

## **On Composition and Literature – Pedr Solis, the author and the opera**

*The path leads on, inexorable. Then, suddenly, shorn by a distant monolithic structure, an unnatural cliff face that sears the sparse terrain. At a distance merely a constructed edifice impairing passage, this illusion collapses as one draws near. Impossibly large, impossibly flat and ashen. A dusted granite scar erupting from the arenaceous scrubland. The conclusion is inevitable: no way around, no way over; must go through.*

*– Pedr Solis, from the novel *Stillaset*, p. 12*

### ***On Pedr Solis, the Author***

When Guerilla Opera approached me about composing a new work, my *second* response was panic. By that point I had written very little vocal music, much less anything as long as an opera. However, despite the many potential pitfalls, finding a topic proved fairly easy. I decided to draw upon the strange and mysterious life of the Norwegian novelist Pedr Solis.

Solis stands as one of the most abstract practitioners of literary modernism to emerge in Norway. His work elicited some passionate critical acclaim during the 60s and 70s, yet today he is all but forgotten. This is not entirely surprising given his extremely limited output. (I know of two novels, a number of articles for literary magazines, and one short set of poetry, though I believe more items exist.) His best chance for public notoriety came in 1970 with the appearance of his second novel, *Stillaset* (in English: *The Scaffolding*). However its publication coincided with the death of the eminent Norwegian author Tarjei Vesaas, which doubtless diverted attention from Solis at a crucial time.

Then, shortly after the disappointing publication of *Stillaset*, Solis vanished completely. This was no mere retreat from publishing – he literally abandoned his home in Oslo, leaving nearly everything behind. At that time he was apparently working on a third novel, the manuscript of which has never been located. It is this bizarre twist to the story that has captured the imagination of Solis aficionados, few as we may be.

I first learned of this obscure, experimental author while visiting Oslo a number of years ago. The purpose of that trip, my first to Scandinavia, was to investigate Norwegian practitioners of literary modernism. I was familiar with some of the more famous authors—Tarjei Vesaas and Jens Bjørneboe, in particular—but was hoping to uncover someone new: someone more surreal and fantastic, less constrained by linear narrative. My initial excitement on hearing of Solis’s work was brief. I don’t speak Norwegian and nothing had yet been translated into English. I could read *about* his novels, but delve no further.

Fortunately English translations have now been completed for both published novels, *Stillaset* and *Den Elektriske Månen* (in English: *Shadows of the Electric Moon*), as well as for his poem “The Cinderheaps.” They have, each in their

way, proved highly significant for my work. In addition to my opera I have thus far composed a number of works based on his books and poetry. Several more pieces relate in some way to the author himself, his investigations into the implications of modernism, and his mysterious fate. In fact it was these topics, particularly his tantalizing evaporation, that informed the core of my opera's libretto.

### ***On Composition and Literature***

*He holds the Black Book in his hands, feeling its weight, immersed in its scent of leather. He has encountered such as this before, compendiums of ancient lore buried by furtive hands. This one though... strangely deficient, devoid of text. Instead filled with images, in turns ghastly and mundane, all relating to the structure. The center pages present a series of maps. Not of this structure, but of others, nearly identical. The import is carried by the discrepancies. As he studies them he understands: these are potential structures, mere zodiacs of the mind's phantasms, each bearing within a gratuitous defect. Thus rendered untenable, they fall victim to their own caprice.*

*He returns the Black Book to its small floor crevice. A billow of dust and he exits to the corridor through the open door, resuming his journey. There is yet a kernel, the hint of a scratch at the periphery, barely noticeable and easily dismissed. The passageway, its closed doors, its periodic dilation into barren chambers, these smooth the edges of the jagged point, yet the pin prick remains. Its depth is unmeasurable.*

*– Pedr Solis, Stillaset, p. 37*

Before continuing I should say more about my compositional background and interests. Drawing on literary sources for inspiration has been central to my process for some time now. I am most interested in extracting ideas from works of fiction and applying them to textless compositions—no lyrics, no words. This is of course nothing new; many composers before me have found interesting ways to inform their compositions via extra-musical sources, literature being a particularly common choice. At the height of the Romantic era Liszt used the term “program music” to refer to instrumental music informed by an external “poetical idea,” [1] though in common use it is more often applied to music that is specifically narrative or descriptive.

