

ROLE-PLAY AND INVARIANCE –

TWO ASPECTS OF RITUAL IN ROGER SMALLEY’S *CEREMONY II*

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ABSTRACT

In Roger Smalley’s *Ceremony I* the performers move about the stage in an austere choreography that is both integral to the musical form and rich with ritualistic connotations, the ensemble of percussion instruments further suggesting the primitivism of an ancient rite. In stark contrast, *Ceremony II* and *III* show almost no signs of this overt physicality or preference for non-pitched instruments, and represent a performance style and instrumental bias more typical of Western concert music. Without the element of theatricality, the relationship of these pieces to their titles must be judged primarily in terms of the musical content. Devices such as repetition, symmetry, instrumental theatre, and non-developmental structures are conspicuous throughout the works, and can be seen to represent the ritualistic characteristics of role-play and invariance. This paper will examine the ritualism that informs the *Ceremony* series, and, through an analysis of *Ceremony II*, consider the relationship between these two specific aspects of ritual and the compositional devices through which they are evoked.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CEREMONY WORKS

The English-Australian composer Roger Smalley composed the chamber and solo-instrumental works *Ceremony I*, *Ceremony II*, and *Flute Variations (Ceremony III)* in the period between 1986 and 1990, among several other significant compositions. These were the only works written by Smalley to carry the *Ceremony* title, and thus one might assume some stylistic common ground or symbolic links. There is, however, scarce commentary available as to how one might perceive the aspects that define the works as being a series.

In ‘Working with Chopin’ (1996), Smalley makes a distinction between two streams of his artistic output in the period 1986-1994. The article is primarily an analysis of the works *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, *Piano Trio*, and *Poles Apart*, all of which are based on material derived from Chopin’s *marzukas*. In a postlude, however, *The Southland*, *Ceremony II*, *Diptych (Homage to Brian Blanchflower)*, *Music for an Imaginary Ballet*, and *Chimera* (all from the same period) are discussed, notably in the ways in which they differ in style and construction from the first group. Smalley notes that the Chopin-based works are cast in ‘classical’ formal structures, inhabit traditional Western sound-worlds and

‘naturally tend towards a functional use of harmony’ (albeit shaped by the ubiquitous serial technique employed by Smalley), while the latter group tend towards ‘ritualistic sectional structures’, and exhibit non-Western (South-East Asian, Indian, Japanese, and Australian Aboriginal) influences through a more exotic instrumentation/orchestration, and static harmony. By association of their titles, it could be reasonably assumed that *Ceremony I* and *III* would form part of the latter group, and the omission of *Ceremony I* is likely due to its composition being prior to the period under discussion. *Ceremony III*, however, does fall within this period, and its exclusion is telling – stylistically, it is far less representative of such overt exotic influences.

While there is much scope for an examination of the influence that non-Western instrumentation, textures and harmony had upon the works above, the inconsistency of such influence across the *Ceremony* series means that in seeking a common conceptual basis, we might be better served investigating the ways a broader, more universal idea of ritual shapes the works. In this light, the following discussion will investigate the ways in which the aforementioned sectional structures and other formal features can be seen to represent the ritualism implied in the titles of the *Ceremony* series, and hence set the works apart from Smalley’s more classically influenced output.

A cursory glance at the instrumentation of each of these pieces reveals a significant disparity in the musical resources presented by each ensemble/instrument: *Ceremony I* is scored for percussion quartet, with the majority of the work played on non-pitched or indefinitely pitched instruments; *Ceremony II* for Pierrot ensemble¹ with pitched percussion; and *Ceremony III* for solo flute. At the outer extremes of this disparity are the solo flute and percussion ensemble, radically different in terms of sonic palette, technique, and the very nature of their respective declamatory styles. Additionally, at first inspection the movement structures of each of the works appear to have little in common aside from being continuous (see Figure 1).

