

My Attitude Problem

By David Rakowski

In response to the *Current Musicology* solicitation letter, I think I am supposed to write about how I fill my pieces up with notes. This is a hard task for any composer who doesn't write pieces destined for deconstruction in graduate seminars: while I can fairly easily list some tendencies my pieces have, and much more easily list the sorts of things that other composers do that I don't, I can't imagine how interesting either would be to anyone. Plus, I believe that composers tend to be their own worst advocates—separating the composition of a piece from its hearing is rather difficult for us: when we tell you about trees, the listener hears forest, and vice versa. Now that the disclaimer has been made, it's time to press on.

Like most composers I know, I write idiosyncratically, changing my methods, kinds of pitch references, and overall view of form from piece to piece depending on the circumstances, ensemble, and materials. In general, I write contextually and from left to right; how I decide on what to do at any given moment depends on gestalt, voice-leading, and (by definition) context. The music tends to be either quite fast or rather slow, without a lot of gradations in between. I have learned a lot about compositional craft and continuity from listening to and studying the musics of Brahms, Berg, Bartók, and Martino, and I think the influences are easy to hear; there is also a strong presence of jazz harmony and funky, driving rhythms, according to some people who know what those words mean. I consciously follow what I understand to be a tension-and-release model, and strive for clear phrases and formal articulations: things start simple, accumulate, get more complicated, catch fire, and release tension with a big gesture to begin another structural section. Beyond that, it's anyone's guess what the heck I am doing.

One thing I hardly ever do is compose from the outside in or the inside out formulaically. There are rarely predetermined formal schemes posing as vessels in wait for the right materials to fulfill their needs; nor do I use fractal models in which everything in the small is reflected in the same way in larger formal levels. I pretty much move from moment to moment, left to right, shaping the piece and keeping as much in memory as I can, so that in the small and large it makes sense and makes a good story, at least for me. Rather than continuing to ramble on with vague and banal generalities, I'm going to take an informal look at a piece of mine and try to give a sense of how and why I wrote it, and follow how my thinking about the piece evolved as it took shape.

I'll be writing about a piano trio I wrote in 1996–97 entitled *Attitude Problem*, which is published by C. F. Peters and recorded on CRI. Like most of my other pieces, it is atypical. The oddball title will be explained in the course of the essay.

The genesis of the piece was an e-mail from pianist Lois Shapiro in the summer of 1996 asking me to write a piece for her newly reconstituted trio, the Triple Helix; the performers are all virtuosi in their own right, and excellent chamber music performers. In 1993 I had written a piano trio called *Hyperblue* for the previous incarnation of the trio, with a different violinist; it was a very fast, virtuosic piece full of killer unison-writing that the group played like a million bucks. The performers described the piece to me as dark, sinister, jazzy, and intense, and also fun to play. The Triple Helix had performed it on its inaugural concert in the spring of 1996, a few months before Lois's e-mail, and it made a big splash. For the new trio, Lois made a few requests: she wanted some more "sinister, jazzy" music like in *Hyperblue*; and for her own part, she asked specifically for two things: she wanted to sock a lot of really low notes (she loved doing it in *Hyperblue*, so this was a request for a reprise), and she wanted a "big, smooshy, romantic" solo. Rhonda Rider, the cellist, asked if I could write something very high for her, in the next-to-top octave of the piano.

With those things in mind, I did what most composers do when they start a piece: I simply improvised piano trio music in my head for a while before I started writing anything down. This improvised music was constituted mostly of brief gestures, which were speculative thoughts about ways the instruments might possibly work in combination. These improvisations had both visual and sonic components: I do tend to "see" musical gestures before I write them down, and often the act of writing them down involves picking out the notes on the piano that most faithfully represent the gestures. I think of musical gestures as having a physical quality, and that is probably part of what it is I "see" when I imagine them.

