Music for Walking

A Composition Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Music

Brown University

In Partial fulfilment of the Requirement for the degree of the Bachelor of Arts

Вγ

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Introduction

In *Music for Walking*, I aimed to undertake a composition project where movement and sound were held on equal footing. The history of dance and music are inextricably linked - it is almost impossible to imagine one being totally devoid of the other. Yet despite their symbiosis, there are few artists who holistically think of the two art forms existing together. Usually, the sound precedes the dance or vice versa, and one group of artists finds themselves working within the framework from the other. I was interested in actively pursuing a composition project where the role of movement is woven into the piece from the very beginning, where sound informs physical realities and where dance shapes the musical form. Experimenting with various strategies of organizing musicians and dancers, I wanted to find out how to work across the cultural divide between these two artistic practices.

To do so, I framed my compositional project as an investigation into the nature of walking. This specific choice was a very pragmatic one: whether or not people had ever thought of it that much, most people have some, if not extensive, personal experience with walking. Therefore, there was an easy access point for everyone involved in this project: I could simply invoke their own memories and experiences with the subject to bring a point across. But walking is far from a triviality. Pedestrianism has long been the source of inquiry for artists, writers, scientists and designers, and embarking on this composition project meant I could interact with all these disciplines and figure out where I as a musician contribute to the conversation.

It was actually in these conversations, with my work and the outside world, that I grappled the most with. The questions that I had initially thought I would be confronting - how to get dancers and musicians on the same page, and how to efface the borders between them - took a back seat to permanent questioning on how I was interacting with these histories and realities of walking, and wondering how my work pertained to the world outside. While this thesis presents the work that was put into staging a performance of my pieces in mid-March, the work of this thesis is not yet done. Not only is the question of how to collaborate between dancers and musicians an open one with an infinitude of possible strategies; Music for Walking has also been the starting point for me to consider how my work fits into the world: how can I valorize what I make? How can my artistic output be an instrument of commentary, of change, of experimenting with the world around me? Which assumptions did I previously make as a musician that I want to let go of? While this project had apparent closure in a final performance, my thinking about pedestrianism, and of how to create art that I care about, has just begun.

Production Process

The aim of this thesis was to produce some body of work and present it in the middle of March. I anticipated working in close conjunction with good friends of mine on both the music and dance components culminating into the show. As it turned out, though, scheduling made me have to reconsider some of my plans.

One of the main differences between music and dance from a cultural perspective is that dancers tend to rehearse longer than musicians would for a given production. The mode of knowledge transmission for dancers is often oral, and through demonstration. Learning a piece involves a high level of interaction between choreographer and dancers. Musicians, on the other hand, will fall back on a written score. A common standardized language and code enables players to quickly arrive at the spot they need to be. My hope was to somewhat subvert these expectations, by emulating the dancer's process more while working with the musicians: relying on oral transmissions to create pieces, using physical gestures and instructions to construct musical phrases,.... I was interested in entering the rehearsal with less material fixed on paper and more material that could be informed by conversation with musicians, and collaboration with dancers. Meanwhile, I was hoping to try to bring in frameworks for the dancers to follow, with which we could easily construct pieces faster and allow the dancers themselves to fill in the details.

On the dancers' side, this worked pretty well. In some pieces we sat down and choreographed out each movement, in others, we set up structures that we then fine-tuned over the course of a number of workshops. A number of sections achieved a golden mean of these two, where we first established a set of movement vocabulary, and then imposed formalized structures on these movements. These approaches were effective in choreographing some pretty intricate sequences between two dancers who had never even met before the final performance. Despite their rehearsal time constraints, the fact that we established a score to follow allowed the two to dance together without a hitch.

On the musicians' side, I had to revise some of these initial ideas for generating material. Due to scheduling, I firstly could not work with a number of musicians I knew well and trusted. Additionally, I did not have enough time with the band to do anything too out of the ordinary. For the most part, the music had to be written in full, in a score that could not be too complicated. Another scheduling issue precluded the musicians and dancers from ever rehearsing together before the day itself. What this meant is that I had to construct a series of links between the dance and the music (visual, auditory, or

personal cues) that could be easily rehearsed even without the presence of everyone in the room, so that when the time came, people could easily synchronize their activities.

The Score

What follows is a breakdown of the score in each section. Throughout the process, I read a wide variety of sources, ranging from physiology journals to poetry to design manifestos. I do not provide a survey of this literature here as the aim was not to summarize these research efforts, but rather inundate myself in their worlds in the hope to reflect some of it back into how I thought about the music I was writing.

The piece crosses through three sets of perspectives on walking: an anatomical take on human locomotion; a poetic perspective on how pedestrianism shapes our perception of the world; and the perspective of the urban designer, and how pedestrians exist within the urban realm. Where these three phases begin and end is up for debate: I found that going through this outwards expansion of spatial scope resulted in ideas from the smallest level making its way all the way up to the level of city planning. What follows is a short breakdown of each piece in *Music for Walking*, and some of the ideas that guided its creation.

Phase 1: Anatomy

In this section I was predominantly interested in how to construct a walk from first principles. A walk can be analyzed as consisting of a whole number of mechanic twists and lever actions and counteractions, as a system of interlocking rhythms in space and time. It is essential that these rhythms be somewhat accurate in space and time (if not, the walker would lose balance and fall over), but it is also surprising how much variability can be tolerated in these rhythms. In fact, it is shifting the relative importances of various rhythms - the arm swing, the hip gyration, the head bob - that can constitute a large part of a walker's identity (for example, a more exaggerated head bob is considered more 'masculine' whereas a relatively static head is a more traditionally feminine walking quality.) In this first section, I wanted to construct a walk: not just in the movement, by building up some of these rhythms from small spasms to full pendulum motions, but also in the music. On the page, the music seems monotonous and mechanic in its repetitiveness. In performance, the slight variabilities in tone quality, speed, synchronization create an appropriate analogy to how the walker walks - following a traditional blueprint but with their own idiosyncrasies. The dancer, meanwhile, builds his way up from small twitches to something approaching, and finally resembling, an in-place walk.

2. The second section is linked to the first, in that human anatomy is still primary concern. Here, though, the time of the walk is slowed down to a

complete crawl, allowing other biorhythms to come to the fore. The middle strings and clarinets exhibit a breathing pattern, while the double bass invokes the heartbeat. It was crucial to pay homage to these three rhythms (heartbeat, breath, and walking rate) as three musical elements that our body perceives almost continuously.

<u>3.</u> Having established the parameters of the walk, this section is where I wanted to permute the rhythms, expand and contract them to see where the walk breaks down, where we no longer call it a walk and it becomes a dance, or it becomes a mania. The musicians play their ostinatos with vigor and impetuousness, while the dancer gets locked into loops that become smaller and smaller, and more and more urgent. This movement culminates with a first moment of exhaustion for the dancer.

