

Case study of my piece *100 Springtimes*

Abstract. The chamber piece *100 Springtimes* (2014) for viola, clarinet and piano marks a personal hallmark in a decade of the development of my composition system. The system is based both on Messianesque belief in certain qualities of chord sets and the jazz-like view toward the tonal organization. In this paper I unfold my personal approach to the composition process that unintentionally echoes neo-Riemannian theory and its Tonnetz. In this paper, I unfold my approach to the composition process. In addition, I present the ethnographic evidence of influences and inspirations that contributed to the development of the system and its function in the piece *100 Springtimes*.

Keywords: music composition system, binarics, Codex Ioannis, Chord of Chords, belief, synaesthesia, ideasthesia, jazz, neo-Riemannian theory, Tonnetz.

Through my early years of music composition studies, one of my main objectives of personal development as an artist and as a composer, in particular, was the quest for a personal composition system or language, one might say. The idiosyncratic codex of dos and don'ts in musical composition began crystallizing itself almost unnoticed. I would regard myself more as a composer of an improvisatory or chaotic nature rather than one that carefully crafts the rules of sonic interplay and sincerely obeys them. Almost every time I did try to establish a pre-compositional system or an algorithm, they failed to survive upon a first encounter with reality. They failed but did not collapse. The creative result then became a mix of precomposed spare parts and intuitive decisions.

I now relate this approach to my involvement in jazz in my teenage years. John Mehegan's theoretical fundamentals (Mehegan 1974), Jamey Aebersold's framework of bebop scales (Aebersold 2015), George Russell's "Lydian chromatic concept of tonal organization" (Russell 1959), and Alan Phillips's mystic chords were all tested, all played. However, it was not before my composition studies at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, and especially the class of music theory under Prof. Rimantas Janeliauskas, that I started to develop my composition system, which, as mentioned earlier, was evolving almost unconsciously. We will get back to jazz in a moment, but let me draw your attention to some theoretical concepts that influenced the development of *de mon langage musical* (no pun intended).



Picture 1. Rimantas Janeliauskas after the concert of the conference *Principles of Music Composing*.
Photo by Jonas Jurkūnas

Professor Janeliauskas introduced us, young composers, to his theory of the Lithuanian polyphonic chants called *sutartinės* (Janeliauskas 2001). The theory states that these chants are closely related to pagan religion and the way people saw the reality of those times. That religion or ideology is based on the notion of two worlds—this one and the one beyond. This one is the one we all live in, while the one beyond is the one where our ancestors and gods live. The driving force of this concept is friction—friction between two poles, two worlds. In the same manner, Janeliauskas explained the friction between minor and/or major seconds in the *sutartinės*, which results from two closely situated melodic thirds. That binary concept also houses a quaternion of four types of such friction, but we will not dive into details here. To this day I

am a sincere follower of this concept. Partly because I am deeply convinced that it resonates closely with the semiotic square developed by Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas Julius Greimas. The Greimas square is formed through the opposition of concepts, which can be easily applied to Janeliauskas's binary theory in music.

As Janeliauskas continued to build a theory around his binary concept, he introduced us to the concept of monary structures. This approach is based upon monotheistic religion, especially Christianity, and its musical evolution. The monary concept is grounded in one main tone, the same way monotheistic religion is based on one God. In this way, it is not difficult to travel from tenor / *fnalis* to sonata form.

Enter the twentieth century. Through the ripe flourishing and disintegration of late romanticism and the advance of serial techniques, we notice the emergence of mixed compositional approaches that involve archaic compositional archetypes—the binary concept included. One of the most fascinating examples may be identified in Béla Bartók's music. Bartók is a separate colossal topic. However, I would like to mention the Axis

system by Ernő Lendvai (Lendvai 1971). To me, it is an elegant example of how functional harmony can be expanded by altering or even substituting the usual concepts of a triad and major-minor system. In a similar manner to how John Cage proposed to broaden the dichotomy of consonance and dissonance by including the whole spectrum from silence to noise, Bartók (or Lendvai for that matter) replaces tonic, dominant and subdominant triads with sets of octatonic scales spaced in the same manner. What do we have here? We have the same operation of substitution. In addition, we have a belief not only that this system has the right to exist but also that it is the right way to compose music. I like that. We will come back to the notion of substitution in a moment when we get back to jazz.

