Oliver Weeks – Note on the premiere of *Iele.* Blog post on oliverweeks.co.uk, Sept 2013.

The Mercury Quartet to premiere 'Iele', 24th September 2013

The enormously talented Mercury Quartet will be premiering my new work, *Iele,* on the 24th September at the Forge, Camden. This flamboyant, at times whimsical and at times brutal, scherzo appears alongside works by Eric Gaudibert, Johan Treichel, Charlotte Bray & Klaus Huber. This is the eighth concert in the Mercury Quartet's *Radar* concert series. Doors open at 7pm and tickets are priced at £10 (£8 concessions).

Iele is constructed from several, quite far-flung, sources. On the one hand, the piece can be seen as a very loosely programmatic *bacchanal* / scherzo, drawing strongly upon Romanian folklore (see below). It also quotes at length from the traditional Romanian song *Aguridă* as performed by Maria Tănase and her band. Against this are ranged ideas derived from my interest in South Asian music and literature, with the piece's rhythmic patterns deriving from Sanskrit poetic metres and its pitch structures from the North Indian raag *marwa.* Finally, the larger-scale teleological drive of the work owes a considerable amount to both traditional sonata structure and a recent re-study of Ligeti's *Études* and *Piano Concerto* on which I embarked whilst looking for a peg on which to hang my initial ideas.

In Romanian folklore, the *Iele* are virginal, feminine, mythological creatures somewhere in between fairies, sirens and furies. The number and names of actual *Iele* vary between different folk traditions, although three seems to be the prevalent figure. All traditions agree that they appear in groups – the word *Iele* itself is an archaic form of the Romanian word for 'they'. They are said to inhabit deep forest, caves or mountains and to appear at night, dancing the *hora* (a traditional Romanian circle dance) naked, their breasts partly covered by their long hair. The *Iele* are not said to be inherently evil as such, but they wreak terrible punishments on those who refuse their invitation to dance, stealing the culprits' minds or making them disappear without trace. They are sometimes said to be agents of revenge variously for God or the devil, forcing their victims into the centre of their dance, where they eventually die in torment and madness.

Reading a detailed musical analysis of a piece without access to a score or a recording is generally a fairly dry task. Carrying out detailed analysis of a piece that is, at the time of writing, yet to be heard by anyone, (even the composer in this case) is thus somewhat Quixotic. What follows then is more of a loose series of observations on the various materials that went into the piece's construction and some ideas about how they are welded into a coherent whole. It also might be read as a way in which a piece *might* be written, rather than an attempt at an analysis *per se.*

Both the rhythmic and pitch structures of *Iele* rest upon a grid-like use of modes. The rhythmic foundation of the piece is derived from two Sanskrit poetic metres, which overlap each other and function as rhythmic cycles (this cyclical structure is also reminiscent of the rhythmic

structure of much Indian classical music). Classical Sanskrit literature contains some fascinatingly esoteric poetic metres which, whilst it seems hard from a modern standpoint to see how living poetry might be written around them, provide potentially fertile rhythmic material for a composer. Unlike English poetic metre, which is *qualitative* (ie stressed syllables occur in a fairly regular rhythm), metre in Sanskrit is *quantitative* (as is that of Latin and Greek). This means that the defined metre actually lays down the rhythm in which the syllables of the poem are to be read – a short syllable is noticeably shorter in time than a long one.

The two metres used in *Iele* are:

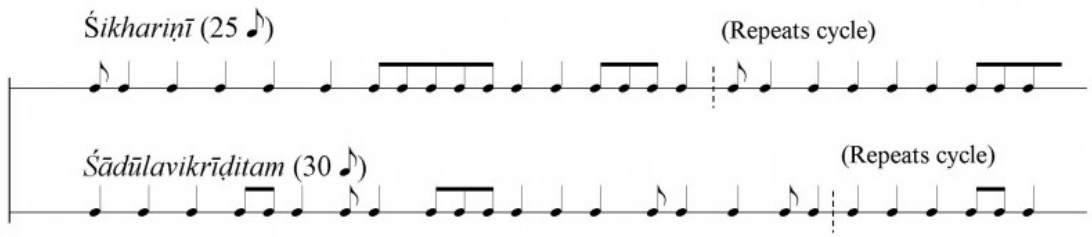
Śikhariṇī (17 syllables)

◡ — - — - — / ◡ ◡ ◡ ◡ ◡ — - ◡ ◡ ◡ -

Śādūlavikrīḍitam (19 syllables)