But perhaps the most striking point of individual differentiation within the series is the performance presentation of the works. *Ceremony I* requires the musicians to perform a strict choreography that is both integral to the musical structure and highly evocative of the ritualistic implications of the title. By contrast, the

¹ Flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano.

	Instrumentation	Movement structure
<i>Ceremony I</i>	- Percussion ensemble (primarily non-pitched)	6 continuous movements, each restricted to one or two instrument families
<i>Ceremony II</i>	- Flute/piccolo - Bb/Eb/bass clarinets - Violin - Cello - Piano - Vibraphone/marimba/ tuned drums	3 continuous movements, all instrument families appear in all movements
<i>Ceremony III</i>	- Solo Flute	Single movement

Figure 1. Overview of the *Ceremony* series

second and third pieces contain no such predetermined physicality (with the exception of an instruction in *Ceremony III* for the performer to remain still after the final note) (1990). Thus, while *Ceremony I* could be seen quite literally as an actual, physical ceremony or ritual, the other works require the listener to derive any ritual associations from the music alone. Such disparities mean that in order to draw connections between the works one must look beyond some of the more literal representations of a ceremony.

Smalley himself has offered little commentary on the implications of the titles. The programme notes for *Ceremony I* inform the audience that the “title and the ritualistic aspects of the piece have no specific connotations, but are intended to awake personal associations in individual listeners” (1994b, p.108). As elusive as this statement is, Smalley’s programme notes for *Ceremony II* and *III* offer the concert-goer/listener still less insight as to the intent of their evocative titles.

Considering the ambiguity (even absence) of programmatic or narrative intent, the constructivism typical of Smalley’s oeuvre, and the theatricality (actual or implied) of the *Ceremony* works individually or as a series, it could be argued that there are many perspectives from which one might discern ritualistic behaviours within their conception and realisation. Indeed, after examining the existing literature on ritualism it could be possible to analyse any given piece of music through this prism.²

In studying the scores and recordings of the *Ceremony* works and Smalley’s various writings, however, two traits representative of ritual action emerge as being prevalent throughout the series, and give shape to the sectional structures and other ritualistic formal elements: *role-play*, represented by instrumental and thematic characterisation achieved through simultaneous and successive contrast, and *invariance*, represented by

² Eduardo de la Fuente writes that “especially before the advent of sound, all musical experience was ritual to the extent that it required a formal assembly of some type by musicians and audience” (2011, p.89). Fritz Staal goes even further by equating the very nature of music itself with ritual by virtue of being syntactic and structural but lacking a semantic system necessary to communicate meaning (1984).

repetition and symmetry (in the form of palindromic pitch/rhythmic structures).³ A significant body of literature has shown us how such traits definitively shape similarly themed works in the music of Smalley’s predecessors and contemporaries, and following these examples I aim to frame the ritualism of the *Ceremony* series through the musical manifestations of role-play and invariance integral to the works.

While all three works can be readily examined in these terms, *Ceremony II* will be analysed in this paper in preference to *I* and *III* for the following reasons:

- *Ceremony I* has previously been subjected to a thorough analysis by Paul Tanner, in which similar ritualistic traits are noted (1994)
- A significant proportion of *Ceremony III* is comprised of thematic material from the first movement of *Ceremony II*, material which will be analysed below in terms of role-play

As Smalley himself has noted, the constructivism of serial music (which informs the vast majority of his output) is well suited to the rigour of ritual (1967). However, the analysis to follow will attempt to illuminate the structural ritualism of these works in more general terms, with little reference to serial procedures per se. In doing so I aim to avoid generalising serialism as the driving force for the ritualism of the *Ceremony* works, a generalisation that would position almost all of Smalley’s work as ritualistic. Additionally, I hope that these broader terms might provide a basis for future analyses of ritualistic works in other styles.