Transitioning to Phase 2: Dérive, and the body in space

- <u>4.</u> This motet-inspired piece starts a small collection of pieces that aim to examine very specifically the coexistence of music and movement. In this piece, the three-voiced motet is mirrored in splitting the body of the dancer into three "voices": the arms, the legs and the torso. As the music permutes through various combinations of these voices singing various melodies, the dancer too cycles between various phrases. This piece marks some of the closest writing between music and dance in the entire piece, and was quite difficult to get right.
- <u>5.</u> A solo clarinettist is accompanied by (the footsteps of?) two dancers in unison. Where at first the rhythm of the three performers is identical, as the piece progresses, the dancers and musician lose each other again: the clarinettist floats higher and higher into more and more ephemeral melodic fragments, while the dancers find a more and more rigorous structure through their walking through space. I liked how this piece turned out, as a continuous question of who was "following" whom: were the dancers just acting as a spatialized percussion? Was the clarinettist tracing the dancers' mood? It was hard to figure out on whose "turf" we were, and for a brief moment it seemed like we were in a zone just between the two.
- 6. Following this moment was a moment for solo piano, quasi-improvised, and two hands, improvised choreography. Where 4 had questioned the body as musical instrument, here I investigate the flipside and honed in on how the physical act of music could act as a choreography. The hands of the choreography here also connote the imagination of walking: the dancer becomes self-aware, cognizant of the body's possibilities and how it manifests itself in pedestrian space. (Video accompaniment: "Video for 6.")

7. This piece is the "heart" of my readings on derive. The technique of derive is meant to traverse a multitude of moods in a short span of time, to map out the "psychogeography" (as Situationists such as Debord referred to it) in a short span of time. The image of letting yourself be guided through space by the unseen, to leave behind the concerns of the every day and just experience the realities of the world was a very alluring prospect from the 19th Century French thinkers. This piece aims to invoke that mood, of just walking, walking for walking's sake, and letting the world come to you as it may: small bursts of birdsong, cars floating by. What was missing for me in the Situationist approach is a constant awareness of the own body in space: while they call to action, they rarely acknowledge the fact that walking requires physical exertion. The ostinato in the piano and bass here are remnants of the first few pieces, viewing walking as a repetitive gesture and system of rhythmseffectively grounding the walker in space. For this section, the dancers were given loose instructions on how to navigate the performance space, but very little guidance was given beyond that - I did not want to ruin their keen sense of alertness and being in the moment by giving them cognitive distractions to follow.

8. Another aspect missing from the derive or flanerie approach to walking around the city was the personal stake of identity as one walks around. It was inevitable for me to at some point have to grapple with how walking is not just defined by the city around you, but also how that city reacts to you. Over the course of writing these pieces, I was confronted with the realities of the homeless walking through the street and being assaulted by police; of people of color feeling unsafe in their own communities because law enforcement may turn against them; of women and transgender people who, in walking in public, expose themselves to the real threat of being accosted, assaulted or killed. It was hard for me to find an appropriate way to broach these topics as a white cisgendered man, and this piece was where I struggled most to say what I wanted to say while being confronted with the limits of the medium of a concert performance. Eventually I decided on an improvised structure, both for the pianist as for the dancer, and allowing at a crucial point to let the story be told by the video rather than by me. The video highlights the moment where protesters against the non-indictment in the Ferguson case take to the highways: a telling moment in both how pedestrians feel safe or unsafe in their own environments, as well as how the mere act of walking becomes a political tool - not just in protests or in actions of civil disobedience, but also, for some identities, just as a matter of existing. (Video accompaniment: "Video for 8.")

Phase 3: Structures

9. After the display of walking as a potential to subvert structures (by entering the highway), it was time to take a step back again and reflect on how the built

environment creates parameters for walking. This piece in particular uses regular structures to emulate the regularity of the city grid. The dance, too, uses a set of fixed movements in a strict lattice to bring about the point of walking as controlled by an external force. String is brought out as a measuring device, almost acting as an antagonist to walking. As the piece progresses, the melody starts shifting relative to itself. The image I had in mind was that of a cube, like an office building, that slowly changes shape as you walk past it, while fundamentally remaining the same. In 19th Century Paris, writers lamented the Hausmannization of the city, and how it inhibited the free pedestrian roaming in favor of organized avenues. The imposition of these structures complicates the matter of walking as an act of rebellion against larger capitalist forces: it becomes hard to tell whether we are freely walking, or whether our experiences are planned, choreographed by the city. Walking around downtown Providence, there is a street that is completely lined with buildings, until all of a sudden you have a full view on your left of a giant parking lot and mural of a man pensively staring at his hand. Whenever I walk past this mural, I am momentarily awestruck by the sudden change in perspective; but I am also suspicious at how beautifully orchestrated the moment is. Compare this for example to last year's appearances of the "LONELY" tags around the city: they were in inconvenient locations, spotted by chance, sneaking into the life of Providence in a way that was apparently too threatening for the city to confront at face value. Where one mural is planned and carefully executed, "LONELY" made you question why someone felt the need to battle the odds, squirm into the bizarre places to proclaim his message. To me, these instances of public art, and how they were treated differently by city government, exposed saliently how cities operate as choreographies of conformity and rebellion. They also opened my eyes to setting a bar to how art could engage with public space, and demand real attention for real-life issues.

10. Closing, I keep at this idea of the city as a choreographic unit, here taking the Shibuya crossing in Tokyo as a musical and choreographic model. Alternating moments of frenetic pedestrian chaos with the sleek serenity of cars was a beautiful image to consider some of the issues I had been thinking about regarding pedestrians in the city. Having established at the beginning of the piece how walking is an individualized rhythm, how do I reconcile that with the notion that cities try to homogenize the walking experience by encapsulating it, streamlining it? Do we need to take over highways to re-live the spirit of action that the Situationists envisioned for their derives? The Shibuya crossing video provided an interesting take on the issue: a homogenous overall texture, with internally a diverse range of movements. Here, the choreography of the city seemed to embrace the idiosyncracies of the individual walkers while still enforcing its own agenda. To mirror this, I gave each of the musicians individually diverging rhythmic lines. The dancers alternate between moments of complete stillness, moments of walking around "freely" and moments of choreography that was deliberately allowed to expose people's personalities in their own idiosyncracies. At the end of the piece, I let

all the musicians join the dancers in just walking back and forth across the stage: a "safe" movement, a free going back and forth within set parameters.

Conclusion

Music for Walking, in my eyes, accomplished some of its goals. I was able to put on a performance involving both dancers and musicians who each worked within a cohesive framework. I managed to strategize ways for people from various artistic backgrounds to find common ground and create something unified together.

Several open questions remain looming though. Was a concert performance truly the optimal way to grapple with this material? Having spent so much time walking around, trying to make sense of the world and how I was experiencing it, it felt disingenuous to try to replicate this experience in a studio setting, let alone in a concert hall. In my readings I was confronted with how walking can be so much more powerful as a political and social event than I had previously anticipated - how do I account for that in an artistic production? Were the strategies I devised to choreograph walking just perpetuations of existing systems? What sort of actions would I have to undertake to truly break out of the institution and reflect upon the lived realities of pedestrians? How does a musician act complicit in existing structures of power, and what sorts of interventions can a musician undertake - both within and without of the concert world? How could I follow "LONELY"'s example more?

I imagine some of these questions, while now framed in the context of *Music for Walking*, will resonate in my further practices. How do I make relevant work? How do I present this work? How do I want people to interact with my work? What am I actually saying, at whose expense? These are all questions I aim to be asking myself from now on, with perhaps never finding a satisfying answer. In the meantime, I'll just go for another walk.