Also before writing anything down I tried to imagine an overall shape for the piece. Rather than thinking hard, I hardly thought, settling on yet another three-movement *attacca* structure: fast–slow–fast. I think I prefer writing *attacca* movements because I'm simply not good at writing endings; with *attacca* structures I can end movements as big upbeats to the next movement, which is much easier. I also get fatigued as a listener by pieces—the chamber music of Dvořák being one of the more exasperating culprits—that keep ending. For the sake of practicality, I was shooting for a twelve- to fifteen-minute piece.

I did want the piece at least to begin differently from *Hyperblue*, for contrast in case the two trios were ever performed on the same concert, or consecutively. *Hyperblue* has a light, jazzy opening concentrated in the

middle register, generally at a soft dynamic. So I opted for a scowl-faced opening with heavy bowing, a wide registral span, something self-consciously on the ugly side—stereotypical *mod* music. For this musical impression, I use piano notes in extreme registers (including some socked low notes, as Lois had requested) and I have the strings hacking away at double stops that are interlocked registrally. For the sake of sonority, bowing, and fingering quickness, the strings' double stops involve both open and fingered strings. And because the music is supposed to function as an opening, I probably wanted the gestures to feel short and fragmented (see fig. 1).

Obviously this scowl-faced passage consists of two phraselets separated by silence; the first one ends rhythmically weak, as if still inhaling; the motion of the bass in the piano sounds to me like it is supporting a motion to a half cadence. The second ends tranquilly, but kind of in the wrong way. Given the quick and fragmented nature of the gestures that have happened so far, it's a little out of left field to end a phrase with this kind of repose.

The aggressive and obnoxious initiation of the second phraselet by the piano is a private joke: Years earlier, when the previous trio rehearsed *Hyperblue*, Lois always used a gesture of that shape, rhythm, and register in order to stop a run-through to make comments and ask questions. In this musical context, then, you can imagine that the pianist may be confused about the first ugly phraselet that just happened and tries to stop the rehearsal and talk about it. In response, the strings cut their sawing gestures short as if to see what the pianist has to say.

What the pianist "says" is the long chord that ends the second phraselet. I absolutely fell in love with that chord. It's got a beautiful, rich, sonorous quality, and, as I hadn't realized at the time, acoustic reinforcement of the bass—it's a C-major triad with D and C# added. Note too the dutiful, conservative voice-leading approaching the chord: the repeated C#s in the bass pointing down to the C, and the chromatic line Bb-B leading up to it; and it is C's first appearance in this register; similarly, the top two notes in the chord are approached by step in the strings. I probably rationalized the C in the bass with voice-leading, and the rest of the chord as some sort of prolongation of what was in the strings. I did not know at this point that the chord was going to be important in the piece.

I was thinking of this music in this passage as introductory material, even though I wasn't sure just what it was that I was introducing, and as so often happens in introductions, the harmonic motion is glacially paced. Keeping the glacial harmonic pacing and the sense of introduction, I repeated the same chunk-chord gestures in the strings a few more times, around the same notes, with similar gestures in the piano. For no other reason than that anything worth doing once is worth doing twice, I ended

Figure 1

Violin

Ansioso ♩ = 96-104

pp *f* *p* poco *sfz* *p* *sfz*

pizz. arco

'Cello

pp *f* *p* poco *sfz* *p* *sfz*

pizz. arco

Piano

sfz *sfz* *p* *f* *pp*

(B^b) (C^b) (C^b) (B^b) (B^b) (C^b)

(d)

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Figure 2

The musical score for Figure 2 consists of three systems of staves. The first system features a treble clef staff with a melodic line starting on a half note, moving to a quarter note, and then a half note, with dynamics *p* and *mp* indicated. The second system features a bass clef staff with a similar melodic line, also with dynamics *p* and *mp*. The third system features a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a more complex melodic line in the treble and a simpler line in the bass, with dynamics *p* and *pp*. Below the grand staff is a chord diagram for (C), showing a C major chord with a tritone substitution.

