

“12 violin pieces” (2007, revised 2015) by Nick Gray

“12 Violin Pieces” are a set of short pieces I originally wrote in 2007 and modified in 2015, working with the violinist Lyrit Milgram and choreographer Ni Made Pujawati while adapting the pieces for the Indonesian story “Bawang Merah Bawang Putih”.

These pieces were all conceived together, so although there was originally no overall storyline, they could create a kind of narrative structure, which I’ve tried to outline below. Piece 6 was designed to be in four parts (6.1, 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4), which could theoretically be played in any order, so the cycle could be said to consist of 15 rather than 12 pieces. The audio recording features violinist Lyrit Milgram and was recorded by Jeremy Glasgow of the SOAS AV Department in the SOAS recording studio on 7th March 2016. The vocalist in piece 6.1 is Rachel Wilcox.

Stylistic diversity within a set of miniatures was one of the guiding principles of composing these: some rely on minimalist techniques, others on earlier atonal styles of composition and, as a whole set, are perhaps reminiscent of Howard Skempton’s piano works, which likewise explore and experiment with style. Balinese techniques and aesthetics do form part of this stylistic palette. Mostly this lies at a deeper level than that of overt techniques, though I could point to the repeated ostinato of pieces 9 and 10, as owing much to the *batél* riffs of Balinese *gendér wayang*, used for dramatic action and conflict scenes within the shadow puppet play.

In terms of composition-based research, the pieces were some of my earliest attempts to work simultaneously within a Western experimental tradition and that of Balinese gamelan composition. The links to the latter helped to create the groundwork for the collaboration with choreographer and dancer Ni Madé Pujawati. Finding a storyline is fundamental to Balinese dance choreography and the first question Ni Madé asked me when I proposed the project was: “what is the story?” I began to perceive an outline as follows:

Pieces 1-3 set the scene.

Pieces 4-5: disintegration sets in

Piece 6: a testing out of four ideas, parables or choices

Piece 7 and 8 set a new scene

Pieces 9-10 dramatic conflict or climax

Pieces 11-12: peace, resolution

This was enough for Ni Madé to start considering story lines, and she decided that the pan-Indonesia fairy tale, “Bawang Merah Bawang Putih” fitted this outline well. I discuss details of this dance project elsewhere so, here, I will provide a brief description of individual pieces.

Piece 1 starts with an elegiac, slow passage then an animated minimalist section.

Piece 2 is short, driving and double-stopped nearly throughout, being built around each open string in turn.

Piece 3 is slow, empty and again double-stopped, alternating passages with 4 beats and 5 beats.

Piece 4 has a disintegrated feel in more atonal style.

Piece 5 maintains the abstract, disconnected feel of piece 4. I felt the piece to be like someone finding a mouthorgan and tentatively trying out notes.

Piece 6 is in four parts, which could be played in any order. These are like processions that each end in some kind of transformation (at the time of composing, I was working on a dramatic work around the medieval tale of Barlam and Josaphat, and some of this material was related to that project).

6.1 – the violinist (or someone else) sings and hums in counterpoint

6.2 – in triple dance-like time with a transformation to more static feel in the middle

6.3 – rapid opening suddenly transforming to a very still open second half

6.4 – again, starts fast and furious, before halving speed once and then halving speed again.

Piece 7 is a minimalist rhythmic piece.

Piece 8 is similar 6.2 in its triple time. Two musical ideas are folded together so they emerge in alternation.

Piece 9 builds up like fighting scenes in Balinese shadow puppetry. It is rhythmic and dynamic, and links straight into the next piece without a break.

Piece 10 takes the intensity of the previous piece to a higher level, again with ostinato patterns derived from fighting music in Balinese puppetry.

Piece 11 provides a complete change of mood, to stillness, resolution of conflict, and peace.

Piece 12 is a farewell piece in a reflective, nostalgic folk-inflected style.