More recently Siglind Bruhn has promoted the term “musical ekphrasis” as a descriptor for works in which the composer seeks to “transform the essence of [an] artwork's features and message, including their personal reaction to it, into their own medium: the musical language.” [2] Though this might involve some form of mimicry, true examples of ekphrasis are not merely descriptive of the source artwork but are intended to evoke new interpretations and layers of meaning. Not all program music is ekphrastic, since an ekphrastic piece must rely on a previously existing work as a source. Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique*, for example, invoked frequently as a work of program music, would not be considered ekphrastic since it

is based on a narrative created by the composer in service of that symphony. The question of whether musical ekphrasis should be subsumed under the broader description of program music, however, proves more difficult. Bruhn makes a clear distinction, restricting program music to those pieces based on programs created solely by the composer. Musical ekphrasis, in contrast, requires an external work created by someone *other* than the composer. This distinction may be difficult to determine, but drawing an exact line of demarcation is neither required nor useful.

Richard Strauss's symphonic poem *Don Quixote* provides an interesting example. Strauss was a master at depicting specific images with instrumental sounds, in many respects illustrating Cervantes's story through music. Recurring musical themes, with specific recurring orchestration, represent the major characters of the novel. These themes travel through the "action" of the narrative, interacting with a changing landscape selected from episodes in the novel. At one point Strauss famously depicts a scene involving a herd of panicked sheep, invoked by fluttermongued wind and brass. It is tempting to dismiss such use of onomatopoeia as mere musical kitsch, but Strauss's relationship with the source text goes much deeper than the surface narrative. The richness of the material with which Strauss portrays the emotional and psychological landscapes of the protagonists has been noted extensively [3].

Perhaps more relevant are the larger philosophical issues that preoccupied Strauss, and his infusion of these ideas into the musical material. When he wrote *Don Quixote* he was at a turning point in his approach to musical tradition, loosening his connections with Wagner as he became increasingly interested in Nietzsche's attack on idealism. This interest in Nietzsche was manifest in *Don Quixote* in several ways. First, it was Strauss's first symphonic work to explicitly reject the use of sonata form, or any other pre-existing (i.e., ideal) form. Though the subtitle labels it as "Fantastic Variations," the degree to which actual variation occurs renders this attribution dubious at best. In fact the organization of the musical material is based more on the program (i.e., the novel) than any formal imperative. Second, Cervantes's protagonist, Don Quixote, becomes so overwhelmingly lost in his own idealism he is unable to function in the material world. The content of the novel thus provides a perfect springboard for Strauss's own critique of idealism. [4]

Regardless of *Don Quixote's* status as program music, musical ekphrasis, or both, one would be hard pressed to find a more representative example of musical mimicry of a literary work. We might imagine a continuum, at one end of which lies musical imitation, at the other those compositions in which the effects of extra-musical influences are abstract and hard to identify. *Don Quixote* would sit comfortably at the former end. At the later end we might place a subset of Richard Barrett's compositions, particularly those relating to Samuel Beckett.

Many of Barrett's compositions from the 1980s refer directly to Beckett's writings, through their titles and by the Beckett quotes Barrett includes in the scores. On the use of these quotes, the composer wrote (in his notes for *I open and close*, for amplified string quartet): "At first the quotations were intended to be distributed though the score, their function partly to act as more eloquent 'performance directions' than I could ever imagine, partly to hint at itineraries between these fragments of Beckett's work which might be suggested by the

musical continuity.” [5] Barrett eventually decided against this practice, instead adding quotes only at sectional breaks. This decision is not surprising - such explicit connections would threaten to concretize the connections among the various works in play. Indeed Barrett prefers to regard his relationship with Beckett as a “parallelism” of style rather than a transposition of any specific text. [6]

We are better served viewing the connections between Barrett and Beckett as informed by similar aesthetic ideals, revolving around the struggle with and ultimate failure of communication. As Catherine Laws points out, this struggle is manifested at multiple levels. In the case of Barrett’s music, these include the struggle of the composer attempting to effectively convey musical ideas with notation; that of the performer striving to execute very intricate and specific notation; and that of the listener attempting to create connections across the duration of the piece. Beckett’s work reveals the same sorts of struggles at congruent levels. [7] In fact Beckett actually sought to *increase* this struggle, specifically at the first level mentioned above (that of conveying ideas in written form), by writing in French, a language with which he was less comfortable than his native English.