Now let us discuss belief. Believing that one musical structure is right and another is not, is not new. We could go back to medieval music theorists and their explicit prohibition of a tritone, stating that it is to be avoided because it is *diabolus in musica*. Let us not go into more detail about this ‘diabolical’ interval. I would rather concentrate my view on the tight relationship between music and belief. There should be no argument that music is closely related to the previously mentioned notion, just looking back to music history and its religious aspects. Rhetorical figures or musical cryptograms (such as the cross motif) are worth mentioning as well. If we jump back to our times, it would be hard to argue that the music of Olivier Messiaen does not have deep roots in religion, or if we express that in more everyday words—his music is highly charged with belief. Here I speak from the compositional point of view, not from the religious one. What is fascinating is that Messiaen builds *his musical language* on beliefs that he accepts are true, without conclusive proof. I would say there is no need for proof if there is a strong aesthetic belief. If Messiaen states that modes of a limited transposition have a divine quality, so they do. So it is for him. If it works for him in his compositional process, if it helps to structure musical ideas, then it is true. I believe that there is no need and no place here to argue that the Messiaenesque theme of God or non-retrograde rhythms are of divine quality. We, as professional or lay listeners, just accept it or not.

Here is the greatest discovery I made with the help of Messiaen: music is all about belief. What rules you apply to your musical material is just a matter of what beliefs you are after. Of course, we run into the dilemma of the chicken or the egg. Does this sound good because it was created with strong compositional beliefs, or does the sound itself generate strong beliefs after it is heard? Did Messiaen think of the modes as divine before he heard them, or the other way around? I would argue that it is not of great importance.

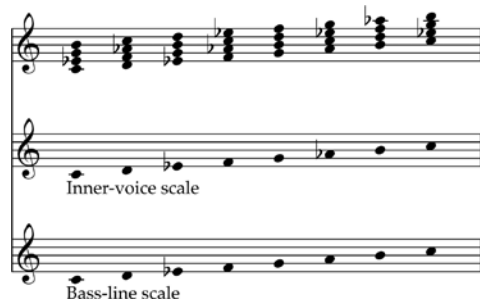
In the same way, we cannot answer the question of whether jazz musicians use tritone substitution because it sounds good, or because it is theoretically plausible within jazz theory. Substitution is a given. That is it.

There are several other fascinating theoretical tricks in jazz that I admire. One of them is the usage of a Lydian augmented fourth instead of a perfect fourth, which is a concept usually associated with George Russel. However, Messiaen himself speaks of how the augmented fourth is heard in the overtone series quite apparently and what kind of flavor it gives to the sound spectrum. Not to mention blues, which has an augmented fourth more as a passing tone—but what a passing tone!

The notion of (harmonic) substitution is crucial for my point of view as a composer. In the same way, as John Coltrane viewed the possibility of an enhanced substitution of II-V-I with his Coltrane changes (made famous by his tunes “Countdown” and “Giant Steps”), I base my compositional system on a substitution type of my own. But we will come to my system in a moment. There are various speculations on the Coltrane changes being a divine example of numerical spiritualism or anything in between—you name it. However, it might be clearly stated that Coltrane’s concept also has roots in his close collaboration with Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis for a certain period of his artistic development, as well as in his acquaintance with Nicolas Slonimsky’s *Thesaurus*.

In addition to Coltrane’s changes and his “Giant Steps” as a primary means of practicing improvisation for breakfast, I recall the theoretical output of John Mehegan presented to me by my first and only guitar teacher Stasys Daugirdas. Mehegan presents an interesting approach to explaining minor jazz harmony juxtaposing melodic minor (or *the jazz minor scale*, C D Eb F G A B C, in both directions the same) with a harmonic minor, where the *jazz minor scale* is in the bass and all upper voices are taken from the harmonic minor. By adding the concepts of modes to that structure, we get a vivid variety of colors that triggered my innate synesthesia (or ideasthesia, to be precise (Nikolić 2009)) right away.¹

¹ My simplest synaesthetic/ideasthetic concepts can easily be described to others are relations of letters and numbers with colors, i. e.: letter D is blue, F – yellow, G – brown, K – black, S – white, T – brown; number 1 is white, 3 – red, 4 – brown, 5 – redder, 6 – blue, 7 – yellow, etc. However, I do not regard them of great importance but it helps compose, as well as do simple math problems, and remember passwords and PIN codes.



E.g. 1. Minor scale-tone chords in C minor [1]

The overall background scope would not be complete without the final touch of minimal music and its concepts that resonated quite harmonically with all the above-mentioned influences. Especially important was the complete oeuvre of Philip Glass that I treat with special regard, completely ignoring the commercial and pop aspect of it, focusing on two basic notions—the crystal-clear rhythmic elaboration of additive cyclic structures, plus harmonic simplicity.

