

Liner note for New World Records album *James Romig: The Complexity of Distance* (#80837) © 2022 © 2022 Anthology of Recorded Music, Inc. Used by permission.

The Complexity of Distance (2020)

by Anthony Donofrio

Distance: noun. 1. The length of the space between two points; 2. The condition of being far off; remoteness.

At the onset, we hear a single, heavily distorted power chord. The chord fades, and then we hear three more iterations of the chord in regular, pulsed attacks. To some, especially fans of metal and its many subgenres, this sound is welcoming and familiar. To others, this sound is surprising, perhaps arresting – an unexpected opening from a composer known for music of quiet, prolonged stillness.

This chord and its four attacks signal the opening of *The Complexity of Distance*, a 58-minute collaboration between composer James Romig (2019 Pulitzer Prize finalist)¹ and guitarist Mike Scheidt (founder/guitarist/vocalist of the doom metal band YOB)². For Romig, the chord came to symbolize his “self” and his “place” in the process; as the composition of the piece evolved and developed, it became the chord to which he could relate.³ For Scheidt, the chord takes on several meanings: the physical (a moment of rest); the spiritual (like the OM syllable in a Buddhist mantra); the psychological (its cyclic recurrence becoming hypnotic); a defiant “assertion of intention.”⁴ These four attacks also set the piece’s formal and harmonic structure into motion. *The Complexity of Distance* is completely built upon a 13:14:15 ratio, which Romig describes in the program notes:

“The work’s formal structure comprises three simultaneously unfolding strands of evenly spaced rhythmic pulses, each articulating a unique pair of foundational chords that

mutate and combine only when heard coincidentally with, or in close proximity to, others. The first rhythmic strand alternates, at a time-interval of 13 beats, between chords with roots written E and G (sounding A and C in A-standard tuning⁵). The second strand alternates every 14 beats between chords with roots written C and D (F/G). The third strand alternates every 15 beats between chords of B and A (E/D). Beginning and ending with a unison pulse in all three strands, the 13:14:15 ratio takes 2,730 beats to resolve. At a metronome tempo of 48, the cyclic process lasts nearly an hour.”⁶

Therefore, the first chord initiates the process by simultaneously presenting the first sonority in each of the three strands. The second, third, and fourth chords present the next pulse in the strands of 13, 14, and 15, respectively. Romig’s rationale for starting the strands with the same chord serves two purposes:

“The aesthetic reason for the “extra” E chords at the beginning (and end) are to provide a “curtain going up” (and then a “curtain going down”) on the piece. The technical reason is that one of the “rules” I created for the composition is that when chords from different strands coincide, or occur only one beat away from one another, they interact with each other in some way, creating a hybrid sonority. Therefore, if the three rhythmic attacks in measure 4 were different chords, the laws of the composition would insist that they be blended in some way. Because at that early point in the composition the six primary chords had not yet been revealed, it seemed prudent to re-attack the initial E-chord (sounding A, of course) and further set the scene before the “main characters” (the six primary chords) were introduced and the action got underway.”⁷

¹ <https://www.jamesromig.com/>

² <https://www.yobislove.com/>

³ James Romig: Conversation among James Romig, Mike Scheidt, and the author. February 17, 2022.

⁴ Mike Scheidt: Conversation among James Romig, Mike Scheidt, and the author. February 17, 2022.

⁵ Scheidt plays in A-standard tuning, where each of the 6 strings of the guitar is tuned down a perfect fifth.

⁶ James Romig: *The Complexity of Distance*. Parallax Music Press, 2020.

⁷ James Romig: Interview with the author, February 13, 2022.

Establishing ratios and sets of “laws” for a composition is nothing new for Romig, who studied with Charles Wuorinen and Milton Babbitt – two of America’s foremost serialists – during his Ph.D. studies at Rutgers University. For example, 2014’s *Bridges* for orchestra, and 2019’s *Petrified Spaces* for alto saxophone and vibraphone use ratios of 7:8:9 and 9:10:11, respectively. In those pieces, the ratio applies solely to rhythm. In *The Complexity of Distance*, Romig extends the application to harmonic content. As a result, all possible orderings of chords are eventually produced, and no sequence is ever repeated with the same durations between chords. This “maximal diversity”⁸ – the exhausting of possibilities within a set of compositional rules – is of high importance to Romig. While *The Complexity of Distance* is not a strictly serial composition, the influence of Babbitt and Wuorinen is clearly on display.⁹

Also on display is Romig’s interest in musical process as the determinant of overall form. Early champions of process music, especially Steve Reich, promoted the creation of:

“...pieces of music that are, literally, processes. The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine *all* the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously. (Think of a round or infinite canon.) I am interested in *perceptible* processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.”¹⁰ (emphasis added)

Romig’s process is definitely perceptible to the careful listener, especially as one ventures into later areas of the piece. However, Romig’s process deviates from Reich’s in that it requires something to be done to the sounds when a specific event occurs – the colliding and interacting of chords in different strands. Romig must enter into the piece, make a decision on how to express the interacting sounds, and then allow the process to resume. Romig’s

process does not determine *all* the details; there are personal, tailored actions taken upon the sounds. Rather than observing the process, Romig reacts to it.