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the second group of phraselets with the same gorgeous chord as the first group, this time phrased like a sigh (see fig. 2).

This time, owing to the rhythm and the voice-leading, the gorgeous chord felt more like it facilitated a concluding cadence than a half cadence, so it felt like a real sectional ending, possibly an end to the introduction. Well-trained, thoughtful composer that I am, I knew the next thing I had to do was to break out of this harmony, in order to “begin” the piece properly, and signal an end to the introduction.

But it didn’t turn out that way. Dutifully, I did add legato, lyrical lines to the box of things that the strings know how to do; but I couldn’t lose either the chunk-chord gesture or that gorgeous chord, and twice again I found myself ending chunks of music with the gorgeous chord—the second time articulated like a stereotypical Stravinsky chordal articulation, together with a tritone substitution stolen from jazz (see fig. 3).

By this point in the piece, I was aware that I had closed major phrase groups twice—perhaps three times—with the same chord, and now I *really* needed to go somewhere else harmonically, because this was getting ridiculous. So I put the piece down for a while to think about it (and about teaching first-year theory, replacing the garage door, etc., etc.). During this time, I encountered Rhonda, the cellist, at Brandeis, and she

Figure 3

Figure 3 shows a musical score in 3/4 time, consisting of three systems. The first system is in treble clef and begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic marking. It features a long, slow-moving melodic line with a slur over several measures. The second system is in bass clef and contains a series of chords and single notes, some with slurs. The third system is in treble clef and shows a more active melodic line with slurs and rests. The score concludes with two measures marked with a common time signature (C^b).

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asked how the piece was going. I told her that I'd written a lot of notes, but couldn't get the piece actually to go anywhere yet. She said, "It sounds like your piece has an attitude problem. In fact, I think that's what you should call it." Not one to turn down a performer's suggestion, I said I would, but didn't mean it. But after thinking about it for a while, I decided I could use the title, because that way I could have a sort of hook for the piece—or at least an interesting way for me to think about what I had already, and where to go next. Consequently, I was able to think of this misbehaving passage not as a bug, but as a feature. That's it—the first movement's *attitude problem* is harmony that moves very slowly, or not at all, despite a lot of *sturm* and *drang* on the surface.

This meant I could, or even should, begin what I was now very clearly thinking of as the main body of the movement in exactly the wrong way: with the same chord and another sequence of frantic surface gestures (see fig. 4).

Beginning the main part of the movement with the same harmony and gestures as the introduction probably struck me as a little perverse. Perverse is good, though, in moderation, and is especially good in this piece.

Clearly, though, I eventually had to stop starting and stopping, especially since all of the gestures were turning out to be short and of similar lengths. Eventually the music does become more continuous, but only after Lois's prized socked low notes go away for a while. In the next three

Figure 4

Figure 4 is a musical score consisting of three systems of staves. The first system has two staves (treble and bass clef) and the second system also has two staves. The third system has a grand staff (treble and bass clef). The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (p, f, sfz, mp, mf), articulation (pizz., arco), and performance markings (0, >). The music is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The first system starts at measure 28. The first staff of the first system has dynamics p, f, sfz, mp, mf, f, p. The second staff of the first system has dynamics p, f, sfz, mp, mf, f, p. The first staff of the second system has dynamics pp, sfz, f, p, mf, f, p. The second staff of the second system has dynamics pp, sfz, f, p, mf, f, p. The grand staff of the third system has dynamics pp, sfz, f, p, mf, f, p.

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or so minutes of music, the gorgeous chord is only heard incidentally a few times; the strings eventually start playing a composite lyrical long line, and the movement comes to a climax. I think the climax is strongly reminiscent of Bartók, if he had listened to too much Tower of Power in his youth (see fig. 5). See the baritone sax in the socked low notes in the piano's left hand and the squealing trumpets in the violin?

