

Program Note – On Rhythmic Complexity in *Pale Fire*

Pale Fire was one of my first pieces to use groupings of a basic common pulse as the main way to have different instruments play in different tempi simultaneously.

The old way of notating simultaneous tempi, and not just for me, was to use elaborate tuplets. In a bar of 4/4 you might find one player reading largely quarter note tuplets (7:4) and another playing quintuplet 16ths, perhaps with the added headache of having clumps of them tied together. Picture this – the tempo is fast and you have nothing but quintuplet 16ths. But sometimes you have, within the bracket, a dotted 8th followed by an 8th tied to a 16th quintuplet. And maybe no one is playing *on* the beat! And so on.

The obvious problem is that it is hard for anyone to relax while playing this, assuming they actually can play it. I have heard confessions from L.A Phil players confessing massive faking, even in the presence of a composer like Ligeti and Carter. And a never-to-be-named world-famous quartet confessed to fudging the truly astounding notational complexities of *Ferneyhough*.

So another way to notate complex simultaneous tempi is for everyone to play 8th notes, say, and each player can accent the first note in his or her eighth notes. Of course, each player can have different length groups. See m.15 of *Pale Fire* for a simple start to this process.

Eventually the piece has sections which sound extremely free, but are really some complex rhythm like 11:7:3, but written in a way that avoid complicated tuplets.

One can go a bit beyond this without relating problems for the players if one simply has some players playing groups of simple tuplets, like triplets. So Player #1 can play a compound line such that every fourth triplet is emphasized. Player #2 can have a part constructed of constant 16ths, written so that every fourth 16th note creates a pulse, and every third pulse is accented somehow.