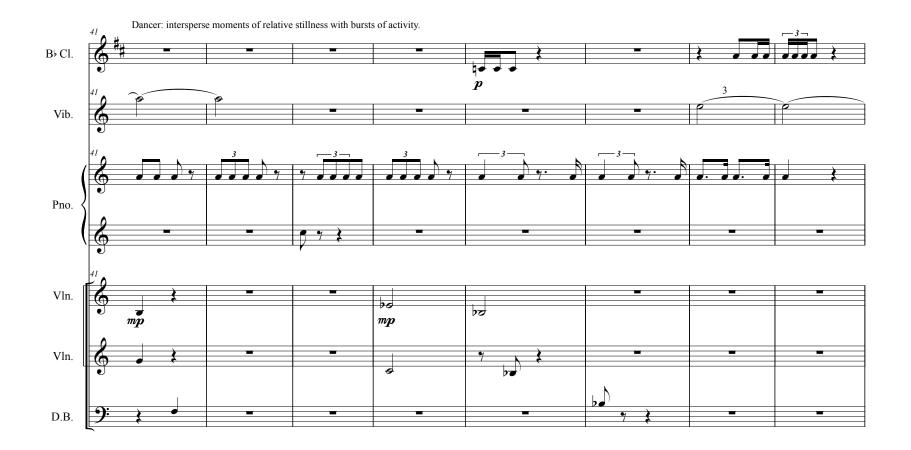


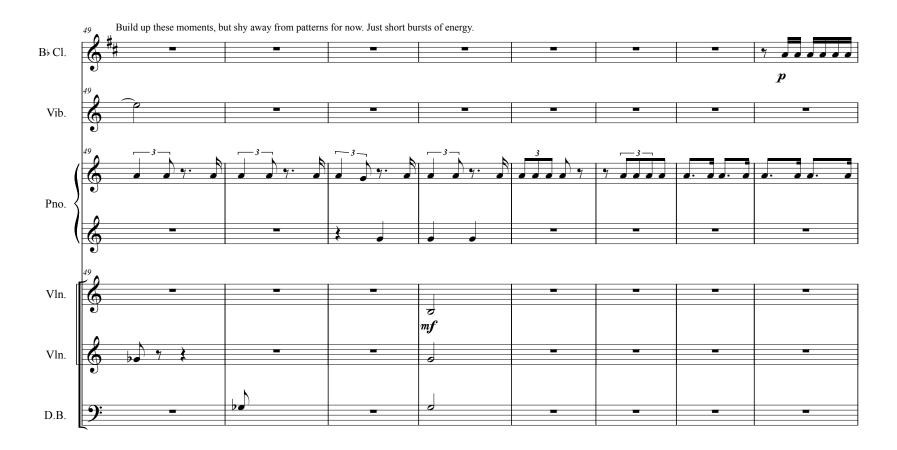
Score



Vln.

D.B.







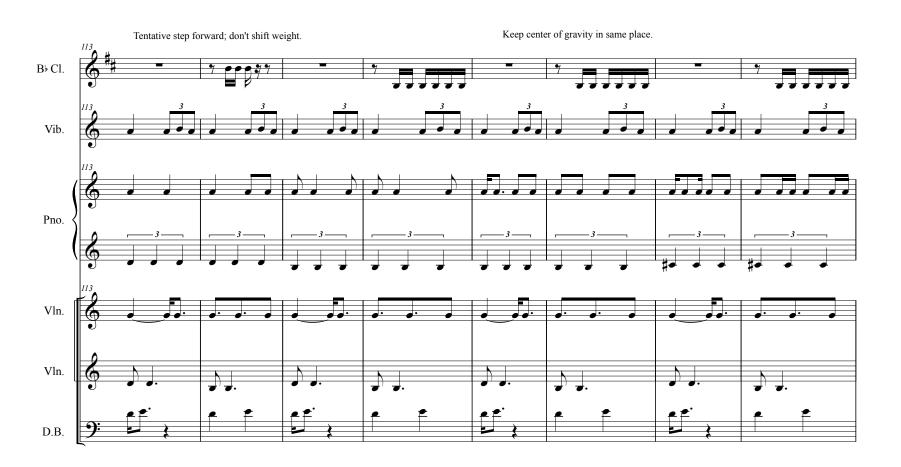


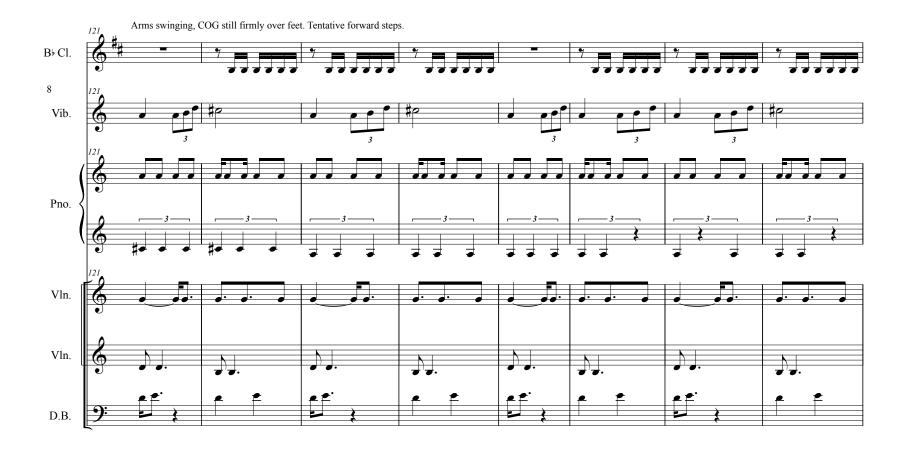
mp

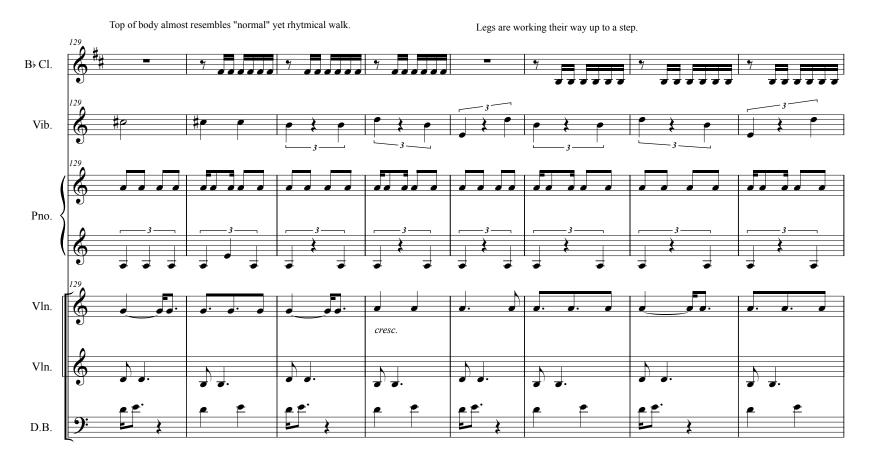














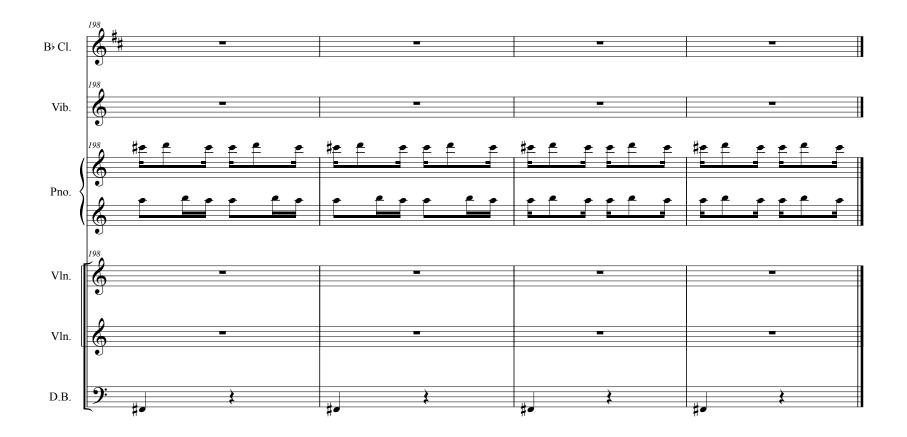


Vln.