- — - ◡ ◡ — ◡ — ◡ ◡ ◡ — / — - ◡ — - ◡ -

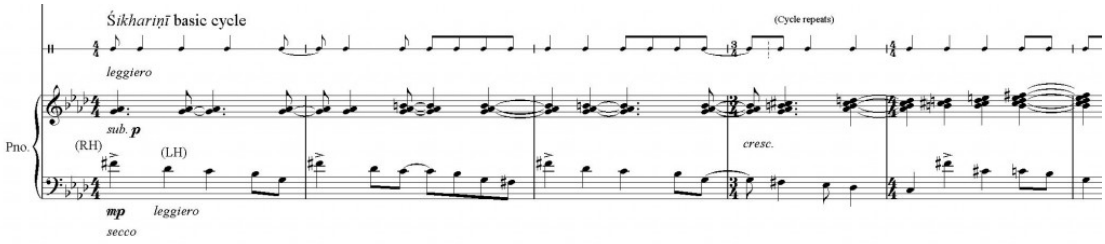
Transposed into quavers and crotchets, these provide us with two rhythmic patterns which, though complex, do have strongly-recognisable characters, even when overlapping each other:



Ex. 1: Rhythmic cycles in *Iele.*

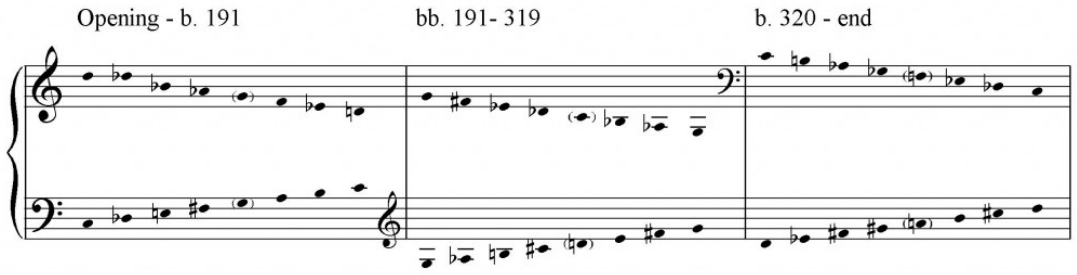
A simple calculation will show that the two cycles come back into syncronisation every 150 quavers – after every 6 repetitions of *Śikhariṇī* and after every 5 repetitions of *Śādūlavikrīḍitam.* However, the application of the metres is nowhere near as simplistic as simple juxtaposition and repetition (although it seems in retrospect that a different type of piece might easily make something of precisely this relentless cyclical structure without compromising on musical interest). In *Iele* there are large periods when only one cycle is in play (although the background grid set up above never varies in its theoretical presence), or where just one, or both cycles are present but not all notes available in the pattern are

sounded. Take the extract (below), from the piano part (bb. 211-214). The Left hand is clearly playing the Śādūlavikrīḍitam pattern, whilst the right hand, less clearly, plays Śikhariṇī. Although the right hand does not play each note of Śikhariṇī, tying them together to create longer note-values, the overlay of the original rhythmic pattern clearly shows it is still present as the basic rhythmic structure:



Ex. 2: Rhythmic cycle juxtaposition in *Iele.*

The harmonic basis of the piece also works around a grid. The inspiration for this comes from the first movement of Ligeti's *Piano Concerto*, in which the piano part combines a diatonic scale fragment in the right hand with its inversion in the left. As a harmonic counterpart to my Sanskrit-derived metrical structure, I took my current favourite group of North Indian ragas – that based around the *marwa* mode (see below) and used this to provide myself with a pitch structure that is comparable to the rhythmic structure in robustness. *Iele's* basic harmonic material consists of *marwa* combined with its inversion in a series of transpositions following the cycles of fifths – implying an underlying basic cadential cycle for the piece. In the graphic below, the left hand has the basic *marwa* mode (as a rising scale), whilst the right hand has its inversion:



Ex. 3: Structural transposition and inversion of *marwa* mode in *Iele.*

The bracketed notes refer to a convention in some ragas (for example in rag *marwa* itself), where the 5th is left out, creating an unsettled, dissonant effect against the drone (generally a tonic-dominant open fifth) – expressing, according to the French ethnomusicologist Alain Daniélou, an "uncomfortable time, when something is expected to happen…No G (no Pa) [ie the 5th degree of the scale] means that something essential is missing."[1] This convention is exploited at points where I want to limit the range of notes in play for expressive reasons, or in order to simplify the harmony. As can be seen from the extract above, the middle part of the piece (bar 191 onwards), where both *marwa* and its inversion begin on G, sets up a composite mode that completely lacks A and F natural. For a long part of this section I also treated the bracketed D and C as 'forbidden notes', ie the 5th notes of their respective modes, ending up with a long passage that is essentially in Ab minor, but approached from a quite unusual viewpoint.

