae*, then, the concert program becomes an imagined theurgic ritual and the saxophone becomes the sonic medium through which imagined incantations are made. For added effect, I also chose to associate the saxophone with the aulos, the double-piped reed instrument from ancient Greece, long associated with mania and ecstatic states.[33] As suggested, this music is experimental, i.e., it does not conform to the norms and standards of more traditional music—for many listeners, the musical content may be unfamiliar and even a little strange.[34] Yet in both Neoplatonic and Kabbalistic theurgy, the participant is moving

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31 Here I have not focused on the Jewish Kabbalah, essentially inaccessible without Hebrew. I went immediately to sources that discussed techniques for transformation, which lead me primarily to the occult Kabbalah: Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, trans. Martin and Sarah Goodman (Abaris Books, 1983); S. L. MacGregor Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (Redway, 1887). The only Jewish source I consulted was Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (S. Weiser, 1985).

32 Regarding this point, the use of Kabbalah might seem somewhat inconsistent. Yet I am following a longstanding tradition within esoteric movements that incorporate it, drawing more on occult Kabbalah than on its original Hebrew form. Most essential to this project, the Kabbalah offered much greater transformational potential for music than did the *voces mysticae* alone.

33 Plato, *Symposium* 215c, *Crito* 54b; Aristotle, *Politic*s 1339b-1342b; Rouget, *Music and Trance*, 213-220.

34 Categorizing music as "regular" or "normal" versus "experimental" or "weird" is of course problematic. Such designations tell us more about the background, music education, and open mindedness of those discussing the music than the music itself. Still, it is possible to distinguish between pieces that conform to consensus notions of music and pieces that fall outside of those expectations. I find the designation of this piece as experimental a bit

to ontological levels beyond regular human comprehension, where the encounter with the divine may be mysterious, frightening, and even disturbing. It would seem appropriate that music aiming at such an encounter would not demonstrate "normal" musical characteristics. The philosopher Porphyry himself tells us that strange, unusual, or even weird characteristics within a text are a critical indicator that a passage contains hidden esoteric truths waiting to be revealed, a principle that can be extended to include strange music.[35] With all of this as preamble, I will now explain how I applied these techniques to my piece *Voces Mysticae*.

Composing *Voces Mysticae*

The first movement is titled "Abulafia" in honor of Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291), the thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalist known for his contemplative use of letter permutations.[36] He inspired a passage in Umberto Eco's novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, which introduces Kabbalistic transformations. The protagonist uses his computer, named Abu (the diminutive of Abulafia), to transform a text. Using the find/replace function, still a new concept at the time the novel was written, the character Belbo gives the computer the following command:

> Abu, do another thing now: Belbo orders Abu to change all words, make each 'a' become 'akka' and each 'o' become 'ulla,' for a paragraph to look almost Finnish.

Performing the substitution transforms the text into a series of new *voces mysticae*:

> Akkabu, dulla akkanullather thing nullaw: Belbulla ullarders Akkabu tulla chakkange akkall wullards, makkake eakkach 'akka' becullame 'akkakkakka' akk-nd eakkach 'ulla' becullame 'ullakka,' fullar akka pakkarakkagrakkaph tulla lullaullak akkalmullast Finnish.[37]

overstated, but at the same time it recognizes that it probably does not fit within most people's musical expectations.

35 Porphyry, *De antr. nymph*. 3-4, cited in Addey, *Divination and Theurgy*, 62-63.

36 Moshe Idel, *The Mysticism of Abraham Abulafia* (State University of New York Press, 1988).

37 Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 24.

This is the Kabbalistic technique of *notarikon*, where a text can be expanded by replacing a single letter with a group of letters in a reverse acronym. The opposite is also possible; a text may be contracted into an acronym. We immediately see that new non-lexical words are formed. An interesting property of this transformation is the recursive use of substitution. For example, 'a' is transformed into 'akka', while 'akka' itself becomes 'akka-kk-akka'. Musically, this results in nested repetitions of the same motive. I based the first movement on this text, using the following techniques:

1. I assigned each letter a short musical motive.
2. The musical motives are presented in the same order that their corresponding letters appear in the text. In this way, the music "spells" out the passage. In Example 1a, we see the translation of the opening line, "Abu do another", into musical notation.
3. Set against this, Example 1b shows the expansion of the theme through *notarikon*. The 'akka' and 'ulla' motives are inserted in place of the 'a' and 'o' motives.
4. The form of the piece is based on spelling out the original instructions to Abu, followed by the transformed text as stated above.