In the examples of Strauss and Barrett we find composers grappling with issues intrinsic to their eras: Romantic idealism for the former, and Modernist alienation for the latter (granted, such reductionism is a bit absurd). These kinds of associations between literature and music are for me the most compelling. I was initially drawn to the writings of Pedr Solis by his preoccupation with modernism itself, and the various ways this preoccupation informs his work. Each of his novels adopts a specific aspect of modernism as a subject, around which the narrative is woven. This is not unlike Thomas Mann’s approach to *Dr. Faustus*, a novel that portrays the life of a fictional German composer during the days leading to World War II. Whether Mann’s novel itself should be considered a genuinely modernist work can be debated; the case can be made that *Dr. Faustus* is viewed best as a narrative from the perspective of an observer of modernism, one on the outside looking in. Solis’s novels, however, particularly *Stillaset*, are of quite a different stripe—clearly he is both observer and practitioner.

Solis’s textual exploration of modernism may have even jumped the page. Though I know nothing of his personal life before or during his active years, on my trip to Oslo I encountered speculation regarding his ultimate fate. The best guess was that he reached a point of seemingly unresolvable crisis in his work, gathered his papers and nothing else, and departed for the northernmost part of Norway. Here, renouncing his previous interests and regressing to a state of seemingly Romantic isolation, he resumed the heroic effort of completing his final novel. It is difficult to tell whether this myth was born of direct knowledge or inventive fantasy. Certainly such a fate would befit a character in a fiction created by Solis himself.

### ***On Elsewhere is a Negative Mirror***

*More open doors passed in haste. With each view across the threshold, it grows. It grows and festers, its edges soft and caustic. And it intrudes. By concentrating on the vanishing corridor ahead he sustains. At the corners*

*the pale shadows dance and flicker as if raised by the rising moon. The  
desiccated walls blanche, yet the corridor continues, no less penetrable.*

– *Pedr Solis, Stillaset, p. 45*

In my recent works I have tended to favor connections closer to the abstract end of the continuum. In earlier pieces, however, I often experimented with the introduction of specific organizational devices derived from the source. *Elsewhere is a Negative Mirror* provides a number of examples of this type of borrowing. The piece is scored for solo piano with electromagnets, and calls for the use the Electromagnetically-Prepared Piano (about which more soon). It is based on Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, and draws on a number of the organizing principles Calvino uses as well as some of the philosophical questions that he explores. Before beginning the piece I spent a good deal of time with the novel, reading it closely and studying analyses by others. The opportunity to travel outside of one's own discipline for inspiration is a truly wonderful part of this whole process!

*Invisible Cities* fictionalizes the interactions between Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Kahn. The novel is organized around descriptions of fifty-five fantastic cities, provided by Polo for the Kahn, punctuated by episodic dialog between the two characters. The novel is incredibly rich and inventive, imbued with multiple layers of meaning from which I could draw for musical purposes. Of primary interest for me were the interactions between the characters, and what they reveal about the ways in which we create meaning. The Kahn might be described as a reductive rationalist, searching for a linear narrative by which to explain his reality. His quest, in addition to world domination, is for a set of concrete and comprehensible guidelines through which his experiences might hold meaning. Polo, in contrast, is characterized by nonlinearity and avoidance of reductive simplification, preferring a kind of dream-like shadow play. At one point in the novel, at the end of a chess game, Polo beautifully deconstructs the epiphanous conclusions of the Kahn, revealing an inherent complexity underlying the Kahn's simplified perspective that threatens to overwhelm the emperor. The struggle between the two characters is a kind of intellectual fencing match in which the Kahn seeks details about his ultimate conquest, Polo's home city of Venice. Polo distracts the Kahn by projecting shimmering images of fantastic cities, grotesque reflections of the one true city he protects.

My composition uses musical material to mirror the novel's two approaches to reason, often in alternation though not necessarily in dialog. It was important that this material be representative of the characters' essences, their modes of thinking and being. To this end I employed pitch symmetry on several levels. At the local level individual central pitches emerge, create a locus of gravity, and then disappear. On a larger scale the local pitch centers spiral ever closer to one true center, middle C, a pitch absent until the final arrival (see fig. 1 for an example of this from roughly midway through the piece). As a contrast to this linear motion, alternate material serves to disrupt and question the narrative. This other material is temporally suspended, offering no sense of progression or drive (see fig. 2).