There is another Ligeti technical borrowing here. Almost the first music I wrote for the piece sets up this technical challenge: the conjuction of modes in the opening third of the work has the full gamut of 12 chromatic pitches available. As I didn't want to write fully-chromatic music for the most part, (in fact, much of this piece has been about diatonic, even tonal simplification), I gave the right hand a series of dyads in the inverted form of the mode and then gave the left hand, which is playing rippling scale figures in *marwa,* the task of 'plugging' the gaps to produce as many clear diatonic triads as possible. This is directly lifted from Ligeti's étude no. 4, book I *(fanfares)*, where a similar process is designed to do the opposite: to create a fully-chromatic pitch world entirely using diatonic triads, in this case using a modal ostinato fragment as a basic reference point.

A further word about the tonal structure of the work: the borrowings from Hindustani classical music are not just based upon lifting the modes and creating new musical material from them. I straight away enjoyed playing with importing certain conventions from the foreign musical world I was exploring – particularly when I found I was able to use these conventions in order to limit the options open for me to use. I also found myself slipping into quoting salient, characteristic melodic motifs from some of the group of ragas associated with *marwa*, although this is fairly freely done. For example, there is a strong quote from the spring/night raga *panchama* at one point – a beautifully Sibelian rising B minor arpeggio in the first inversion. Adopting North Indian modal and melodic structures didn't just result in dry technical exercises – the process brought with it some of the expressive and aesthetic characteristics of the Hindustani classical music, although they appear in a very different context.

Closer to the folkloristic and programmatic elements in the piece is the use of the Romanian traditional song *Aguridă.* This partly acts as a repository for motivic material – particularly the

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[1] Alain Daniélou, *The Rāga-s of Northern Indian Music, p. 245,* Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi 2010.

song's opening falling minor third-rising tone motif and the *oom-pah* tonic-domimant bassline, but it also, and most importantly, acts as sinister sound-object that floats in and out of the listener's consciousness, sometimes dominating the music, sometimes far in the background (perhaps like the flickering B pedal in the murder scene from *Wozzeck*).

Aguridă is a quite exceptionally strange song. It shares with many Romanian folksongs an almost surreal, incantatory nature. Although the text of the song is virtually untranslatable (and, like translations of many folk lyrics can perhaps seem faintly ludicrous), I can assure my readers that the strangeness of the words persists in the original. The word *Aguridă* refers to a type of sour grape – which I haven't attempted to translate. I didn't think much was to be gained by translating the first line as 'sour grape, sour grape' - the words *"Aguridă, Aguridă"* seem to me to be the crux of the incantatory nature of the song and thus powerful as semi-magical words, and for their sonority:

Aguridă, Aguridă
Puica neicăi a dorită
Ah mânca-ţi-aş guriţa friptă
Ochişorii să ţi-i beau

Ochişorii să ţi-i beau
Într-un pahar de cleştar
Într-un pahar de cleştar
Că după drumuri nu mai stau

Şi vino neicuţă călare
Că trece Dunărea mare
Şi te taie la picioare,
Şi te taie la picioare

Şi de-o fi dor după nevastă
Să-ţi laşi calul să mai pască
Da, dar de-o fi dorul după mumă
Îmi fac calul tot o spumă.

"Aguridă, Aguridă
Little chicken of mine, much adored
Oh, might I eat your mouth fried
And your eyes to drink

Your eyes to drink
In a crystal glass
In a crystal glass
I'll remain on the road no longer."

"And come darling on horseback
To cross the great Danube
And it cuts your feet
And it cuts your feet

And if it was longing for wife
Then let your horse graze a while longer
But if it's longing for mother…"
"…I'll drive my horse into a frenzy."

The song seems to be written from the points of view of two different narrators: that of the first two stanzas is clearly male and that of the next two stanzas female – whether that of the first narrator's wife/lover or mother is left disturbingly unlcear. The very last line seems to be a return to the male perspective. The two voices are sung by one singer (the song isn't a duet). In lieu of any solid information (as opposed to quite fertile grounds for quasi-psychoanalytical speculation) about the song's meaning, this playing with the narrator's voice seems best appreciated purely as a defamiliarising literary device.

Aguridă is used precisely in my piece because of its otherness – it is something unexplained, unreal and remote. Whenever I quoted any aspect of it, it seemed radically – even magically – different from anything else around it. I also felt that it linked with the subject-matter of the piece in several subtle ways – in particular the song's mysterious, undefined, latently violent sexuality. Most striking is the disturbing image of intense desire in the lines "Oh, might I eat your mouth fried /and your eyes to drink / in a crystal glass". This acts as a creepy counterpart to the *Iele's* stealing of their victim's minds – I had an image of someone's mind being literally drunk via their eyes, leaving behing nothing but an empty husk. There is something of this in the ending to the piece, where the piano, which has been quoting the cimbalom part to Maria Tănase's version of *Aguridă*, suddenly fizzles into silence on a violent upsurge of its previous music, suddenly draining the music of all its shimmering, lush richness. This leaves a ghostly, dancing trio of Eb clarinet, violin and cello quietly playing the *Aguridă* music and gradually disappearing as if part of a fadeout of an endless loop.