D.B.

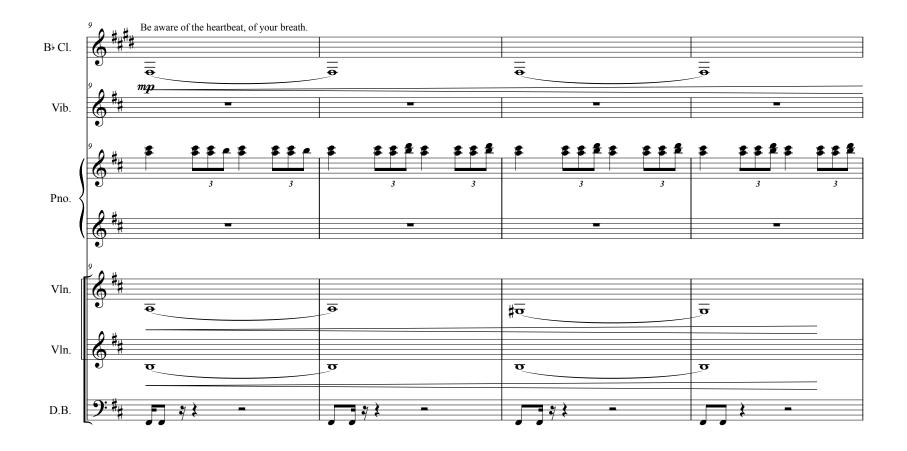


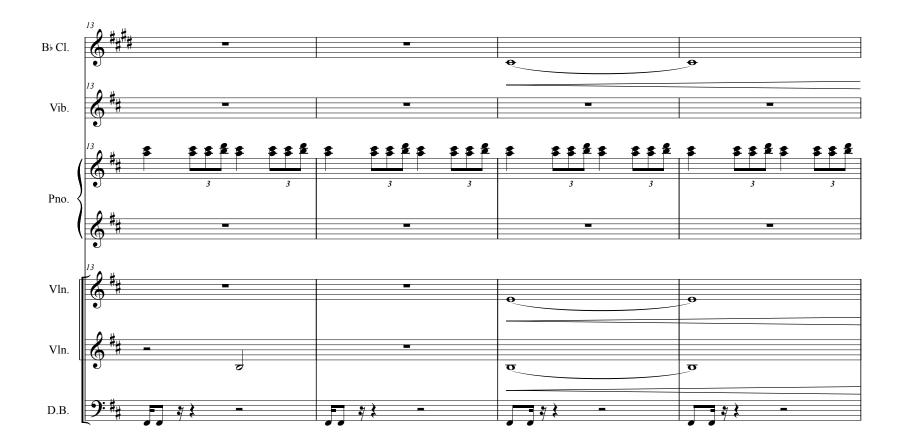


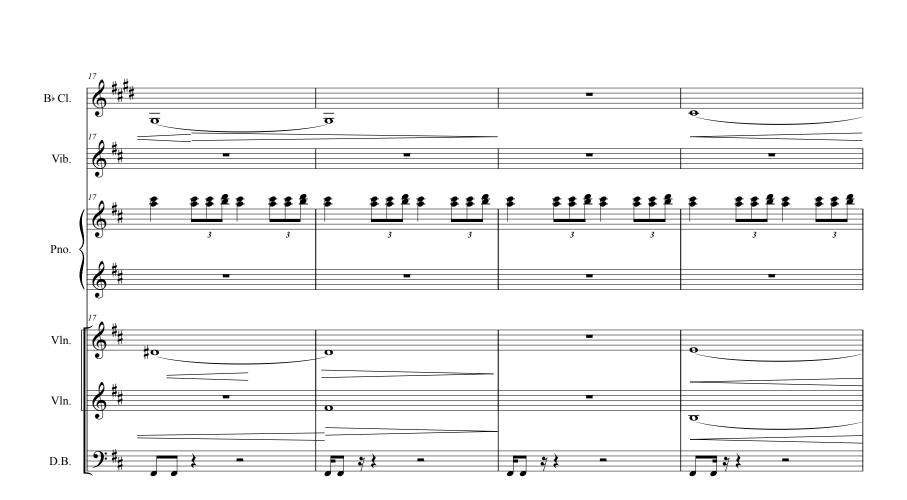


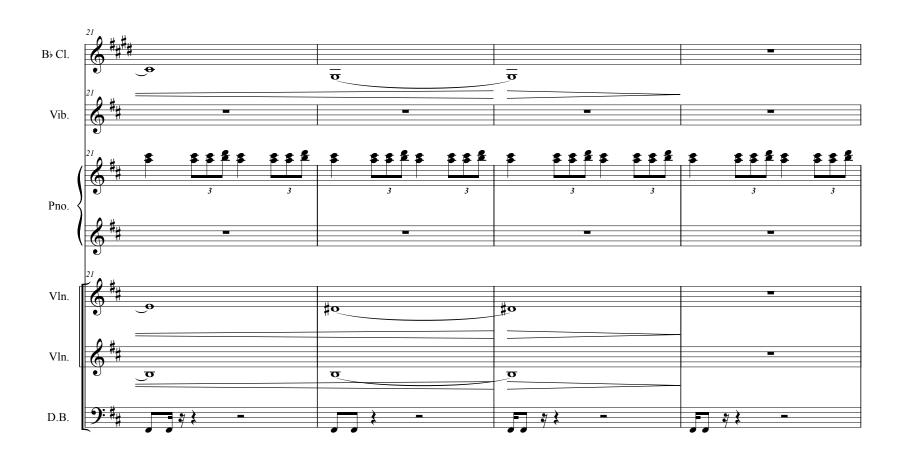


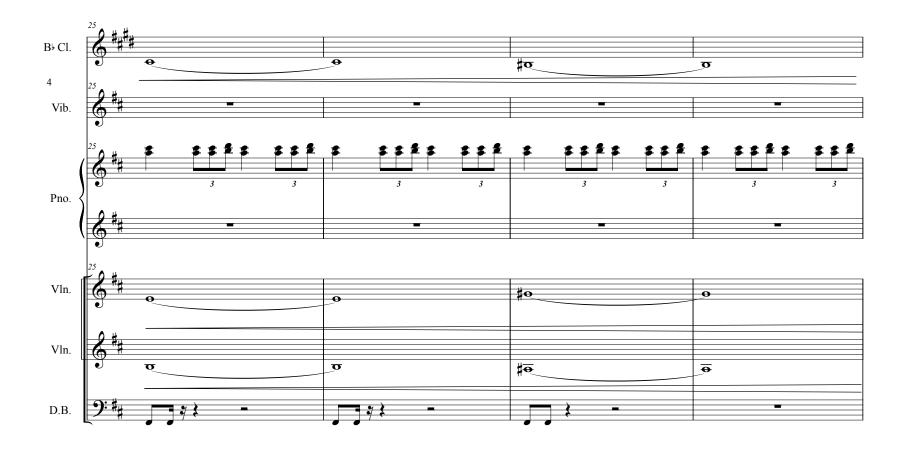
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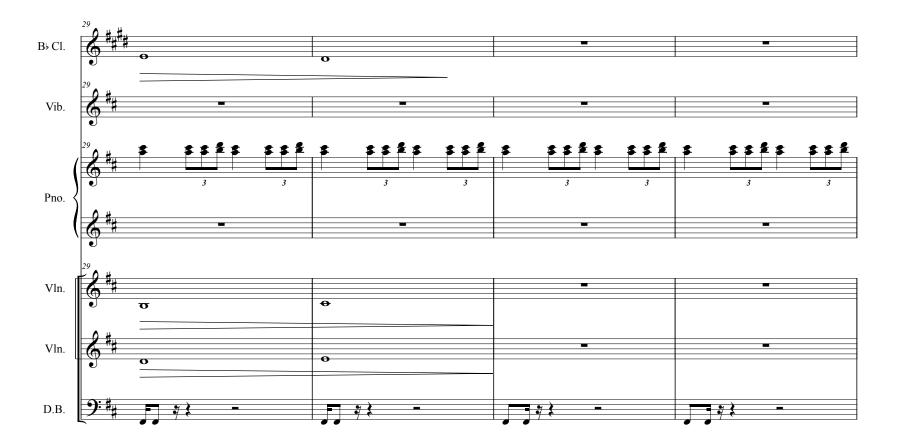




