

**“Dances of a Hill Tribe”**  
*(for two violins and invisible drums)*

Chaipruck Mekara

**Abstract**

This article is an analysis of a composition entitled “Dances of a Hill Tribe” for two violins and invisible drums. Through out the writing, the composer demonstrates how he applies inspiration and raw material into the work. The result is a piece that represents two dancers dance together in three sections and accompanied by invisible drums.

The work was commissioned by Ensemble TIMF and the Thailand International Composition Festival 2006. The piece was also premiered at the festival by the ensemble. The composition was inspired by a rhythmic pattern of a Maew dance, which is a dance of a hill tribe called Mong. It is a dance that Mekara first saw when he was a young boy at a local temple’s fair. There was a parade led by a group of Mong tribe dancers. They were dancing synchronized and opposite each other in two rows. The dance was accompanied by a group of drummers who played a very exciting drum pattern. It was his first impression of the dance and its music, especially the rhythmic pattern. In this article, the writer will explain how the composer uses this rhythmic pattern in this composition.

The drums have an easy ostinato pattern in common time. It is in a faster tempo than those of other tribes in Thailand. After listening to the drum pattern, Mekara took the first bar of the ostinato part as his raw material. See example 1.



Example 1. Maew dance’s rhythmic pattern, roughly notated

Then, he rewrote it for his own imaginary hill tribe-like pattern by taking away an eighth note and set it into a new time signature -7/8 time, as in example 2a. and 2b.

Violin II

*pizz.*

*arco.*

*mp*

Example 2a. The original Mong's drum pattern

Example 2b. The main rhythmic pattern of the piece in 7/8 time

\*\*From example 2b. onward, all examples are from the Violin's parts (they are all in treble clef) of the piece.

This rhythmic pattern plays an important role throughout the work. It starts out with the extended quasi ostinato, where the pattern repeats itself in various ways. For example, the pattern was played alternating arco and pizzicato and later with harmonic, strum, and glissando.

These various sound colors represent different ways of beating the drums, with the palm of the hand, fingers, stick or even playing pitch bend. See example 3.

*arco.*

*pizz.*

*arco.*

*pizz.*

*strum*

*pizz.*

Example 3. Various sound colors produced by different ways of playing the violin represent percussive techniques, beat the drums by hand, stick, fingers, playing pitch bend, etc.

The interesting 7/8 time signature also gives a natural irregular accented feeling, especially when switching back and forth between the note grouping from 12 12 123 to 123 12 12 to 12 12 123. See example 4.



Example 4. 7/8 meter gives uneven accented pulses

Moreover, from bars 42-60, for instance, the two violins are almost playing the same passage but in different order. These passages create the stereo-like effect. When played by professionals, the audience can clearly hear and see the conversation back and forth between the two performers. See example 5.

Example 5. The two violins almost playing the same passage in different order creates a stereo-like effect

Between bar 70-97, is one of the bridge sections where Mekara uses the main pattern and the five main pitches (discuss below) together. Although one set of the pattern has 7 eighth notes (from 7/8 time signature) but there are only five main pitches, when put together there will be a constant shifting of the pitches against the pattern. This method is widely used in the late medieval polyphony and in the renaissance period. It is called isorhythm, where the rhythmic texture (talea) and melodic features (color) are treated separately.

Isorhythmic is one of the compositional techniques that give composers another way of presenting the irregular pulses in his or her pieces. The following example shows five pitches in a seven 8<sup>th</sup> note pattern resulting in an irregular rhythmic pattern starting each five-pitch set in a set shifting. See example 6.

12 34 512 34 51 234 51 23 451 23 45 123 45 12 345

Example 6. The five-pitch set G, A, B, Bb, and C placed within the seven 8<sup>th</sup> note rhythmic pattern resulting in the irregular pulses and accents.

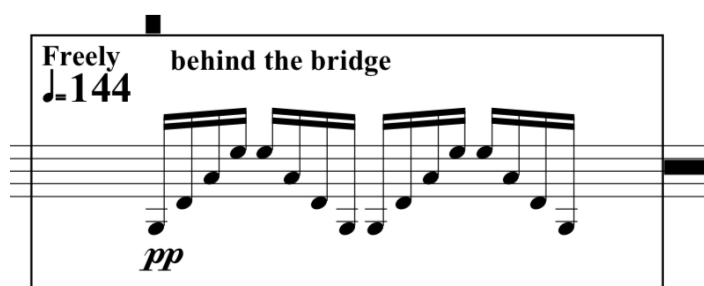
In this work, the open strings (and some extended techniques) represent the drums while the two violins are the two master dancers of the tribe. The drum's pattern is presented at the beginning and maintained throughout most of the work. Many of authentic drum players usually beat the drums with their palms in various ways to create different sound, high and low pitch level, and colors. Likewise, in this composition, the composer ask the players to "play" the invisible drums by using various string techniques such as plucking, bowing, strumming, playing glissando, harmonics, behind the bridge among others. As a result, the audience will hear the drum pattern beating throughout most of the work accompanying the two master dancers and of course they stay invisible to the eyes. See examples 7a. 7b. 7c. and 7d.