2. RITUALISM IN CONTEXT

Many composers in the twentieth century, particularly from the 1960’s onwards, have taken ceremonial proceedings or ritual as a conceptual basis for musical compositions. As in *Ceremony I*, the most direct way to convey such notions is in the form of physical theatre, but it is still possible to imbue a non-theatrical work with a sense of ritual through purely musical means:

The drama, the ceremonial, in these cases is derived from the internal structure of the music, often involving a high degree of repetition, and from the implied roles played by the instruments within that structure (Cross, 1998, p.149)

Instrumental role-play (Cross’s term) can appear in numerous forms. For example, a composer might individualize the character of instruments and their respective material so as they can be clearly set in dialogue or opposition to one another, or reserve a particular sound or gesture to function as a signal, its role made clear by a combination of repetition, restricted

³ In this paper the term ‘invariance’ is used to denote a group of musical processes (repetition, symmetry) that may evoke notions of ritualism, and will be described further below. This usage is distinct from that of 12-tone or set theory, i.e. invariance after operation (transposition, inversion, etc.) (Griffiths, 2015).

function, and singularity. Jonathan Harvey describes how Stockhausen (a significant early mentor of Smalley's)⁴ employs the latter device in his work *Telemusik*:

The *Keisu*, the principal metal plate chime instrument used in Buddhist ceremonies to demarcate sections in a way similar to that in which the Catholic sanctus bell is used, divides the works into three sections (1975, p.101)

Furthering the ritualistic effect of instrumental role-play in many such works are large-scale structural features, and in particular sectional, non-developmental-forms. Such forms often evoke a sense of antiphony through an alternating succession of distinct and non-continuous sections, delineated by contrasted instrumentation and musical material. These formal structures have an innate ability to convey the impression of verse/refrain, call/response, leader/congregation, or actor/public interactions common to the ceremonial or ritual traditions of many cultures, and have been employed in various guises by many significant 20th century composers, including Stravinsky (*Symphonies of Wind Instruments*), Messiaen (*Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*) and Boulez (*Rituel*).⁵ These works, and by extension others with similar structures, are described by Cross as constituting a non-narrative, non-developmental music, in which the continual return to previously stated material represents a kind of stasis analogous with the timelessness of ritual (1998, p.149-51). This can be seen as a kind of higher-level structural role-play.

In an article written as a tribute to Stravinsky, Smalley himself drew attention to such features in the music of the elder composer, specifically *Threni*, for solo singers, chorus, and orchestra:

It is ritualistic in the deepest sense, not because of its superficially ritualistic gestures ... but because the sense of monumentality is built into the whole musical fabric. A ritualistic form is one whose course is inevitable, something very difficult to achieve without recourse to an historical form. But Stravinsky achieves it with impressive success in *Threni*, particularly in the second part, 'De Elegia Tertia'. Here the form is an inexorable unfolding of a single structural idea. There are three bass solos, three canons à 2, three canons à 3, and three canons à 4, each canon and solo being prefaced by a Hebrew letter, all identically scored for women's voices in two parts and three trombones. Such is the simplicity of the form that the listener knows exactly where he stands in relation to it at any given point. In other words the music has become totally undramatic and genuinely ritualistic. (1967, p.22) (see Figure 2)

Despite this article being written over twenty years before the composition of *Ceremony I*, the characteristics that Smalley points out as being integral to the success of Stravinsky's ritualistic music also play a defining role in the *Ceremony* works.