Here we come to this hypothetical moment where a student hears Philip Glass’ Mishima opening:



E.g. 2. The main motif from P. Glass’ Mishima. Opening

The Phrygian turn upon the entrance of the main theme in Eb minor (and the three notes it consists of) triggered the emergence of my system, The Codex Ioannis. So here it is.



Picture 2. The Codex Ioannis

This design emerged in the distant 2004 while on the Erasmus program in the *Conservatoire Nationale Supérieure de Musique et de Danse de Lyon*. We see it as it was drawn back then. There are four circles that, following the Bartók-Lendvai manner, would be called axes α (alpha), β (beta), γ (gamma), and δ (delta). Each circle houses three main pitches and three major chords. For example, the alpha axis consists of pitches C-Ab-E and major chords. Following the notion of substitution, I regard each of these equally spaced chords as the same entity. Each can be replaced by any other two. This trinity gains a spatial quality, if we convert them into major chords. These chords of the axis are exact replicas of the Coltrane changes, though, contrary to Coltrane, they do not contain any elements of authentic cadence.

Moreover, they manifest plagal cadence via the turn of the mediants, which are minor chords also depicted in the axis as auxiliary ones (Cm-Abm-Em). Thus, we have the amalgam of Coltranian influences, via Bartók-Lendvai architecture, backed by Messianesque belief of limited transposition, that C-Ab-E is. Therefore, if we look at the alpha axis as a tonic entity, then the delta entity containing G would be the dominant one. In the same manner, the beta axis, containing F, is our subdominant substitution. Finally, we are left with the gamma axis that contains D and Bb, thus acting as a double dominant and double subdominant entity at once.

These relations could be plotted onto a grid that has triad (or the same axis entity) relations horizontally and inter-axis relations of dominant/authentic flavor vertically (m3). Thus, we can notice that any movement from one axis to another involves a dominant/authentic action. In addition, two axioms complete the system.

Any third of a major triad may be raised by a whole step at any time. Thus, the chords c-e-g and c-f#-g are the same. In this case, we unexpectedly enter the Viennese trichord (whose set class prime form is [0 1 6]), in which case c-f#-g is its wider voicing. With this simple step, we saturate the color palette of our system by orders of magnitude.

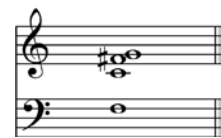
Any chord in the axis has a super-partner bass situated exactly a perfect fifth lower than its root. In this case, we get a shadow of bitonality and dilute the triad-ness with an even more plagal scent. In this case, each letter on the grid has a super-partner situated below it on the third z axis in the 3d plane (not in the picture). If there is a need and space to go further, another axis could be built on the super-partner note, creating the dense atmosphere of bitonality.

As a result, we can manifest The Chord of Chords that may be inhabited in the Codex axis (see E.g. 3).

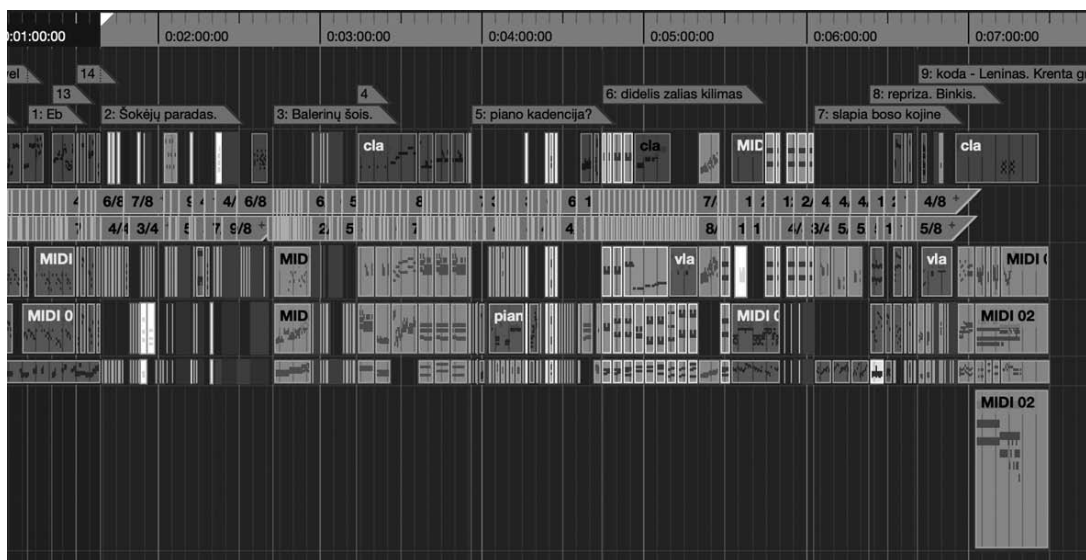
Minor chords, if needed, are saturated by the *jazz minor scale harmony* or the mixed one presented by Mehegan. The harmonic ambiguity of the *jazz minor scale* also increases the tonal palette of the overall tonal universe.

