

Compositional constraints and creative process in solo works by George Benjamin

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This paper explores the use of strict (but hidden) canonic procedures in two 2001 solo works by George Benjamin (*Shadowlines* for solo piano and *Three Miniatures* for solo violin), emphasizing the role of rigid compositional constraints in shaping the composer's creative process. Benjamin has hinted at these works' canonic conception (Benjamin 2003), but no previous scholarly study has untangled their novel imitation techniques. Indeed, the works' monotimbral musical surfaces rarely permit the easy recognition of Dux (leader) and Comes (follower) voices—the canons are “encoded” to obscure their imitative nature, and Benjamin often intertwines the Dux and Comes to give the impression of a single, non-imitative line. The canonic “encodings” include one-to-one pitch-class mappings based on pitch-class multiplication (Morris 1977) and many-to-one mappings that project the twelve chromatic pitch classes of the Dux onto a smaller target set in the Comes.

Benjamin's use of constraints plays a major role in his compositional process, providing a starting point to escape the “terror of the blank page” (Stravinsky 1947) and encouraging “problem finding,” the development of new creative challenges to be resolved (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi 1976). The imposition of constraints is essential to turning a vaguely defined task into a well-structured problem that can encourage innovative and artistic solutions. Though most of Benjamin's canonic constraints are not instantly comprehensible to the ear, they affect the work's overall sound in many subtle ways, from the choice of motivic pitch-class sets to the metric patterning of the Dux and Comes. The initial choice of the constraint shapes all subsequent compositional decisions, and often works in unforeseen ways to create musical forms that are new and surprising, even to the composer himself. Benjamin's use of creative constraints will be compared to examples from other disciplines including film (the Dogme 95 Manifesto), visual art (Robert Morris's *Blind Time Drawings*), and literature (the writings of authors associated with the Oulipo such as Georges Perec and Raymond Queneau).