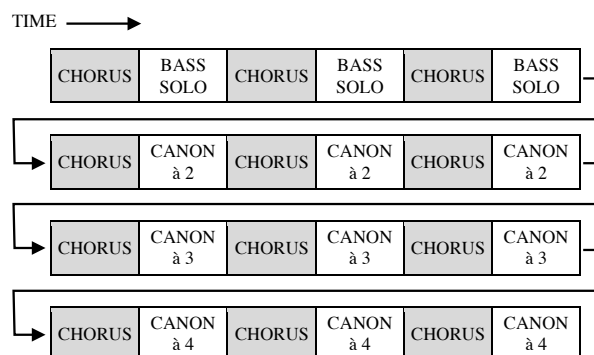


Figure 2. Structure of 'De Elegia Tertia' from *Threni*

In *Threni*, Smalley's notion of a 'ritualistic form...whose course is inevitable' is achieved through the systematic reiteration of strongly characterized and clearly demarcated sections, and indeed for the listener to perceive this kind of structural role-play a degree of repetition, implying inevitability, is unquestionably necessary. Inevitability can also be seen in the symmetries (intrinsically certain and fixed in their form) of Stravinsky's music that Cross describes as being 'ideally matched to the presentation of ritual', representing a transcendently repetitive, non-narrative, collective expression, distinct from romantic notions of naturalism and individualism (1996).⁶ Symmetries, in the form of palindromes, are conspicuous throughout the *Ceremony* series.

In summary, it is through instrumental and structural *role-play* that Smalley and other composers are able to convey a sense of ritualistic action, both in the implication of individual actors through thematic characterization, and collective interactions such as signalling and antiphony. This implied role-play is enabled and clarified by pattern-forming, repetitious qualities that will be referred to henceforth as being symptomatic of *invariance*, one of six characteristics of ritual behaviour listed by religious studies scholar Catherine Bell (2009, p.139-64). Further, large-scale invariance is employed in such works to suggest monumental inevitability through sectional form involving verse/refrain-type interactions, and palindromic pitch/rhythmic structures (symmetry).

⁴ Of all Stockhausen's students, 'it appears to have been Smalley who embraced the most trumpeted techniques of Stockhausen with the greatest enthusiasm' (Mark, 2012, p.114)

⁵ With regards to the antiphonic structure of *Rituel*, Jonathan Goldman has noted that the 'religious...connotation of this form was fully intended by Boulez' (2011, p.102).

⁶ It should be noted here that while suggestions of individual actors through instrumental role-play are discussed in this paper, in these instances the acts of the individual are defined by their relationship with the collective.