Moving towards higher structural elements of my music, Philip Glass-like additive cyclic textures help bond the ambiguous harmonic dichotomy of complexity and simplicity. What is intriguing is experimenting with the boundaries of these textures—on the one hand, we see click'n'cut, glitch aesthetics and irregular looped patterns; on the other hand, something feral or folk is lurking in the shape of pure polka or waltz consisting of bare twos or threes.

Furthermore, keeping the dominant/authentic sound avoidance policy (I do not have any illusions that it is avoidable per se, but it is worth trying), we can rearrange the sonata form to our liking. For example, most of my chamber or electronic pieces may be called sonatas without expositions and recapitulations, just bare developments, where only fragments of possible thematic motifs are already fallen apart, freeing the author from the unavoidable narrative of motivic development via contrasts and teleology.



E.g. 3. The Chord of Chords



Picture 3. 100 Springtimes. Cubase project file

Since this is a case study of the piece *100 Springtimes*, and not an analysis of the piece (after stating the prerequisites and conditions, I will have a free hand to move on to the analysis in a future paper), I will pass through the main aspects of the piece’s ethnographic, structural and poetic elements.

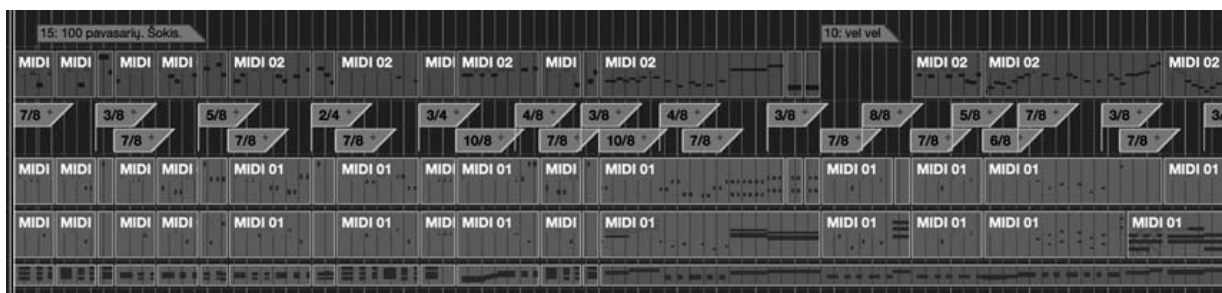


E.g. 4. The Old Sketch

The piece was commissioned by Prof. Rimantas Janeliauskas for the second concert of the conference *Principles of Music Composing* in 2014. This was the second year that the conference had specially-composed music being played. The ensemble for the concert was Trio Claviola, a group of young and talented virtuosos Vytautas Giedraitis, Jurgis Juozapaitis and Ugnė Antanavičiūtė. Upon hearing several albums by the Trio, I came up with my long-sought idea to counteract the almost traditional lyricism of Lithuanian music with something more aggressive, but not destructive. After surfing through my old sketches, I found this ten-year-old, one-minute sketch, that was a concentrate of ideas, but too dense, and I was too naïve or too scared to expand it into music of some kind at the time of sketching.

However, in 2014, I already had acquired some level of skill to elaborate the concentrate. Therefore, it was just a matter of time left before the performance, and it was not much, to be frank.

The final version of the piece lasts almost nine minutes. One of the devices I came up with to help expand the ideas in time and dilute the concentrate arose from The Codex:



Picture 4. The diluted concentrate. Cubase project

The statement is established when it is stated in all tones of the Axis. Therefore, it is in the first part (measures 1–115) that the main motif is established from G, then B, then Eb. It is worth mentioning that the motif itself is a manifesto of the Codex—it is constructed of the ever-falling waltz-polka accompaniment loop of G-Bm-Eb-Gm-B chords that is exactly the DELTA wheel on this verbatim picture.

$\text{♩} = 392$ ($\text{♩} = 196$) very fast, crazy, bitter precise

Clarinet in B \flat

Viola

Piano

E.g. 5. *100 Springtimes*. Opening bars

The second part—the ballet (m. 115–276)—elaborates the second, lyric motif (oh, sonata again!) of the concentrate, based upon the modulations of the jazz scale. A simple method of rhythmic glitching and inversion is used.

115 **C** Ballet

Clarinet in B \flat

Viola

Piano

E.g. 6. *100 Springtimes*, measures 115–120

Reh. E (m. 183) states verbatim the lyrical part.