Example 1

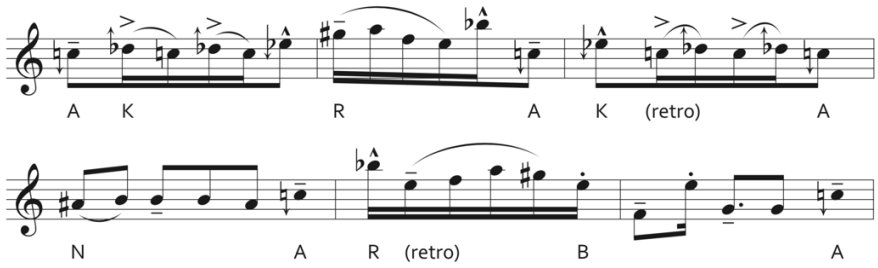


The second movement, "Akrakanarba", is a magic formula from the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM II.1-64). It goes through a process of subtraction, which generates the form of the pieces:

AK/R/AK/A/N/A/RBA	abacdce
R/AK/A/N/A/RBA	bacdce
AK/A/N/A/RBA	acdce
A/N/A/RBA	cdce
N/A/RBA	dce
A/RBA	ce
RBA	e

Again, I assigned motives to the letters and arranged them to spell out the text AKRAKANARBA as it goes through its subtractive process. Example 2 shows the opening statement. Since the K and R motives are stated twice, the second occurrence is in retrograde. The A motive is quite short, so it was grouped with its adjacent motives. Both A and K include microtonal tunings (intervals closer together than the semitone keys on a piano).

Example 2



In this movement, each time a motive reappeared it went through multiple transformations based on the well-known technique of *gematria*. Neither Greek nor Hebrew have independent characters for numbers, so they are notated using letters. Because of this, each word has its own numerical value. Symbolic relationships can be found between words that share the same number. To adapt this to music, I used standard integer notation to assign each pitch class a numerical value:

C	C♯	D	E♭	E	F	F♯	G	G♯	A	B♭	B
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11

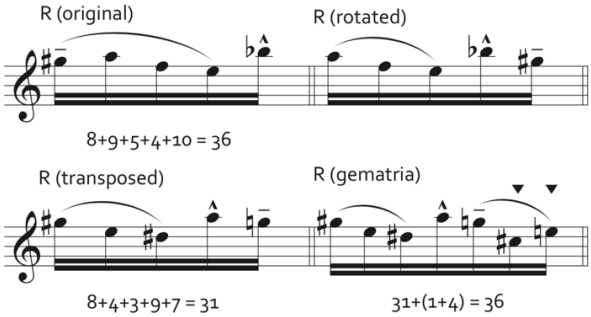
This assignment of number to pitch was arbitrary. Any value could have been assigned to any note. To transform the motive through *gematria*, I used the following procedure, shown in Example 3, for the R motive:

1. I first calculated the numerical value of the original motive (R original).
2. Each time the motive returns it was rotated so that the first note moved to the end (R rotated). Because no pitches have been changed yet, it maintains the same numerical value. This stage of the transformation was not taken from the Kabbalah but from Stravinsky, although it is certainly in the spirit of the Kabbalah.[38]

[38] As we have seen, Stravinsky uses this technique in the *Requiem Canticles* and is an example of his personalized application of Arnold Schoenberg's serial technique, composition with twelve tones, the same technique used by Webern (note 25). One does not need to work with it for very long to see its Kabbalistic qualities. Although Schoenberg was Jewish, his interest in the esoteric is well documented, and twelve-tone technique *screams* Kabbalistic transformation, I have not found direct evidence to confirm that he had knowledge of the Kabbalah. However, based on his musical technique, it is hard to shake the nagging sense that he did. See Alexander Ringer,

3. Continuing to follow Stravinsky's technique, the motive was then transposed to begin on its original pitch (R transposed). This changes the pitch-class content, resulting in a new numerical value for the motive.
4. Additional pitches (indicated by black triangles) were added to return the motive to its original numerical value (R gematria), resulting in a new transformation of R.