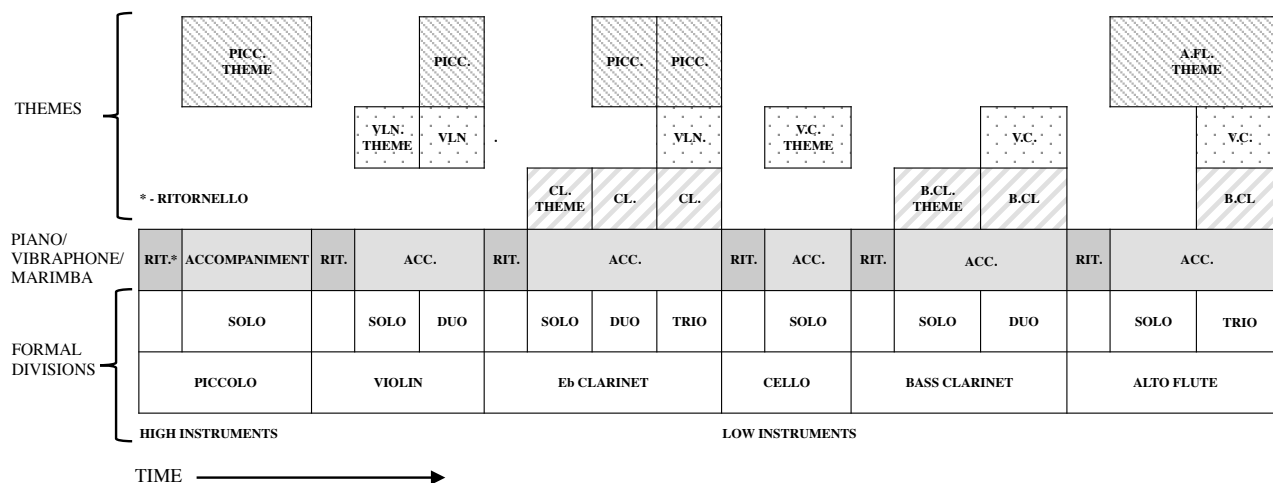


Figure 3. Structure of *Ceremony II*, Movement I

3. ROLE-PLAY IN *CEREMONY II*

The instrumentation of the second work in the series lends itself to a multitude of implied role-playings by virtue of the broad timbral palette of the Pierrot ensemble. This particular scoring enables an abundance of both homogenous and contrasting instrumental combinations, the possibilities expanded further in *Ceremony II* through doubling within instrument families (flute/piccolo, clarinet/soprano clarinet/bass clarinet) and the addition of percussion.⁷ Smalley exploits these possibilities in a great many ways towards the service of ritualism throughout the three movements, but possibly most effectively in the first.

Movement I is divided into two independent halves—characterized by high, and then low register instruments—which are further divided into three sections. In these sections, previously unheard instruments are introduced by a ‘ritornello of loud bell-like chords on piano and vibraphone’ (from Smalley’s programme notes, though the marimba takes the part of the vibraphone in the last three sections) (1994a, p.110). Following the appearance of a new instrument, the previous instruments re-join the ensemble in the order they appeared, forming duos and trios, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Immediately we can discern three forms of role-play: the contrast of high vs. low register instruments, the signalling of new instruments by the bell-like chords, and the suggestion of the individual significance of each of the instruments via their solo entries. But Smalley employs yet further measures to enhance the individuality of these solos. Each instrument is allotted a theme with a unique tempo, time signature/phrase length, central pitch, interval, and articulation, imparting a distinct and singular characterization (Figures 4 and 5).⁸ When combined in duos and trios, this degree of

contrast means that the instruments and their respective themes retain independence, and Smalley’s note in the score that the synchronization of the various parts is approximate reveals this as an intentional plan. The vertical relationships are unimportant, with the focus being on the simultaneous action of the individual characters.

Despite this resolute thematic independence, a closer examination of motivic design reveals a significant shared feature amongst the themes that comprise each half of the movement. The piccolo, violin and E flat clarinet themes each conclude with a similar gesture, comprising a semiquaver figure and crescendo (Figure 4). These figures are brought into synchronization (though the tempi are still different) at the end of the first half through an instruction to wait for the other instruments to reach their respective figure, before ending abruptly on an accented fortissimo. The combined semiquavers and crescendo mark the point of highest density and dynamic—the central climax of the movement.

The bass clarinet and cello interact in a similar way in the second half, but where the high instruments came together in climax, the endings of the low instruments’ themes are marked by a reduction in density and dynamic (Figure 5).⁹ As these theme endings coincide—their diminution echoed by the piano and vibraphone/marimba—they effect a fading out, or dying away, a combined gesture that acts as a resting point from which the serene second movement emerges. In both halves the themes have served to first individualise, then unite the players in their purpose—a dual role-play.

⁷ ‘On the whole, the Pierrot model offered composers the opportunity to explore individual character’ (Cross, p.143)

⁸ Several numerical patterns and correlations can be found between the characteristics shown here, such as phrase length – interval, but this is

a treatment common to much of Smalley’s work and not unique to his ritualistic compositions. (Smalley, 1994, p.69)

⁹ The alto flute plays a slightly different role here in its longer, lament-like theme.

PICCOLO (8vb)

♩ = 132

ff *f*

sf-p *p* *p sub. cresc.* *ff*

ff *f*

sf-p *p* *p sub. cresc.* *ff*

VIOLIN

♩ = 120

f *continuous gliss.* *ff* *f* *ff*

f *ff* *f* *ff*

f *ff* *f* *ff*

f *ff*

E♭ CLARINET

♩ = 108

pp *ff* *pp* *ff* *f* *sf-p* *ff* *f*

p *f* *ff* *f*

pp *ff* *pp* *ff* *f* *sf-p* *ff* *f*

ff *f*

Figure 4. High instrument themes, Mvt. I

CELLO

$\text{♩} = 128$

BASS CLARINET

$\text{♩} = 84$

etc. sempre stacc.