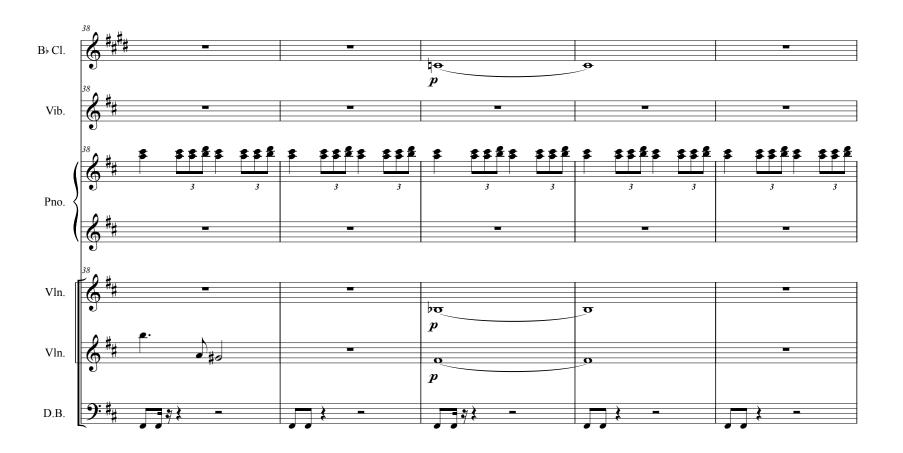


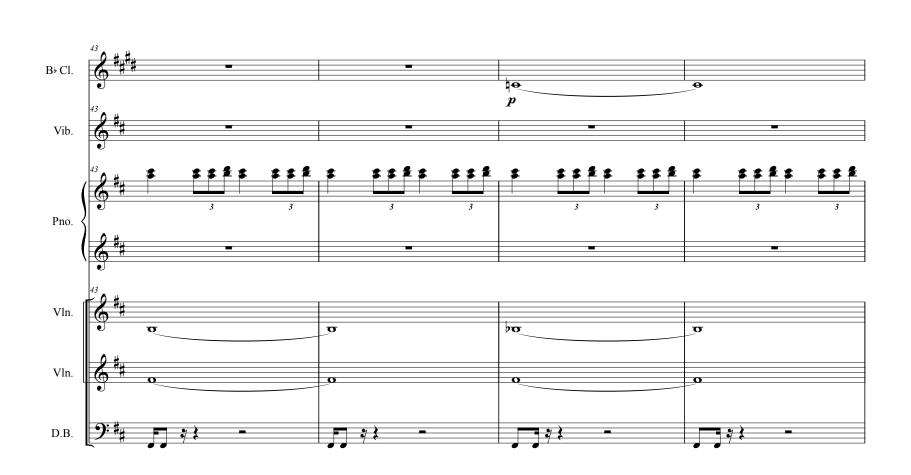


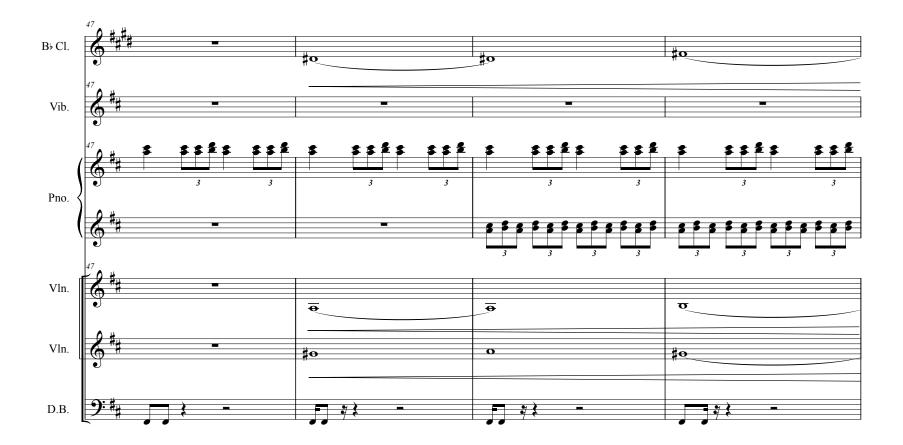


















Step in place, jumping and alternating feet













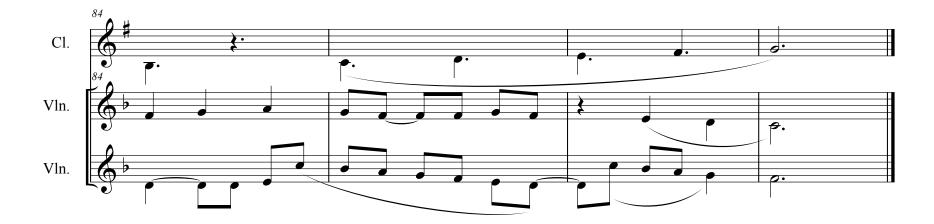




Sequence A - arms, legs, torso.







There are two movement sequences, which were constructed thinking of arms, legs and torso separately. The explanation given below describes the sequences as completely put together, as these are most informative in terms of timing. However, each of the body parts should be attributed its own phrasing and personality.

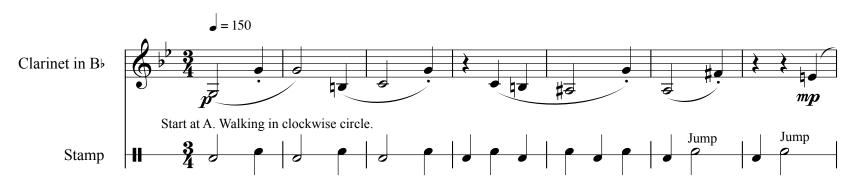
The timing is gleaned by syncing the footwork to the slowest moving melodic line.

SEQUENCE A.

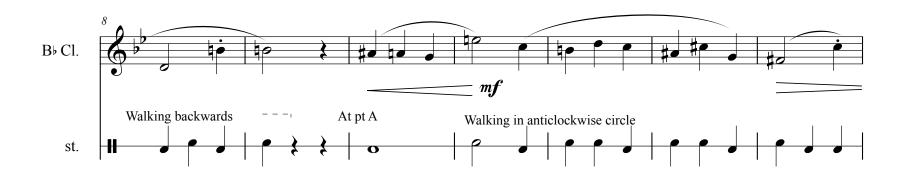
Left foot back, right arm slight swing forward, torso starts leaning forward. Right foot back, right arm slight swing back, torso continues. Left foot back, right arm moderate swing back, torso continues. Left foot back, right arm moderate swing back, torso continues. Left foot back, right arm large swing forward, torso veers upright. Right foot forward, right arm to the right. Skip backwards, right arm crosses over chest, left arm back at hip height. Another skip, both arms move diagonally up right, torso turns slightly to the left. Right foot makes a small semicircle from back to front, left arm plunges down and describes a full vertical circle from back to front, right arm glides to cross stomach. Left foot makes a small weightless kick, left arm describes another circle from front to back and meets right arm, torso leans slightly to the right. Weight still on right foot, left foot on ground, right arm holds left arm and drags it to the right hand side of the body. Torso twists along to right. Left foot twists a little, arms expand into cradle, and then out into right arm up, left arm diagonally to the left ("7 o clock" pose.) Torso coils towards left hand. Slight weight shift onto left foot, arms start contracting towards center of gravity, torso, twists to look at right arm. Feet place together again, arms sink to the side, torso unwinds into neutral pose.