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EM

The image shows a musical score for an Electromagnetically-Prepared Piano. It consists of three staves: a treble clef staff at the top, a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in the middle, and a bass clef staff at the bottom. The top staff is labeled 'EM' and contains a series of horizontal lines representing sound waves. The middle and bottom staves contain musical notation with various notes, rests, and articulation marks. There are several slurs with the number '5' underneath them, indicating quintuplets. A dynamic marking 'mp' is placed below the bottom staff, and 'mf p' is placed below the middle staff. Pedal markings '(Ped I)' and '(Ped II)' are located below the bottom staff. A note with a sharp sign is labeled 'B'.

Fig. 1. The staff marked EM provides a graphic representation of the sounds elicited by the Electromagnetically-Prepared Piano

The image shows a musical score excerpt with three staves. The top staff contains musical notation with various notes and rests. There are several slurs with the number '6' underneath them, indicating sextuplets. A note with a sharp sign is labeled 'C#'. The bottom staff contains dynamic markings: 'f', 'sub. p', 'mp', and 'sub. p'. A 'Ped I' marking is located below the bottom staff. The middle staff contains musical notation with various notes and rests.

Fig. 2. In this excerpt, the Ped I marking indicates the advent of the less linear material

The chapter structure of the novel is fascinating, and reveals something of Calvino's connection with the Oulipo group of writers, known for their imposition of artificial constraints. The table of contents for *Invisible Cities* presents this immediately, organizing Polo's cities into five "types," such as "Cities and memory" and "Cities and desire." New city types are revealed gradually according to a simple cyclic pattern. Groups of these description types are organized into larger numbered sections, between which exist episodes of dialog, as follows (with ellipses representing the dialog):

Section 1	..... a a b a b c a b c d .....	Section 3	..... b c d e f .....
Section 2	..... a b c d e .....	Section 4	..... c d e f g .....
		etc. [8]	

Such a system is musically irresistible! In *Elsewhere...* I introduce new material types rotationally, corresponding to Calvino's pattern for section 1 (a subsequent piece of mine, *Negative Mirror, Part II*, continues this process through additional sections of the novel). These material types needed to be malleable enough to reflect the two musical ideologies listed above. They are conveyed not only by the performer playing the keyboard, but also by sounds elicited from the piano by the Electromagnetically-Prepared Piano device.

This device, created in 2006, was the result of a collaboration between me and two other graduate students at Stanford's CCRMA, Steven Backer, and Edgar Berdahl. The device consists of a rack of electromagnets that rests on the frame of a grand piano. Individual electromagnets are suspended over specific piano strings that are thus vibrated by the fluctuating electromagnetic field. The system is in many ways similar to an EBow, except that each electromagnet is controlled by an external audio signal, resulting in a much higher degree of control over pitch and timbre. The sounds that emerge are distinctly ethereal and seem synthetic, though they are strictly the result of vibrating strings, not actual synthesis [9].

In the end the material types I used were straightforward, and can briefly be described as: a) pointillistic (fig. 3), b) pulsing chords (fig. 4), c) single notes sustained beneath high rotating clusters (fig. 5), and d) glisses/arpeggiations (fig. 6). While the pianist cycles through these material types according to Calvino's chapter structure, the electromagnets move through them much more slowly, playing each type only once over the course of the piece. I thought of the sounds elicited by the electromagnets, which fall further and further into the background, as a representation of the eternal, immutable ideal, embodied in the novel by the city of Venice.