Example 3



The last movement, *Auioeoueei* (which I cannot pronounce), is my own magical formula. It is based on all five English vowels and goes through a process of substitution again, based on *notarikon*:

A →	UIO
E →	A
I →	U
O →	EEI
U →	EO

This transformation can go on infinitely, so I stopped after seven expansions to generate the form of the piece:

Arnold Schoenberg: The Composer as Jew (Clarendon Press, 1990); John Covach, "Schoenberg and the Occult," *Theory and Practice: Journal of the Music Theory Society of New York State* 17 (1992): 103-118; Covach, "Schoenberg's Turn to an 'Other' World," *Music Theory Online* 1, no. 5 (September 1995); Julian Johnson, "Schoenberg, modernism, and metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Schoenberg*, ed. Jennifer Shaw and Joseph Auner (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 108-119.

I A

II UIO

III EO U EEI

IV A EEI EO A A U

V UIO A A U A EEI UIO UIO EO

VI EO U EEI UIO UIO U UIO A A U EO U EEI EO U EEI A EEI

VII A EEI EO A A U EO U EEI EO U EEI EO EO U EEI UIO UIO EO A EEI EO A A U A EEI EO A A U UIO A A U

Each letter once again received its own motive. Repeated statements of motives were transformed using the process of *temurah*. In this technique, letters are substituted through rotating the alphabet. A common application of *temurah* is the *atabash* system, where the alphabet folds onto itself as we see here in English:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Z	Y	X	W	V	U	T	S	R	Q	P	O	N

When we substitute corresponding letters, A with Z, B with Y and so on, we can transform a familiar word into a magical invocation. For example, SAXOPHONE becomes HZCLKSLMV. To adapt this to music, I used a similar technique of folding the chromatic scale on itself in order to create dyadic pairs for note substitutions. In the first fold of the chromatic scale, C is replaced by B, C♯ by B♭ and so on. To create variety, in each subsequent appearance of the motive, the placement of the fold was rotated to a different point, thereby generating different substitutions as the piece progressed:[39]

[39] It is only necessary to work out the rotations starting on C to F because the rotations for the next six pitch classes, F♯ through B, repeat the same dyadic pairings. Any rotations related by tritone will be identical: C is substituted by B for the rotations starting on both C and F♯; C is substituted by C♯ for the rotations starting on C♯ and G, and so on.

I	C	C♯	D	E⁻	E	F
	B	B⁻	A	G♯	G	F♯

II	C♯	D	E⁻	E	F	F♯
	C	B	B⁻	A	G♯	G

III	D	E⁻	E	F	F♯	G
	C♯	C	B	B⁻	A	G♯

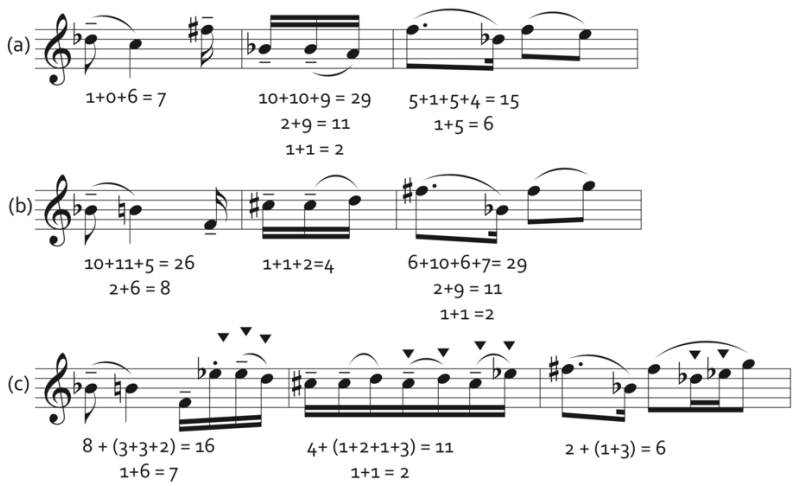
IV	Eb	E	F	F♯	G	G♯
	D	C♯	C	B	B⁻	A

V	E	F	F♯	G	G♯	A
	E⁻	D	C♯	C	B	B⁻

VI	F	F♯	G	G♯	A	B⁻
	E	E⁻	D	C♯	C	B

In this movement, *temurah* was combined with *gematria*. Each time a pitch class is substituted, it creates a new *gematria*-value for the given motive. As in the previous movement, pitches were added to the rotation to restore the transformed motive to its original numeric value. Example 4 shows the transformation process on the UIO motive. Example 4a shows the original motive and its *gematria*-value (determined measure by measure). Example 4b shows the new pitches that result from the *temurah*-substitution using the first rotation of the chromatic scale beginning on C (D⁻ becomes B⁻, C becomes B, F♯ becomes F, etc.), along with their new *gematria*-values. Example 4c shows the added pitches (again indicated by triangles) that restored the transformed motives to their original *gematria*-value.