183 **E** easily

197

Clarinet in B \flat

Viola

Piano

quasi solo *mf*
8^{va}.....1

8^{va}.....1

E.g. 7. *100 Springtimes*, rehearsal mark E

Reh. G (m. 276) is a pure retrograde of the main motif, with bass given to clarinet—hence a hint of inversion too. Then all disintegrates into sporadic hoquet.

20

G dry, with new power

276

G dry, with new power

283

H

arco

$p < f$ $p < f$

$p < f$ $p < f$

H

$p < f$ $p < f$

r.h.

E.g. 8. *100 Springtimes*, rehearsal mark G

Measure 330 marks a hint of newly composed material (not from the initial sketch concentrate) inserted, following an interplay of snippets and loops and their retrogrades.

330 in a new manner

f

f in a new manner

f

339

p

p

f

E.g. 9. *100 Springtimes*, measures 330–346

The rehearsal mark I (m. 353) used a device that imitates American minimal music, or even something cinematic, providing a quasi-climatic movement that has the sole purpose of moving forward and stumbling into the main motif again in m. 399.

E.g. 10. *100 Springtimes*, measures 352–367

Measure 431 is the feral climactic moment where the super-partner chords are introduced. There is a simple bitonal juxtaposition of major G on the left hand and major D on the right hand. However, according to my Codex, it is the binary friction of the augmented 3d super-partner chords (with no #4 so far).

Rehearsal mark L (m. 436) leaps down into the lower energy spectrum by hocketing in an even more radical manner the lyric motif of the concentrate, with the advance refrain of the main three chords compressing as much as possible into a constant flow of eight notes.

E.g. 11. *100 Springtimes*, measures 431–445

Measure 497 is the only significant place where the texture escapes square rhythmic values, manifesting the main three notes from the main motif in triple tuplets, in original and retrograded form. By the way, Prof. Janeliauskas suggested that the rhythmic pulse should be evened out and a portion or tuplet passage added at the end.

E.g. 12. *100 Springtimes*, measures 497–515

The following concert-like gesture is nothing more than an imitation of the coda.

E.g. 13. *100 Springtimes*, measures 521–533

After the piece was finished, the question of naming it became apparent. Since it was written in the summer of 2014, times were getting interesting: the annexation of Crimea, and anti-Soviet-heritage protests all over Ukraine. One of the significant elements during these protests was tearing down the Lenin statues. Since many of the statues were torn down in such a short time, the period was named *Leninfall*. The main motif of the piece had a temporary name *Leninfall*, since it (thanks again to my ideasthesia) had this statue-like black shiny grand piano falling down nature.

However, further ballet-like development and playful nature (part of its character I purposefully borrowed from Philip Glass's piece "Man in the Bath") did not contribute to the *Leninfall* notion. Enter Kazys Binkis, a Lithuanian modernist poet from the inter-war period. His poem "One Hundred Springs" was the replica of the musical flow of the piece. The flow of various springtimes all evolving, all falling, and the new ones arriving. All this with its own synesthetic/ideasthetic color and shape. And so it is. In addition to that, in the following years, I composed a handful of chamber pieces based on poems. Poetry and music is always the right choice. Fun fact, many people connected this piece with Prokofiev's Sonata No 7 Op. 83, even though I was unaware of that sonata while writing my piece. Moreover, I was totally unaware of the neo-Riemannian theory and its Tonnetz. I have to admit my theoretical ideas share a great part with it. On the other hand, I wouldn't have spent much effort on my theory if I had known it was not completely original. However, my theory has some interesting idiosyncrasies (substitutions, α (alpha), β (beta), γ (gamma), and δ (delta) axes, etc.) that—in my belief—make it authentic.

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Mano kūrinio 100 pavasarių atvejo analizė

Santrauka

Kūrinys *100 pavasarių* man suteikė tikėjimą savo kompozicijos sistema (straipsnyje vadinama *The Codex*) kaip įtaisų, galinčių padėti kurti muziką, kuria tikiu. Ši kompozicijos sistema neatsirado iš giedro dangaus, tad straipsnyje pristatau tiksliai jos komponentų atsiradimo pėdsakus. Svarbu paminėti, kad ši kompozicijos sistema nėra fiksuota – tai nuolat besivystanti struktūra. Kita vertus, kūrinio analizė parodo, kaip galima nukrypti nuo Glasso iki Messiaeno, Coltrane'o ir Prokofjevo (ir neorymaniškos teorijos) nebūtinai tai sąmoningai suvokiant, o veikiau vedamam tikėjimo, kad būtent tikėjimas ir yra tai, kas muzikoje svarbiausia.