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“The YOB show was brilliant, and it had a vibe that in some ways reminded me of new-music events – a very specific and knowledgeable audience that expected and appreciated expert performers who were concerned with presenting very serious and carefully-considered music. And, of course, the extended length of the pieces struck a chord with me as well.”¹¹

“He shared the mathematical ideas he had...the 13:14:15 time intervals, with the ratio resolving after 2,730 beats. It sounded like an endeavor that was beyond anything I’d ever attempted...It was an overwhelming and somewhat intimidating proposition. So, of course, I said yes.”¹²

After learning of YOB in a New York Times article, listening to their 2014 album *Clearing the Path to Ascend*, and attending a live performance in 2015, Romig reached out to Scheidt and the two began conversing about music, specifically their shared compositional interests, including repetition and variation, formal structures, and timbral control. The pair found many common influences – e.g., King Crimson, Pauline Oliveros, Sunn O))), and Éliane Radigue – and began sharing music with each other. Romig and Scheidt met in person, for the first time, in Toronto, and it was there where the idea for a collaborative project was born. In early 2019, the idea had blossomed into a fully-composed solo work. By the middle of the year, basic parameters were set, and composition began in earnest in December during Romig’s residency at Copland House in Cortlandt Manor, New York. As with any creative project in process during late 2019 and early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became an immediate backdrop. With both Romig and Scheidt grounded in their respective states (Romig in Illinois and Scheidt in

⁸ This term was coined by Joseph Dubiel in his first of his “Three Essays on Milton Babbitt (1990),” *Perspectives of New Music*, Summer, 1990, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 216-261.

⁹ See the Valedictory chapter of Wuorinen’s *Simple Composition*, (New York: Longman Inc., 1979), pp. 163-164.

¹⁰ Steve Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process (1968),” *Writings about Music, 1965-2000*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 9-11.

¹¹ James Romig: Interview with the author, March 10, 2022.

¹² Mike Scheidt: Interview with the author, March 11, 2022.

Oregon), the project was a way to remain creatively active and connected.

"We exchanged emails, phone calls, and text messages. We traded audio, video, and PDF files. We talked about guitar technique, distortion and feedback, and music notation. By the end of summer 2020 I had completed most of the composition and notation of the work, and by the end of the year I delivered the final draft to Mike."¹³

Romig's statement underscores the fundamental component of this recording: the collaboration, the "we." Two artists, separated by thousands of miles, surrounded by uncertainty, finding solace in a shared creation.

"Later, the title took on additional and more profound meaning as "distance" became a way of life for all of us."¹⁴

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Just as the genres of classical chamber music have specific timbres – compare pieces for string quartet, wind quintet, and unpitched percussion – so do the subgenres and sub-subgenres of metal. Tracing its origin to the sound of Black Sabbath of the 1970s, doom metal's characteristic timbres include lower-tuned guitars, a dense or "heavy" orchestration, and slower tempos.¹⁵ Song structures are often long-form and complex: it is common to find songs lasting well over 15 minutes, and album durations of over 70, 80, and even 90 minutes.¹⁶

¹³ James Romig: Interview with the author, March 10, 2022.

¹⁴ James Romig: *The Complexity of Distance*. Parallax Music Press, 2020.

¹⁵ These characteristics are extremely general. Metal is known for its vast, complex web of genres, subgenres, and sub-subgenres, as well as the accompanying nomenclature.

¹⁶ Examples from other bands include Bell Witch's *Mirror Reaper* (an 83-minute album consisting of one track), and Esoteric's *A Pyrrhic Existence* (98 minutes).

¹⁷ Mike Scheidt: Conversation with the author. March 27, 2022.

¹⁸ Scheidt was kind enough to take the time to list these materials: two half-stacks, one with a 100-watt Hi-Tone HT-100 head, the other with a Fuzzlord

YOB takes these timbral and temporal characteristics (profoundly heavy orchestrations, extended formal structures, many songs over 10-15 minutes, etc.) and blends them with lyrical themes that focus on the spiritual, transcendent, and positive. According to Scheidt, YOB's lyrics acknowledge themes of despair and suffering as being a common denominator of human experience. Through that acknowledgment, they are motivated by the opportunity to bring "a sense of catharsis, release, and even joy" to their listeners - a sense YOB also experiences while performing.¹⁷

Similar to how a percussionist will choose specific instruments and mallets in order to achieve the particular timbral quality of a particular piece, Scheidt took great care and precision in choosing the materials to express Romig's score. In collaboration with engineer Billy Barnett of Gung Ho Studio and the Hult Performing Arts Center in Eugene, Oregon, Scheidt assembled a wide-ranging arsenal of equipment to craft the sound of this recording.¹⁸