Example 4



Algorithmic Composition

The musical results of these experiments can be heard by listening to the piece itself, but further reflection on the compositional process will lead us to a deeper understanding of issues related to theurgic music. On a strictly musical level, this system of embedding *voces mysticae* and Kabbalistic transformations into the music is a form of algorithmic composition. An algorithm is simply a set of rules to execute a procedure, so in this piece, the Kabbalah-inspired transformations we have discussed are the algorithms that generate the music. Once engaged, the algorithms churn out the musical material largely without concern for how they sound. Because of this, I had to wait to see how the rules played out, and it was something of a revelation to finally hear the whole piece. On a technical level, this was an effective, albeit tedious, way to generate a lot of music relatively quickly. A common criticism of algorithmic composition is that it is somehow not creative or is cheating because the composer does not decide every musical detail. While it is true that the composer surrenders some control of the musical events (even though I departed from the algorithms from time to time when it suited my purpose), I would argue that the creative act comes in setting up the initial algorithmic process and determining what material goes into it.

These factors can be controlled in such a way as to ensure that the musical results remain within the boundaries of traditional music, i.e., to keep the music within a regular periodic meter, a given key, and so forth. This was not the case here. Individual motives were not designed to align with traditional metric or pitch structures, but rather to create new ones. For example, the irregular rhythmic groups of the individual motives will never add up to a four-beat pattern or a regular alternation of strong and weak beats. Thus, the rhythms should be thought of as independent durations rather than as pulses that align with a regular metric pattern. Similarly, the pitches do not fit into a specific key or mode but freely range through the chromatic scale and occasionally even into microtones.[40] By allowing the algorithms to generate material beyond the confines of traditional structures rather than requiring the algorithms to stay within them, the transformations create new and sometimes unusually musical details. The unfamiliar sound structures that result from the algorithms may create an uncanny effect for many listeners. This makes the music a fitting realization of the enigmatic *voces mysticae* and contributes to its theurgic effect since unusual music, just like ritual, helps push us beyond our regular frames of reference.

Rules Without Meaning?

More can be said about the importance of following the compositional algorithms over guiding the musical results. While writing this piece, I discovered the work of the Vedic scholar Frits Staal which provided an interpretive lens for the project. Staal holds the provocative thesis that rituals are rules without meaning.[41] He claims that rituals are based exclusively on rules that control the order and execution of their component activities (vocalizations, postures, motions, and so forth). That is to say, rituals are nothing more than rules of syntax,

[40] Despite the inability to neatly categorize it, the pitch material does have a sense of centricity—the pitches move around a central note, a characteristic made explicit by a continuously sounding drone.

[41] Fritz Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen*, 26, fasc. 1 (Jun 1979): 2-22; "Ritual Syntax," in *Sanskrit and Indian Studies: Essays in Honor of Daniel H.H. Ingalls*, ed. M. Nagatomi, Bimal Krishna Matilal, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and E. Dimock (Reidel, 1980), 119-142; "The Search for Meaning: Mathematics, Music and Ritual," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 2, no. 4 (1984): 1-57; "Vedic Mantras," in *Understanding Mantras*, ed. Harvey P. Alper (State University of New York Press, 1989), 48-95; *Rules without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras, and the Human Sciences* (P. Lang, 1990).

and none of these rules have any semantic content—everything that happens in a ritual is a precisely choreographed, but altogether meaningless activity. Any symbolic content found in a ritual, according to Staal, was added later as an interpretation of its purely syntactic activity. This position is not without controversy. It clearly raises plenty of questions and its proper evaluation is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the emphasis his argument places on syntax and formal arrangement over content does provide insight into the nature of rituals as well as the composition in question. Indeed, Staal's description of ritual articulates the compositional approach I used to write this music. Following compositional algorithms amounted to following ritual syntax. In effect, in writing the piece, I performed my own musical ritual.