ALTO FLUTE

$\text{♩} = 72$

Figure 5. Low instrument themes, Mvt. I

As in the first movement, the piano and vibraphone share a role in the second movement of *Ceremony II*. However, whereas their previous function was one of demarcation and signalling, here they lead the music in a gently undulating broken chord, which over two minutes expands and contracts before the other instruments gradually enter, further extending the chord. Once again, high and low melody instruments are grouped together, this time in pairs: violin and flute; cello and bass clarinet. While it can be said that this is another instance of role-play, symmetry has a greater ritualistic significance in this movement, and will be discussed below in the context of invariance.

Smalley describes the third movement as a ‘vigorous, rondo like finale’ (1994a, 110), and here the tuned drums introduce the other instruments, playing a role similar to

that of the piano/vibraphone in the first movement, while quite different in execution. Motivic material for cello, violin, clarinet, flute and piano is individually characterized in various subdivisions of a regular crotchet pulse: quavers, quaver triplets, semiquavers, semiquaver quintuplets and semiquaver triplets, respectively. The tuned drums herald the solo entries of these instruments with a statement in the subdivision to follow, before engaging in a hoquet-like dialogue, in which the newly introduced instrument progressively supersedes the drums in claiming the greater share of the notes available in the bar (Figure 7). As in the first movement, the previously introduced instruments re-join the ensemble one by one, the drums again heralding their successive individual reappearances with a statement in each instrument’s characteristic subdivision. While the

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system features a Cello part on a single staff and a Tuned Drums part on a second staff. The Cello part begins with a long note followed by a series of rhythmic patterns. The Tuned Drums part consists of a steady, interlocking rhythmic pattern. The second system features a Flute part on a single staff and a Tuned Drums part on a second staff. The Flute part includes several passages marked with a '5' (quintuplets) and a final long note. The Tuned Drums part continues with its rhythmic pattern, also featuring quintuplets.

Figure 6. Hocket-like dialogues, Mvt. III, rehearsal A and F

regular pulse and interlocking parts unite the players in a frenzied, dance-like way, the characterization of motivic material and prominence given to new entries once again highlights the uniqueness of the individual actor, allowed to stand apart before being inevitably subsumed into the choreography of the collective.

4. INVARIANCE IN *CEREMONY II*

Smalley's perception of ritual inevitability in *De Elegia Tertia* from Stravinsky's *Threni* was informed by the methodical unfolding of its sectional form, an almost arbitrary pattern of addition and alternation (as shown in Figure 2). While differing greatly in immediate aural impression from this work, the structure of the first movement of *Ceremony II* exhibits a similar sense of uncompromising formal deliberation. In Figure 3 we can clearly see the systematic framework in which the six instrumental themes are set, ordering and contextualizing their inherent individualities.

The ceremonial symbolism of bells and bell-like sounds is almost unavoidable, and the clamorous opening chord of *Ceremony II*, performed by the piano and vibraphone, strikes the listener as an announcement of arrival or a call to action. As the movement progresses, its role is made even more clear, beyond immediate associations, by the way in which it functions

in relation to the other instruments. As well as functioning as a ritornello, demarcating the broader structure and announcing the arrival of new themes (illustrated in Figure 3), the chords in fact introduce not only the solos but the duos and trios as well, meaning that no single structural event is unheralded. Each instrument is allotted a chord that, while similarly voiced to the others, reflects the central pitch of its theme, and after the initial solo every subsequent reappearance of a given theme in duo and trio is marked by this chord, signalling its return. Such invariance of function, as both ritornello and thematic herald, grants the chords the ability to act as a universal symbol of change.