"We spent a lot of time saying that we wanted it to sound like a real person, playing a real guitar, through a real amplifier...we were in total agreement on this from the start."¹⁹

The most immediate example of Scheidt's crafting of Romig's score is in his use of feedback. Throughout this recording, Scheidt expertly navigates both the physical space of the recording studio and the passing of time (distance, again) between chords through the natural crescendo of feedback. To control this sound, Scheidt must position himself in

Effects JTM-45 head, each sounding through a Mammoth Custom Cabinet 4X12 with Eminence Man-O-War Speakers. In one isolation booth, a 1968 Fender Deluxe Reverb; in another, a 1967 Fender Vibro Champ – four amplifiers in total. The rooms were fitted with a complement of strategically-placed Neumann and RCA microphones. The distortion was achieved through a combination of a Black Arts Toneworks Quantum Mystic Overdrive (designed, in part, by Scheidt), a Walrus Audio Deep Six Compressor, and a Fuzzlord Effects FM-7 EQ pedal. Finally, Scheidt played a Monson Nomad guitar with a zebra wood top and black walnut back, hard-rock maple neck, and ebony fretboard.

¹⁹ James Romig: Conversation among James Romig, Mike Scheidt, and the author. February 17, 2022.

such a way that the feedback does not overwhelm the space: too close and he loses control, too far and the chord simply fades away. Scheidt refers to this technique as “riding the feedback,”²⁰ and its use in the piece is not notated in the score. For example, the excerpt below is from the timestamps of 7:31 to 7:49. Romig has notated 10 beats of rest between the second and third chords; however, the recording contains a gradual crescendo of noise and feedback, resolving dramatically in the attack of the third chord. This drama is crafted by Scheidt’s sense of the moment, his familiarity with the equipment, and his thorough understanding of both the score and the aesthetic of the piece – an understanding forged through the many conversations with Romig over the entire collaborative process.



The Complexity of Distance, excerpt of score, p. 3

Somewhat ironically, the use of feedback occasionally required Scheidt to manipulate the metronomic pulse of the piece. Though Romig’s process is a strict application of steady pulses in a 13:14:15 ratio, the interfering frequencies caused by both the feedback and the distortion create waves of sound with internal beating patterns that take on their own tempo. If Scheidt were to adhere strictly to the notated tempo of 48 beats per minute, he would be required to “shut off” this additional rhythm midway through a feedback-created beating pattern, resulting in a sound that, to all parties involved, was not musical and took on an artificial characteristic. Therefore, Scheidt forgoes the strict pulse where necessary to acknowledge the natural beating of the feedback, much in the way a classical performer applies rubato.

“There’s this weird combination of what is, no doubt, something that could be probably quantified...and something that’s mystic sorcery.”²¹

²⁰ Mike Scheidt: Conversation among James Romig, Mike Scheidt, and the author. February 17, 2022.

²¹ Mike Scheidt, speaking about the control of feedback: Conversation among James Romig, Mike Scheidt, and the author. February 17, 2022.

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“A piece of paper with symbols inscribed on it is not sound.”²²

I find the above quote to be deeply appropriate when experiencing *The Complexity of Distance*. Required, obviously, for the piece to exist, the score can only go so far in communicating the true essence of the piece. Though one sees notated rests, the reality is that those spaces are filled with the growing drama of a feedback crescendo. Though a written major triad suggests a sound of consonance, a sound of stability, this suggestion is negated when performed on a heavily distorted and amplified guitar, especially when that chord is in close proximity to others. Though the rational mind knows that the opening chord returns, without fail, every 26 beats (or 32.5 seconds on this recording), the perceiving mind will hear malleable frames of time – *Kairos* rather than *Chronos*.

And what of the other chords? Romig’s process – his contribution to the idea of “maximal diversity” of harmonic pairings – results in chord progressions that align with the aforementioned musical and lyrical characteristics of YOB. Between the regular iterations of the opening chord, the pairings, collisions, and interactions of the other chords in the strands communicate despair, hope, pain, cessation, striving, etc. Like the sounds that communicate them, these emotions collaborate yet clash, creating tension, possibly suggesting resolution, only to be grounded again by the opening chord’s gravitational pull, its defiant “assertion of intention.”

Equally defiant was the collaborative spirit between composer and performer:

*“It was charmed, really. Some projects can’t seem to get off the ground, no matter how hard you try. Others can’t be stopped no matter the obstacles. For *The Complexity of Distance* to come into existence, with the backdrop of a worldwide pandemic...with the literal distance between the two of us in the midst of it all...this falls into the latter category...”²³*

²² Stuart Saunders Smith, “Showing and Saying (1996),” *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter, 1996), pp. 116-123.

²³ Mike Scheidt: Interview with the author, March 11, 2022.