SEOUENCE B

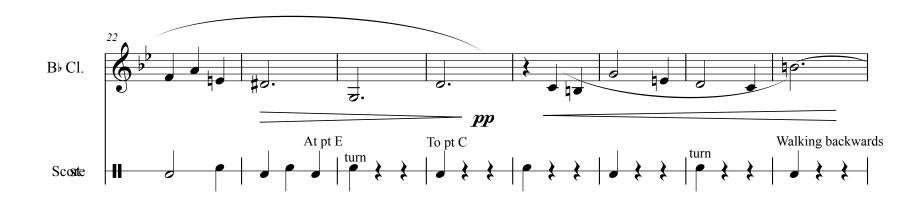
Small step on left walking into a tiptoe on right arms small swing forward, torso slight bob backwards. Repeat, this time with larger arm movement. Repeat, this time arms reaching eye height; this time freeze at the apex of the tiptoe, with left foot forward in air. Lean torso a little to the right, bring left arm around to spin 270 degrees clockwise. Arms are parallel to ground, and bent at elbow, arms in front of head for this turn. Turn complete, place left foot behind right then make a small circle with right foot to bring it behind left. Lean forward with torso while elbows drop and meet, keeping hands at the same height. Arms then flap like wings forward, while torso leans backwards and feet remain in same relative position while skipping back twice. Torso leans all the way b back, arms down by the side, left foot slightly up due to momentum. Step on left, skip forward twice, propelled by swinging arms forward and torso leaning forward. Turn 180 degrees quickly on left foot by swinging right arm across body and let torso lean with. Assume a neutral standing position. Lunge with right foot forward, throwing arms back at the lowest point. Come up from lunge and kick with left. Then, step with right, swing arm with left. Turn by leaning torso at the last moment of the step to face audience. Now repeat the three tiptoe steps from the beginning of the sequence, but in reverse, heading backwards.



Notes under the line indicate right foot, notes above are left foot

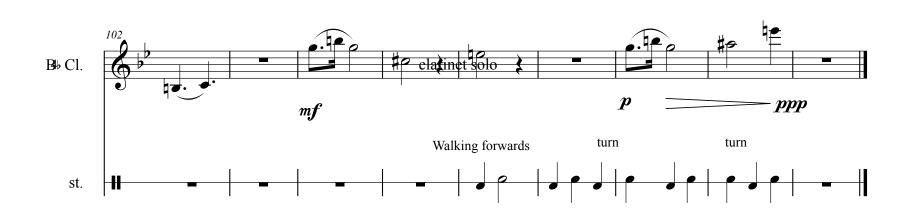














Instructions for pianist:

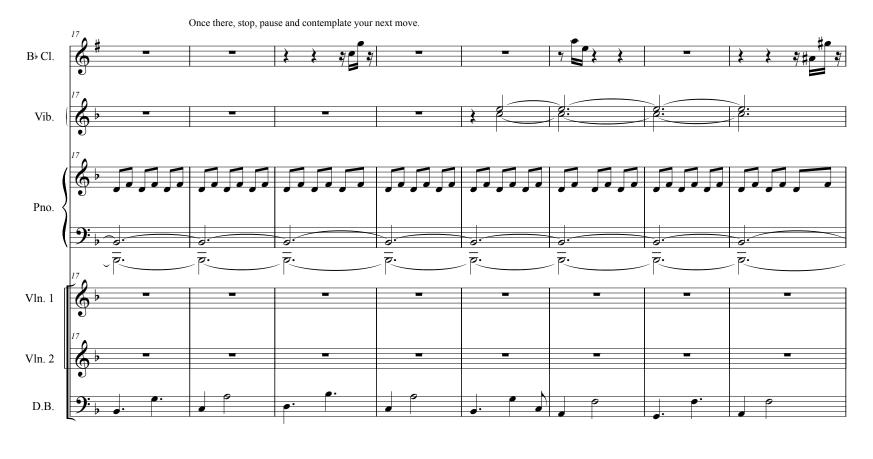
With these two themes, improvise. Allow dwelling on one theme or the other, and work towards moments where the two meet. Find common ground, and find differences. Allow the movement of your hand to guide you.

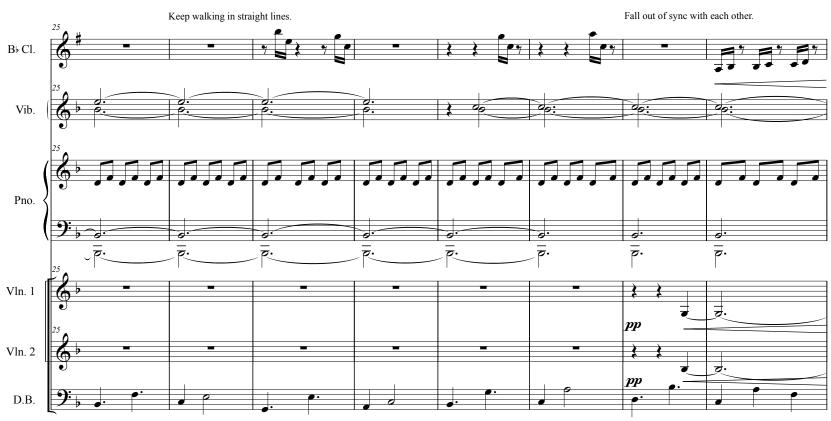
Instructions for dancer:

With your index and middle finger, form a little "pedestrian" with each hand. Allow the two hands to walk separately and freely. Find moments for the two to cross paths, to meet each other, dance with each other and let each other go. Play with the image of your hand as a person and your hand as just a hand, and let those two images collapse into each other.