Fig. 3. Pointillistic material

Fig. 4. Pulsing chords

Fig. 5. Single notes sustained beneath high rotating clusters



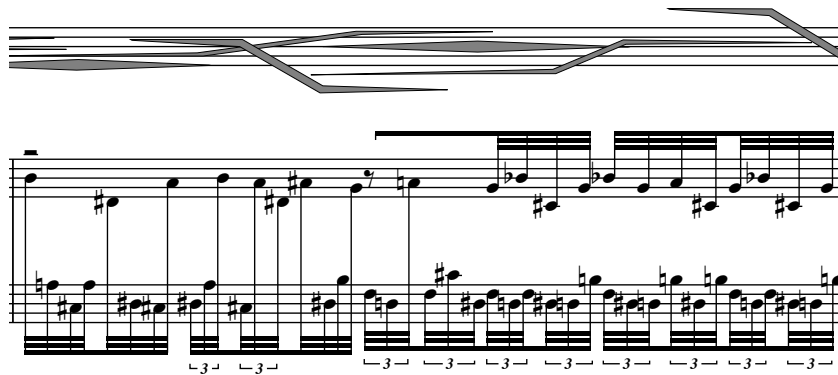


Fig. 6. Arpeggiations

The ultimate center, middle C, was selected for its banality. If it were possible to ascribe interest levels to isolated pitches on a piano (which it isn't), middle C would certainly score the lowest. Paradoxically (not really), when middle C arrives it provides a certain freshness as a result of its previous absence. At this point the piece shifts. All linearity ceases as the one pitch is deconstructed bit by bit. The player moves to the inside of the piano and gradually reveals the building blocks of the sound, including its overtones and noise components. This process is roughly analogous to a wonderful moment during the chess match in *Invisible Cities*. The Kahn, having taken Polo's king, ponders the game and its ultimate result. Once the king is removed, what remains? The answer is nothing, an empty square on the chess board, his entire empire reduced to a blank space. In this moment of epiphany the Kahn arrives at a rational system by which he might now interpret his reality—nihilism. Characteristically, Polo disrupts this reductionist view by visually deconstructing the simple square of wood beneath the now absent king, revealing worlds of complexity, from weather patterns to entire societies, contained within.

### ***On Of Dust and Sand, briefly***

As an example from the other end of the continuum I offer *Of Dust and Sand*, written several years after *Elsewhere...* and relating indirectly (for the most part) to its source literature. This later piece of mine, scored for alto saxophone and piano with electromagnets (yes, it uses the same Electromagnetically-Prepared Piano device, but this is mere coincidence, most of my pieces don't), is loosely based on a novel I have already mentioned – Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*. During the compositional process I happened to be reading the novel, but I didn't register the influence until the piece was well underway. Eventually I realized that some of the book's imagery was contaminating my timbral and structural choices.

In my program note I wrote "the title is in part drawn from an image that recurs throughout the novel, that of the hourglass of mortality, which Mann in turn drew from the etchings of Albrecht Dürer. The material of my piece is connected with the novel, though in ways so tenuous as to escape relevance."

I confess that that last part is not entirely true. In the novel, Mann invents a composer, Adrian Leverkühn, who in turn "invents" Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-

tone technique. (Leverkühn also contracts syphilis, a fact that Schoenberg apparently found rather upsetting.) At a certain point in my compositional process I decided to create a twelve-tone row of my own. I then returned to the beginning of the piece and adjusted the pitches such that they conformed to the various permutations of my row. I did, however, leave myself a great deal of leeway in following the row, switching to different permutations at will. I wouldn't categorize the result as an actual twelve-tone piece, and don't think the sound is in any way reminiscent.

I therefor decided to leave that entire process hidden. I was hesitant even to include it here, but decided that it might provide a good example of those elements that composers consciously employ yet suppress when discussing their works. There are any number of pieces for which hidden programs have eventually emerged, with motivations for the suppression ranging from personal (as with Berg's *Lyric Suite*) to professional (as with Mahler's fear that his music would be misinterpreted). Regardless of the reason, the act of building "secret" elements into compositions has a distinct allure. I can imagine even an entire body of work built around such a conceit. One might, for example, reverse the idea of a hidden program and claim that a series of compositions are based on an external program that does not, in fact, exist!

### ***On Solis's novel Stillaset***

*The chamber is large, the largest yet. The clamor reaches its crescendo here, overwhelming the senses. Its source is revealed – a river emerging from a glaring maw in the right wall and disappearing into another on the left. Far too wide and turbulent to ford. A metallic bridge crouches, straddling the division.*

– *Pedr Solis, Stillaset, p. 90*

*Stillaset* tells the tale of a single protagonist as he traverses a seemingly infinitely large edifice. Having discovered a written text at the entrance that claims to describe the intricacies of the structure in great detail, the protagonist begins his journey, confident in his ability to navigate his path. The early chapters chronicle an orderly progression through a series of barren chambers, drawing on imagery of sterility, order, and moonlight. The protagonist passes through many corridors, unconcerned with the countless closed doors that line his path.