The segregation of high and low instruments in the two halves is, in part, a matter of practicality—the doubling by the piccolo/flute and Eb clarinet/bass clarinet players means that all instruments could not be heard at once. There is, however, no practical reason that the cello could not be involved in the first half, nor the violin in the second, perhaps in support of the piano/vibraphone accompaniment or some other secondary role, taking full advantage of the ensemble's resources. It is clear that this unyielding commitment to segregation is intended to reinforce the role-play of the individual themes and the delineation of the form into two halves that, despite an extremely similar internal plan, are of a markedly different character.

The musical score for Figure 7 consists of four systems of staves for Vibraphone (Vib.) and Piano (Pno.).

- System 1:** Tempo $\text{♩} = 72$. Vib. part starts with *pp* and includes *poco a poco accel.* and *poco a poco cresc.* markings. Pno. part also starts with *pp* and includes *poco a poco cresc.*.
- System 2:** Continues the acceleration. A central bar features a double-headed arrow labeled "AXIS OF SYMMETRY" and a dynamic marking of *mf* for both instruments.
- System 3:** Includes markings *poco a poco rall.* and *poco a poco dim.* for both instruments.
- System 4:** Returns to tempo $\text{♩} = 72$ and ends with a dynamic marking of *pp* for both instruments.

Figure 7. Palindromic piano/vibraphone duo, mvt. II, rehearsal C

The way these features cause the structure to unfold in an arbitrary, formal manner gives the movement a sense of non-narrative symbolism, a ritual quality of the first degree.

Movement II is described by Smalley as ‘meditative in character’, a quality that arises from a process very different from that of the strict, yet visceral, first movement. Whereas Movement I was characterised by clearly delineated events, here the music rises and falls in successive and then simultaneous waves (Smalley’s term) enacted by the three duos: piano/vibraphone, violin/flute, cello/bass clarinet. Each duo plays a tempo independent from the others, and the individuals within the duos move between various states of rhythmic alignment while following a similar sequence of pitches. Smalley’s performance note asks the performers to play with rubato, imparting upon the work a flexible and improvisatory effect (1989). This multi-level non-synchronicity gives the movement a floating, static quality—a meditation of sorts.

This sense of unhurried temporal freedom, however, is in no small part the result of strict process. Within the duos, each of the two parts is almost exactly symmetrical, progressing from states of slow tempo, low rhythmic density, narrow tessitura and quiet dynamic, to

faster tempo, higher density, wider tessitura and louder dynamic, before returning to the original state in reverse order. Figure 8 demonstrates this process in the piano and vibraphone duo. Examining each part individually, if we trace a path simultaneously from both ends of the example towards the central axis of symmetry, we can see that the sequence of pitches and durations is identical (with the exception of the central bar, where the two instruments share a palindrome). The other duos are similarly constructed. Cross’s ritualistic symmetries are employed here in a way which imparts a sense of hypnotic, rote acting out—invariance—and these palindromes perhaps stand as an analogy for the mantras used to focus and clear one’s mind in some types of meditation.

5. CONCLUSION

Instrumental role-play is central not only to internal dialogues and characterization but the very structure of *Ceremony II*. The six sections of the first movement are defined by the appearance of a new instrument and reinforced by the bell-like ritornello of the piano and vibraphone; the third movement echoes this announcement of new instrumental actors with the

drums playing the role of herald. The perception of such role-play is enabled by degrees of invariance in the external appearance and structural function of the individual and collective actors. Also symptomatic of invariance are ritualistic processes such as verse/refrain type alternation, and symmetries such as we have seen in the palindromic, wave-like duos of Movement II. Thus we see role-play and invariance, as aspects of ritual, representing a conceptual basis for *Ceremony II*. The influence these traits have had upon compositions by Smalley's predecessors is also clear, and suggests the possibility for similar analyses in works over a broad range of composers and styles, identifying ritualistic behaviour in musical form and function.

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