Example 7a. arco, pizz. and glissando effects in the invisible drums



Example 7b. Combination of arco on open strings with high note, pizz. and strum add to the various color of the invisible drums



Example 7c. Playing behind the bridge of the violins creates a very high and colorful sound



Example 7d. Invisible drums solo passage (all open strings)

Although, the main material of the piece is the rhythmic pattern, the piece has the main melodic line that uses limited pitches. To select the pitches for my main melodic line, the composer was looking into his personal life and he found his inspiration from his daughter, Angela. “Dances of a Hill Tribe” is a Western piece with a Thai rhythmic pattern playing the main role in the piece. Mekara thought the piece was perfect for his daughter, whose mother is Swiss and her father, himself, is Thai. The composer has embedded the first letter of her

name and his name as the main two notes in the work. Even though, there are five pitches which dominant the whole work (ACBG and Bb – from the first three letters = A-a, N-bb, G-g, C-c, H-b see the explanation below) the note A and C being the most important pitches because they are the initial letters of his daughter and the composer's name.

First, he assigned the letter (capital letters) to pitches (small letters) as follow A-a, G-g, C-c. For the letter H, I use b as in German, letter H=b.

And since there is no pitch named “n” the composer set up the following to find a way to assign a pitch for the letter N, which is the pitch “b”

Letters: a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v u x y z

Note names: c d e f g a b c d e f g a b c d e f g a b c d e f g

And since we already have the note “b” the composer then changed this “b” (from letter N) to “b flat” beside in German system H is b and the note b German call b flat. (from [www.wikibooks.org/wiki/Music\\_Theory/Music\\_Notation\\_Systems](http://www.wikibooks.org/wiki/Music_Theory/Music_Notation_Systems))

Selected letters: ANGCHA (“A” as a common letter- NGACH), therefore we have A C B G Bb, see example 8.



Example 8. Five main pitches

The piece starts with the invisible drums (open strings) playing the ostinato-like pattern. The main melodic line is introduced by the notes A and C at first followed by the rest of the set. Throughout the work, the composer usually use these pitches in random order and in various rhythmic patterns. See example 9.



Example 9. Another form of the use of the five pitches

The overall structure of the piece is in a simple three section format. The first and third sections are faster and fun, while the second section is slower in open time, representing free and improvisational dances. The 1<sup>st</sup> section consists of three smaller sections (A, B, and C) with a short bridge to connect to the next section. In section A, the piece starts with the second violin playing the pizzicato on an ostinato like pattern in 7/8 meter to represent the drum pattern. The percussive pattern continues by alternating arco, portamento, harmonic and strum techniques. Notice that I have the second violin (the drums) play the open strings and its octaves to represent the authentic sound and the openness of the drum's sound. At the same time, the first violin (playing arco) starts to introduce the five main pitches of the piece (ACBG and Bb) in different ways. The section comes to a close at bar 41. From bars 42-69 (section B), both violins play mostly pizzicato alternating arco, harmonic, and strum. This section is presenting the imitated dance (conversation-like passages) between the two dancers who are accompanied by the drum section. The grouping 3+2+2 alternating with 2+2+3 gives the sense of irregular pulse of the dance. The C section (bars 70-97) shows the synchronization between the two dancers. The two violins play the same note and rhythm, but in different octaves and note values. The shift between octaves and the exchange passages give the feeling of leading and following dance positions. See example 10.



Example 10. Both violins play the same note and rhythm but in different octaves-representing the feeling of leading and following dance positions

This section leads to the bridge section, where the two violins play the long notes with the invisible drums accented on the same beats, achieved by left hand pizzicato. The next section (the 2<sup>nd</sup> section) is an open time section where the 1<sup>st</sup> violin plays behind the bride. This effect gives a distinct sound color of the violin in the background while the 2<sup>nd</sup> violin plays the five-note melodic line in the foreground. After they switch roles, the 2<sup>nd</sup> violin

plays the open strings in the background representing a drum solo pattern in a different tone color. The first violin plays the five-note motive again, however, this time in an octave displacement notation to lead into the next section. In the following section, Mekara splits the melodic line, which range covers four different octaves, for both violins. See example 11.

Example 11. The two violins share the melodic line by using octave displacement technique

The motif is divided for both players in a passage that increases in intensity and loudness only to reach a very soft and light climax of a high A portamento to a high C – representing his daughter (Angela) running to the composer (Chaipruek) at a high point of the dance. See example 12.

Example 12. A high A portamento to a high C representing Angela running and leaping to Chaipruek



The music then returns to the faster and more rhythmical pattern section (the 3<sup>rd</sup> section). The piece ends by the two violins playing the fading out pizzicato of the irregular isorhythmic pattern until the end.

Dances of a Hill Tribe for two violins and invisible drums is a piece that has several inspirations which the composer has drawn from the Maew dance's rhythmic pattern to invisible hand drums and the relationship with his daughter in the work. It starts with an inspiration (imagination) and transfers to raw materials. Compositional techniques are the vehicle to realize the inner sound of my imagination to the sound of the two violins. When the work was completed, the composition was well received from the audience at its world premiere and other performances.

#### **World Premiere**

Thailand Composition Festival 2006:

Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand

July 19, 2006: Research Center Auditorium

by Ensemble TIMF (Tongyeong International Music Festival, Korea)

#### **Europe Premiere**

Une Saison – Asie, Ameriques (Quinze compositeurs, quatre concerts) 2009:

Paris, France

February 13, 2009

by Ensemble TIMF (Tongyeong International Music Festival, Korea)

#### **United States of America Premiere**

The New Music Café 2009: School of Music, Illinois Wesleyan University

March 10, 2009

by Gregory Donahue and Janet Lyu

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Wikipedia. (2014). Music Theory/Music Notation Systems. [online]. Retrieved: 21 January. From [http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Music\\_Theory/Music\\_Notation\\_Systems](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Music_Theory/Music_Notation_Systems))

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