By this point, I imagined that the listener (and performers) would be fatigued from hearing so many notes and so few different harmonies—I know I was. Indeed, the lack of significant harmonic movement made me think of the music as a little like a hamster on a hamster wheel, forever running but not getting anywhere. So I ended the movement with a return to the opening harmony and gestures, although quite a bit slower, mimicking that fatigue; I think the Triple Helix understood the point of this return because they perform this passage without vibrato or inflection—they really do sound tired.

It made sense to begin the second movement with a new chord of a markedly different quality; if I calculated correctly, the chord would feel like a big exhalation, a big relief, because we're finally in the section of our program where harmony moves. As an overlap, though, I had Lois pick up the repeated E–F# figure in the violin part and turn it into an accompaniment figure to start her smooshy, romantic solo (see fig. 6).

Obviously the piano bass note at the opening of the second movement could not be C (as in the gorgeous chord), since that would tend to defeat the impression that the harmony had finally moved.

When I wrote the first bar of the second movement, I hadn't thought yet what the "attitude problem" of the second and third movements might be. The simple metric modulation that I had used to get from the first to the second movement gave me the idea to have the three instruments proceed in different pulses, but to agree harmonically—the pulse disagreement is the attitude problem. In performance this tends to sound like extravagant rubato, which is fine with me. (An additional idea was to have the piano accompaniment be present for the whole movement, gradually slowing down from eighth notes to dotted halves and then speeding up.) Predictably, when the piano slows to its longest pulse, the gorgeous chord is heard for the only time in the movement.

Rhonda gets her extremely high cello solo after the smooshy piano solo, and the piece proceeds as you would expect: the violin enters, all three play a while, the violin gets a solo, and the cello reenters. By then it was time for a transition to a fast movement, and it occurred to me that the way to do it was to have the lines agree in pulse again, and start doing things together. You can see where that happens in fig. 7; the piano doesn't catch on for another two bars.

Figure 5

Musical score for Figure 5, measures 87-94. The score is written for three staves: two treble clefs and one grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The first staff begins with a dynamic marking of *< ff*. The second staff also begins with *< ff* and ends with *sub. p*. The third staff begins with *< ff*. The music features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and various articulations such as accents and slurs.

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Figure 6

II.

— ♪ = ♪ —
Calmo, flessibile ♩ = c. 48

The musical score consists of three systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The second system has a bass clef and a 3/4 time signature. The third system is a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff, with a 3/4 time signature. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The dynamics 'poco' and 'poco p' are indicated with hairpins. The score concludes with a double bar line and a key signature change to one sharp (F#).

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Fin.

In this rough-and-ready transition, all the parts speed up to sixteenth-note triplets, and strings gradually slide back into the notes and gestures that opened the piece, except that this time, because of the great speed, they sound frantic and more desperate—as if struggling in quicksand.

In other words, the piece was back in harmonic stasis, sounding even more desperate than before, and gave me a new picture of the gorgeous chord in which the harmony was now stuck: the gorgeous chord became a mysterious black hole, capturing the string players like flies onto flypaper, causing them to flap about frantically. I was reminded of a running gag on an old Bill Irwin special on public TV: when he got close to one corner of the stage it would appear to be sucking him offstage; when the string players get close to the opening chord, it appears to be sucking them in, requiring a heroic gesture from the piano for them to be freed.

I liked the idea of pianist as hero. Plus, a heroic gesture would necessarily be a dramatic one, the upshot of which would be a signal of the beginning of another movement (see fig. 8).

At this point the simple two-note figure in the violin, together with the clearing of the murky quicksand texture, should have the metaphorical feeling of opening a window for the first time in spring after it has been closed for the whole winter—in other words, a feeling of clearing the air. In fact, at this point I thought of the violin as a character in an air freshener commercial, where our blonde protagonist sniffs the air in ecstasy, life is beautiful, and nobody is ever going to hurt us again. But as you would expect, it soon turns out to be a revel without a clue . . .