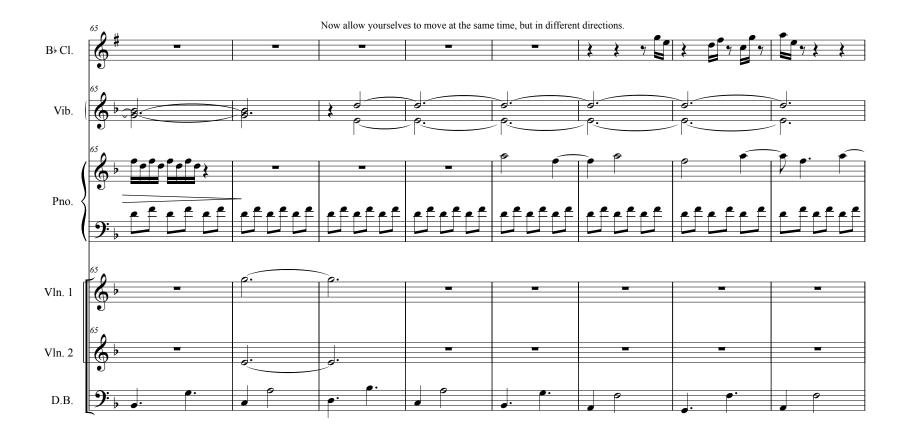


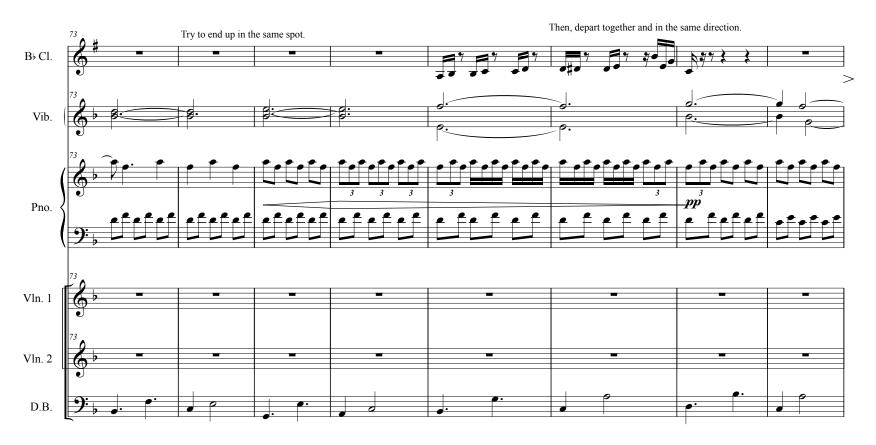








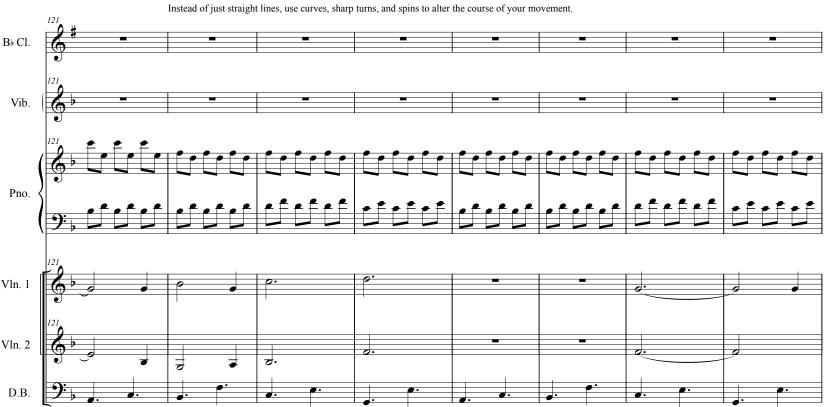














Vln. 1

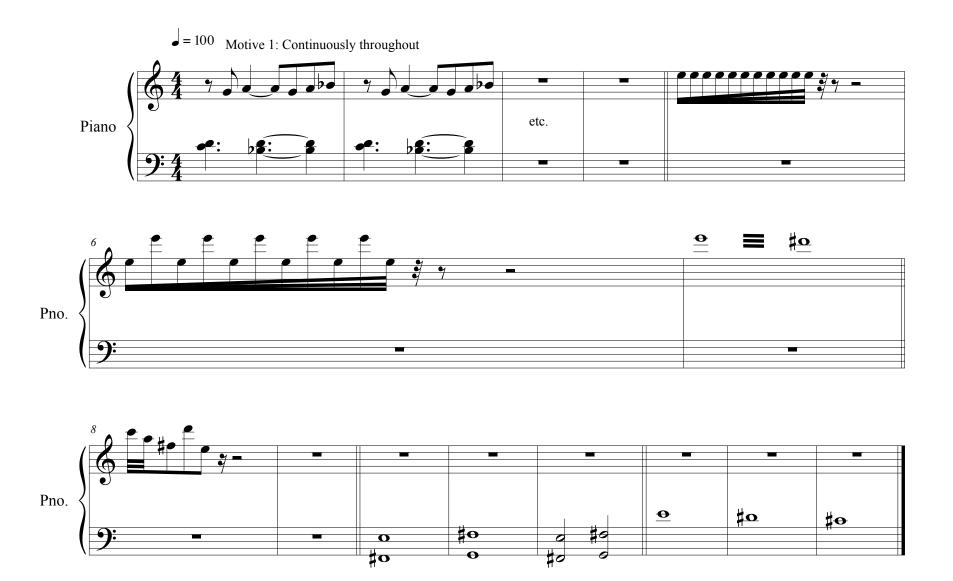
Vln. 2











Pianist instructions:

As with 6., these are themes to work with. Create a story going from one moment to the next, keeping a close eye on the dancer. When the dancer falls, start the video. Introduce E4 as a central pitch to gravitate around, highlighting E major chords versus e minor accompaniment. As the video cuts out and just the audio remains, first build up low rumbling chords and then diminish your presence entirely until all we hear is the video recording.

Dancer instructions:

Walk center stage, face audience for a short while.

Walk to the side of the stage and put on heels. Walk straight towards the audience and stop right in front of them. Make prolonged eye contact.

Put on earrings while still making eye contact with the audience. Then, slowly, turn to the screen.

Walk slowly towards the screen, with your hands up. Every once in a while, look behind you at the audience, almost fearfully. Lose one heel.

Fall.

Slowly come back up and watch the video. Then, slowly take off your remaining shoe, gather your belongings and walk to the audience. Keep your hands up, holding your shoes.

Slowly walk off stage.

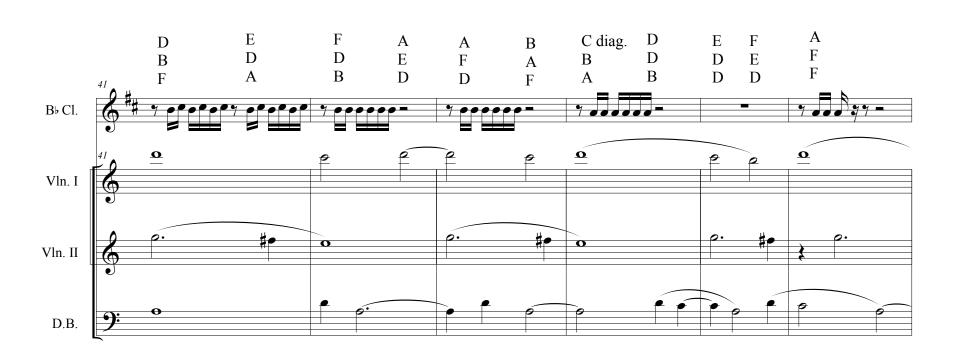
Dancer 2 waits at H. Dancer 3 walks to piano to fetch pianist/Dancer 1.