Furthermore, the main distinction between language and music is that language has semantics. Words mean something beyond themselves; they represent ideas, things, and concepts. Music does not do this—it has no semantics.[42] It is true that composers may assign specific meanings to certain passages. This is the basis of the leitmotif technique where themes are assigned to various characters or situations in an opera or film. Music may also use rhetorical devices based on conventional associations that suggest an affective response in the listener: low brass and percussion represent something scary, while high winds something pastoral as we hear in the leitmotifs for Mordor and the Shire in the *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack. In all of these cases, though, the semantic content of the music is unique to the work and is only confirmed by seeing the associated dramatic content. Music has nothing equivalent to the comprehensive system of representation that exists in language. Due to this absence of definable semantics music cannot be a language system. Rather, it is a syntax system.

[42] As Staal comments, "Music can convey so many different things because it has no meaning: there is no systematic relationship between its structured sounds and these many things." See Staal, "The Search for Meaning", 50. He also notes that music cannot represent the appearance of physical things in the same way representational art can (ibid., 31–34).

Still, music has a way of suggesting semantic meaning through its relationship to a musical system. If we hear musical events conform to the rules of the system, they become "meaningful"; but when they do not, they become "meaningless." We see this clearly in tonal music, our familiar system of major and minor scales and functional harmony (i.e., "normal music"). We can hear when certain material "fits" and when it does not. However, this is only the illusion of semantics. Our sense of meaning in these cases is based on rules for ordering the musical content that establishes well-formed or recognizable patterns—that is by its *syntax*.[43] I would argue that this tension between musical syntax and the *illusion* of semantic meaning is part of what gives music its impact. Music—all music from conventional to experimental—invokes our expectation for semantic content at the same time that it denies this expectation. A piece with unconventional musical content, like *Voces Mysticae*, exasperates this breakdown between syntax and semantic expectation.

Suspension of Semantics in *voces mysticae*

The incantational practice of *voces mysticae* extends this same tension between the anticipation and ultimate denial of semantic meaning to language. We recognize the incantations as words, look for their meaning, but, in the end, do not find it—or at least not a meaning available to the limited capacity of human reason.[44] This sensation is intensified with the *voces mysticae* because they resemble words so closely. But despite their linguistic appearance, I argue that the *voces mysticae* are in effect music—both are organized sounds without semantic content.

[43] Linguistic syntax is determined by speech-units as they are realized in time. Music similarly has syntactical relationships that unfold in time as melodic (horizontal) statements, but it also has harmonic (vertical) syntax that relates simultaneously sounding events. Furthermore, music can also shift whole syntactical units by moving them up or down in pitch in such a way that these units are not just emphasized (as in changes of vocal intonation) but are actually transformed. Thus, musical syntax exploits sound frequency to a much greater extent than does language.

[44] Staal sees this same impulse to create semantic meaning directed to ritual as a whole: "When faced with ritual, we find it unintelligible, and so we naturally assume that it should have hidden meaning." See Staal, "Ritual Syntax", 119.

This breakdown of meaning is essential to ritual. Linguistic semantics are fundamental to discursive-conceptual thought; after all, semantic meaning is the very mechanism through which concepts are defined. The *voces mysticae* subvert this relationship. The transformation of signifiers into sounds, of words into music that takes place in the *voces mysticae* begins to break down conceptual thought by undercutting its semantic foundation. This helps explain their role in ritual as a tool to transcend the limits of rational thought and open up more supra-rational modes of knowing, to enter Iamblichus' unknowing receptivity. Similarly, by focusing on actions (that may or may not make sense to us) over meaning (as defined by rational concepts), ritual activates mystical states that move past the limits of discursive thought.

If rituals really are rules without meaning, it seems that the Neoplatonists and Kabbalists understood and developed methods to cultivate the profound psycho-spiritual effect of syntax, patterns, and transformations in and of themselves, independent of their meaning or content. Action, it would seem, supersedes knowledge as a means of encountering the gods. The Kabbalists thought that the transformation of words had contemplative value. Even though the Kabbalistic transformations in the music are essentially inaudible, those relationships are still present, and they are working in the background. The impact of the piece seems to come less from the musical ideas themselves and more from the syntactical and transformational relationships that created them. My guess is that if I changed the musical themes but still followed the same rules—thereby preserving the same relationships between the parts while changing what those relationships sounded like—the music would still have a similar effect. This gives some credibility to Staal's idea that the rules of a ritual are more important than the meaning of a ritual.