Which is a good setup for a scherzo movement. I love writing scherzos for several reasons. First, it's fun writing fast music, especially when there are so few composers—especially composers of similar outlook and training—who seem able, or willing, to write truly whizbang-fast music. Second, performers usually like to play fast music as long as it's gratefully written for the instruments and it makes them sound good. Third, with stuff flying by so fast, it's fun and challenging to see what sort of rhythmic games I can get away with. By saying this music is scherzo music, I'm not saying anything about its form, just about a state of mind.

As scherzo music, it might as well live up to its name—hence the ideas for the “attitude problem” of this movement. I decided on two attitude problems happening simultaneously: flowing notes in a triple subdivision conflicting with and interrupted by articulated notes in a duple subdivision; and scrupulously prepared climaxes that go unfulfilled. In fact, it is often these duple interruptions that prevent the climaxes from coming where they are supposed to.

The cello shortly joins the violin in the air-freshener commercial. Now for the sake of the scherzo, I thought of the strings as being so ecstatic

Figure 7

The musical score for Figure 7 consists of three systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef staff starting at measure 33 with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a dynamic marking of *mp*. The second system has a bass clef staff with a dynamic marking of *pp* and a *mp* marking later in the system. The third system has a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a dynamic marking of *mp* and a *a fuori* marking. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, triplets (marked with '3'), and dynamic markings.

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Figure 8

♩ = ♩.
Attacca III. mvt.

39

loco poco * poco * poco

♩ = ♩.
Poco agitato, Vivacissimo ♩ = c. 172-180

III.

ff p gliss. 0

ff mf

ff slowly * poco *

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that they'd eventually lose control and start tripping over themselves, which leads to the first unfulfilled climax. The ecstatic gestures eventually coalesce again into the gorgeous chord, and the strings get stuck, unable to move, as before. So the piano has to come to the rescue with another heroic gesture (see fig. 9).

The immediate response of the strings to the piano is straight out of a cartoon—the harmonic disagreement is supposed to sound as if the strings have stars in their eyes from being slapped so hard. But since the slapping doesn't seem to take, the piano has to repeat the gesture, amplified this time with the "let's stop and talk about this" gesture from the very beginning of the work (see fig. 10).

Figure 9

Poco più mosso ♩ = 152-168

25

f *p*

f *p*

ffz stop note near tuning peg
an instant after playing it

(C) R. 20

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Figure 10

29 *Poco meno mosso* ♩. = 144-160

f *p* *f* *p* *ffz* *ff*

(C#) (B^b) (B^b)

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This is where the duple-vs.-triple subdivision attitude problem is first heard. The interruptions of the triplet stream by the duple notes become more invasive and obnoxious later in the piece. After a few more exchanges between Lois and the strings, Lois is left by herself on the alternating E–F \sharp accompaniment figure, as she was at the opening of the second movement. In fact, each re-beginning after this point begins with alternating E–F \sharp figures. Right after this, the group seems finally to catch a groove, but it is frustrated by the intrusion of the duple figures, and the music winds down and starts again (see fig. 11).

Several times after this, the same large-scale gesture is repeated: the piano is left by itself on an E–F \sharp figure, the music builds, and is thwarted from climaxing by various interruptions. One of the interruptions is a private joke: While writing this movement I met composer Daron Hagen for the first time and was listening to his music. I very much liked the fake swing music at the beginning of his opera *Vera of Las Vegas* and I used the feel of that music as one of the interruptive gestures in the next large segment (see fig. 12). The two gestures in swing eighths that diminuendo in the piano quote the feel of Daron's piece while using notes from another piece of mine.

There is another much longer passage, initiated again by E–F \sharp figures, which manages to continue and build, this time seeming to ignore the myriad interferences of the duple idea. In order to “resolve” the conflict once and for all, a real climax finally happens, and it is heard entirely in duple time—after which the duple villain disappears (see fig. 13). Note that Lois gets to sock her low notes here, and gesturally it's like Bartók hepped up on Tower of Power again.