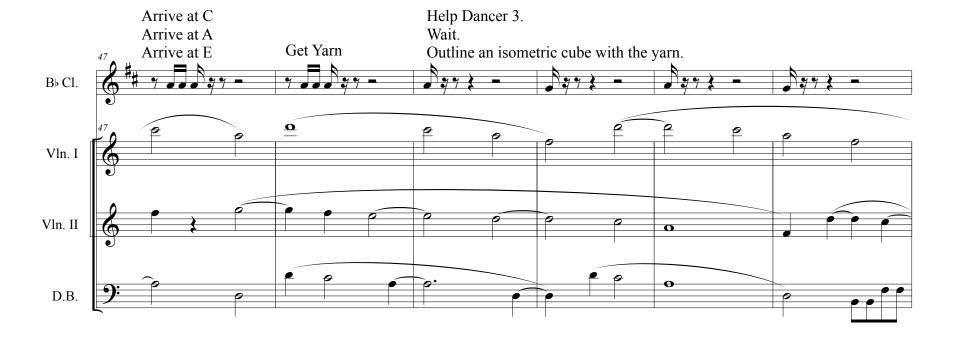


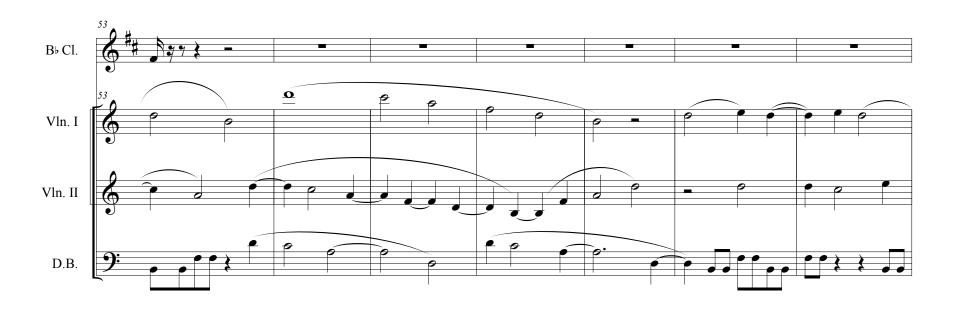




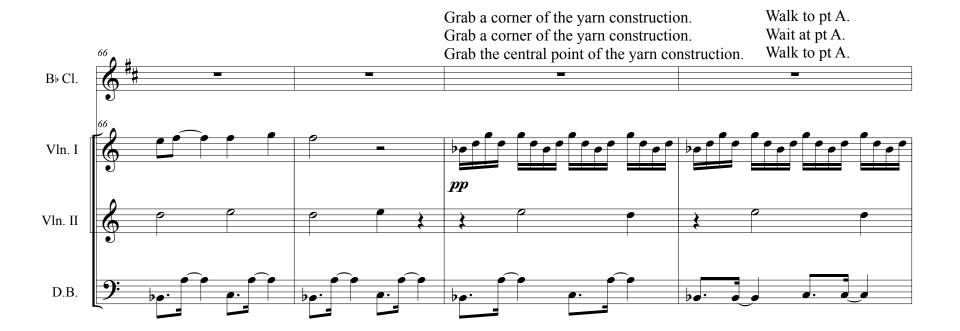






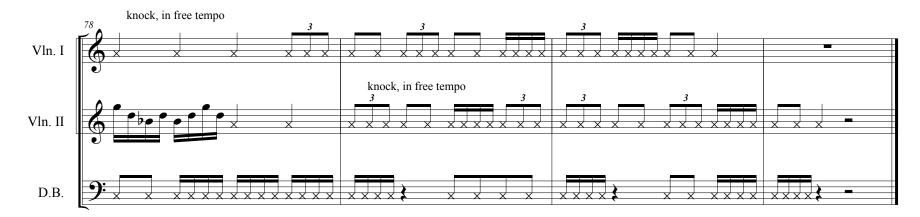












Knocking continues until 10. is cued.

The dance here constructs a shifting counterpoint of six basic movements, each taking two beats of time.

- A: Kick with the right leg, arms swing up.
- B: Touch step with the left leg, right arm straight forward.
- C: Touch step with the right leg, torsion to the right, left arm swings over to the right hip.
- D: One whole step forward with the right foot.
- E: look left and right.
- F: a small jump and then a step backwards with left foot first.





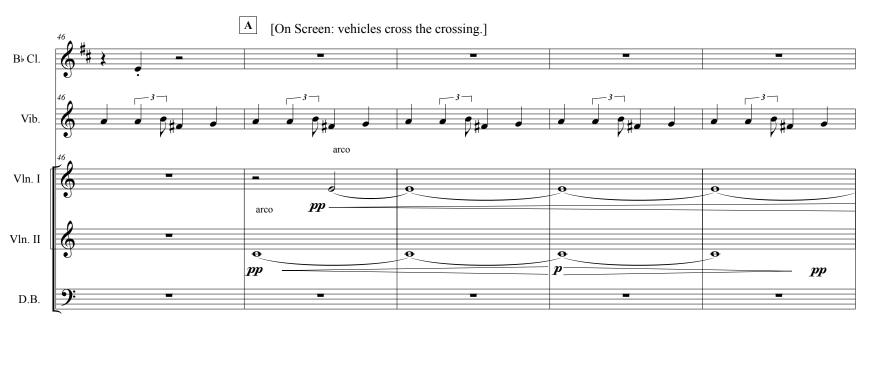




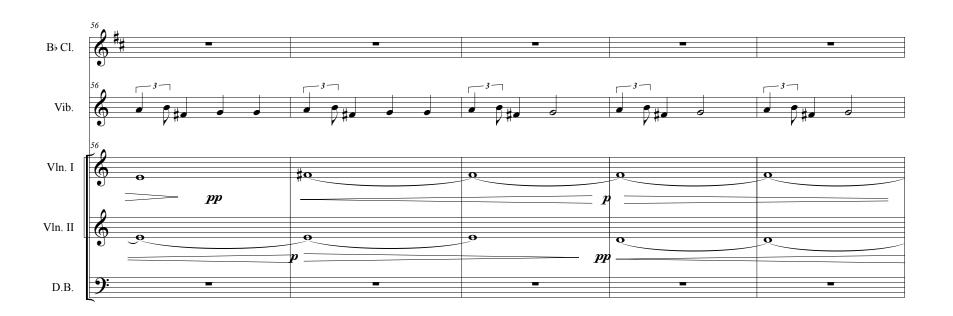


In their own time, the dancers meet up again at C. They relax - they are waiting as if at a pedestrian crossing.















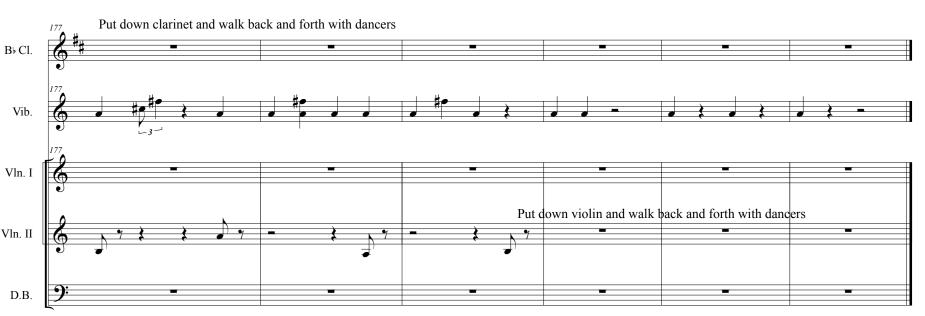












All of the sequences take the vibraphone's beat as their own. They are all done facing from E to C and done both forward and in retrograde. When in canon, dancer 2 waits 2 beats before initiating the sequence.

SEQUENCE A.

Right foot kick.

Left foot back kick, right foot hop.

Left foot kick forward, right foot hop.

Left foot step.

Right foot step and turn 360 degrees.

Left foot step.

Right foot step.

SEQUENCE B

Step right

Step left

Skip turn 180 on right.

Skip turn 180 on left.

Hop on right.

Hop on left.

Hop and turn on right.

Hop and turn on left.

SEQUENCE C

Step right

Step left

Skip right

Step left.

"Fall onto" right catch left.

Step right

Step left

Step right

SEQUENCE D

Step right

Step left

Turn on right

Turn on left

Turn on right

Turn on left

Step right

Step left