To the extent that my piece *Voces Mysticae* is successful, it is due to its focus on syntactical elements and their innate effect, rather than on melodic content or emotional expressiveness, as is customary in most music. Although instrumental music is obviously not able to "pronounce" the divine names, it can still participate in their formal qualities, patterns, and transformations by embedding these into the musical structure. Whether we ultimately

understand the effects of focusing on syntax as spiritual, mystical, or purely psychological is of little consequence and will largely be dependent on one's personal worldview and understanding of consciousness. What is more important is that these transformations provide tangible musical techniques that amount to a procedure for redirecting the mind, however the idea of mind may be conceived.

Practice

The above findings are certainly anecdotal, even personal, but perhaps the personal element is the point. Musicologist Phil Ford explains that "Magical hermeneutics is a technology for experiencing your own experience."[45] He argues that music is one such technology but focuses on the importance of creative experience over the created artifact. He considers event scores, a type of avant-garde piece, which provide written instructions for certain actions, both musical as well as non-musical. In effect, these pieces are rituals based on Staal's definition of ritual as patterned activities. Such pieces do not result in reproduceable musical artifacts, nor can they be encapsulated in a score. They are based on a "logic of participation" that exists only in the ephemeral moment of their execution.[46] These works are only meaningful for those who partake in the experience, or as Ford's describes it, for those who are initiated by them. The experience is, "only incidentally and at second hand for anyone else who might have stumbled upon it."[47] He compares this to the amateur musician who, despite the certainty they can never rise to the level of the professional, still finds personal value, even transcendence in their flawed musical workings. The point once again is not the artifact, but the personal practice—the creative action over the created object.

We see the same idea of practice in Charles Stang's conclusions about the writings of the Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Stang argues the author did not write pseudepigraphic works under the name Dionysius to gain doctrinal authority but did so as

[45] Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 209.

[46] Ibid., 213.

[47] Ibid., 215.

part of a spiritual discipline.[48] The author used the practice of writing itself as an ascetic act designed to extinguish their own identity—to create a self beyond the self, which mirrors the notion of the apophatic God, a God beyond God. The persona of Dionysius was chosen for his proximity to the Apostle Paul, who in turn served as an intermediary between the author and Christ. Writing under the assumed identity of Dionysius collapses time, allowing the author to interact with these historical figures. In this way, the act of writing is no longer about communication or the preservation of information but becomes a performative spiritual practice. The text serves as the container for and the byproduct of that practice.

Similarly, it may be that the real point of composing *Voces Mysticae* was simply the act of composing it. In the end, what I found most interesting about this project was the effect working with these materials had on me. Shuffling letters and pitches around on the page produced an unexpected meditative quality, perhaps much as the original theurgists and Kabbalists intended their techniques to have. I cannot say that I experienced an altered state of consciousness, but there was a certain shift from rational or goal-directed consciousness toward a kind of alert calmness, a bit like one might experience when drawing a mandala or doing Tai Chi. This has something to do with focusing on syntax, on patterns and transformations at the exclusion of musical or semantic content. This is something of an ironic situation. A compositional process based more on non-musical, often numerical calculations rather than on sounding relationships might be expected to intensify rational linear thinking. For me, this was not the case. Following my self-imposed compositional rules became a technique to detach myself from expectations, desires, and rhetorical goals, and experience a certain sense of flow. *Voces Mysticae* has found its place in the concert hall much more than in a ritual context. Perhaps both are only secondary concerns in comparison to the creative practice itself.

[48] Charles M. Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No Longer I"* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

To return to my original question about how to create anagogic music, perhaps all this suggests that one path lies less in following traditional musical styles or even using specific musical content (certain tunes, themes, and so on), and instead on finding musical processes based on ritual syntax that free us from the familiar sense of conventional musical meaning. Syntax and transformation, then, are compelling entry points to explore music's anagogical potential. Regardless of what direction is chosen, pursuing a personal musical practice is critical. In my practice of following the formal, syntactical model of the *voces mysticae* and the Kabbalah, I have attempted to create music that is not just inspired by the idea of theurgy, but one that embodies ritual structures within the sounding music—and shapes the compositional practice itself. In this way, performing the piece *Voces Mysticae* helps transform a concert into an imagined theurgic ritual. In so doing, my hope is that the performance can induce the same initiatory-effect of more formal rituals in both the audience and myself.

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