At this point, with both attitude problems “solved,” I figured it was time for a coda in which another old problem is dispensed with—that of the gorgeous chord. This coda begins as all the other re-beginnings in this movement do, with an E–F \sharp figure, and this time explicitly attached to the gorgeous chord (see fig. 14).

But this time the chord feels defanged. There is no heroic gesture extracting the strings from the chord—just business as usual. And the coda that follows is so happy-go-lucky that it is as if nothing has happened. The strings glissando to harmonics, the piano keeps the sixteenth notes active, and eventually the piece simply ends understatedly, on the gorgeous chord (see fig. 15).

A high D \flat from the piece's opening (a little later in the piece than is shown in fig. 1) “moves” to D in the violin here at the same time that the bass moves locally from C \sharp to C. That is there as a joke, as a red herring

Figure 11

Figure 11 shows a musical score for measures 67 through 70. The score is written for three staves: a treble clef staff at the top, a bass clef staff in the middle, and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) at the bottom. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 18/8. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Dynamics are indicated by *mp* (mezzo-piano), *f* (forte), and *p* (piano). Fingerings are shown with numbers 1-5 and slurs. The score is divided into four measures, with measure numbers 67, 68, 69, and 70 indicated above the first staff.

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Figure 12

Figure 12 is a musical score for three staves, numbered 86. The score is written in 18/16 time and features dynamic markings and performance instructions.

The first staff (Violin) begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a *pizz.* (pizzicato) instruction. It transitions to an *arco* (arco) instruction and a forte (*f*) dynamic in the second measure.

The second staff (Viola) begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a *pizz.* instruction. It transitions to an *arco* instruction and a forte (*f*) dynamic in the second measure.

The third staff (Piano) begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. It features a mezzo-piano (*mp*) section in the second measure, followed by a forte (*f*) section, and concludes with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) section.

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Figure 13

$\text{♩} = 152-168$ $\text{— ♩} = \text{♩} \text{—}$

141

poco a poco dim. *(f)*

poco a poco dim. *(f)*

poco a poco dim. *(f)*

2

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Figure 14

150

Accel.

Tempo Primo ♩ = 172-180

The musical score consists of three systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The second system has a bass clef staff. The third system has a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The score is divided into three measures by bar lines. The first measure is in 12/16 time, the second in 9/16, and the third in 12/16. Dynamics include piano (p) and forte (f). The instruction 'secco, leggiero' is placed above the third measure of the grand staff. A tempo marking 'Tempo Primo ♩ = 172-180' is at the top right. An 'Accel.' marking is above the first measure. A rehearsal mark '150' is at the top left.

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Figure 15

The musical score for Figure 15 consists of four staves. The top two staves are vocal parts, and the bottom two are piano accompaniment. The score begins at measure 171. The vocal parts feature long, sweeping lines with fermatas, indicating sustained notes. The piano part includes a complex rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes in the right hand and a bass line with a fermata. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and one flat (Bb). The time signature is 9/16. The dynamic marking is *pp* (pianissimo). A rehearsal mark *Red.* is placed below the first vocal staff. A section marked *(D)* with a fermata is present in the piano part. The score concludes with a double bar line and a *pp* marking.

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*

for future theorists who may read somewhere that there is voice-leading in my music.

I frankly don't know how a listener would receive this piece, whether exposed to the long narrative just presented, or innocent of it. I would hope that the successions of formal articulations are clear, and that the gestalt of the music is something like the gestalt I felt when writing it. And I would hope that on repeated hearings, the function—or at least the repetition—of the “gorgeous chord” would become clear. Beside all of that, I would presume any listener would bring experiences into a listening that I could never dream of (and therefore write for), might have some interesting things to say (or complain about), might find relationships in it of which I was unaware, or might simply get up and start dancing (which I would like). But one thing is clear—I am too close to the piece to tell you what it is. I can only say with any accuracy what it is made of.