This desolate monotony is disrupted by an open doorway. Disturbed, he enters the chamber beyond and discovers a "Black Book", a type of compendium of Norwegian folklore and magic maintained even into the modern age. He continues on his journey, but the discovery of the book marks the end of his orderly progression. He becomes increasingly conscious of two conflicting worlds: the world of imagery (the structure he holds in his memory), and the world of perception (the structure he experiences with his eyes and fingertips). This discrepancy, initially a small rift, widens into a chasm, its tendrils extending throughout the fabric of the novel.

At this point in the text, linear narrative begins to break down. Elements drawn from Norse mythology emerge with increasing regularity: the crossing of a bridge, images of bones, blood, and burning candles. Words in Old Norse intrude, and the protagonist stumbles over tree roots in the floor beneath. As the two worlds grow increasingly distinct he loses confidence in his ability to navigate them. Images of monsters appear, their descriptions drawn directly from Old Norse Eddic tales. He enters rooms but never leaves them, finds himself in rooms he has never entered. He is struck by the color of the sky, by the trees, and especially their roots, which seem intertwined with everything. The walls are inconsistent, flickering with permeability. Some rooms are discrete, others distended and continuous. These disruptions of existing order are both terrifying and beautiful. The protagonist becomes lost in fascination with the infinite variety of all that surrounds him.

*Stillaset* does not have a traditional ending. The majority of the novel is written in Norwegian Bokmål, the more prevalent of the two official norms for written Norwegian. Over the course of the novel Bokmål is eventually overcome completely by Old Norse, which itself comes apart – letters, sentences, and finally paragraphs go missing or are replaced with symbols resembling runes.

Ultimately the novel can be read as a commentary on the interaction between two readings of modernism, the subjective and the objective. They exist simultaneously, creating an essential tension in a modernist text while offering a key method of navigation. The rational and the irrational, the orderly and the chaotic, the mediated and the unmediated – each of these oppositions is directly at play in the narrative of *Stillaset*. The use of myth is another fundamental element in this dialectic, representing a shared reference while providing an outlet for primal, internal drives. Solis here adapts the predilection of earlier modernists for incorporating elements from Greek mythology.

Modernism is seen as the process of shifting focus from the external world to the internal, from a shared and mutually recognized external reality to a uniquely individualized internal one. While a description of a shared reality (i.e., objective realism) can simply flow according to a sequence of events, describing an internal and potentially atemporal perspective (i.e., subjective) may benefit from the imposition of some arbitrary formal procedure, as with Calvino's chapter structure for *Invisible Cities*. The elevation of form and structural integrity as a precursor to actual content risks depersonalizing or objectifying the internal reality. This formal elegance can, however, be justified within the subjective: these forms are not shared, but created on demand as necessitated by the work at hand. Thus each work represents the creation of a (semi-)isolated world, its success tied directly to its ability to establish rules and relationships with these rules (when it is appropriate to follow them and when to break them).

### ***On Pedr Solis, the opera***

*These cracks in the floor, the smooth rock thrust aside by tangles of roots.  
The roots of unseen trees, entwined like snakes beneath his feet. Branches  
veer off the path at impossible angles, otherwise indistinguishable from the  
main artery. Thyrstr ek köm thessar hallar til,*

*Loptr of langan veg,  
ásu at bithja, at mér einn gefi  
mæran drykk mjathar.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*All was seen to be ruinous throughout, and filled with a violent and abominable reek. It teemed with everything that could disgust the eye or the mind: the wall was plastered with filth, the roof made up of spear-heads, the flooring covered with snakes and bespattered with all manner of uncleanness. Bloodless phantasmal monsters huddled on the iron seats, and the places for sitting were railed off by leaden trellises.*

*Yet even still all was not desolate, for beyond each atrocity arose a vista of great beauty. There followed pillars of red gold beneath a roof of silver set. Another with a bright-growing ash beside a thorn-bush, and a young stag, drenched in dew, who surpassed all other animals and whose horns were aglow against the sky itself.*

*Occasionally arises remembrance of the corridor walls, now far beyond the reach of human gaze, yet ever present as a distant ephemeral source of continuity.*

*– Pedr Solis, Stillaset, pp. 178 and 199*

Finally we return to my opera *Pedr Solis*. Guerilla Opera, for which *Pedr Solis* was written, is a chamber opera company affiliated with the Boston Conservatory. They're a lean outfit: typical productions employ four singers and four instrumentalists. They also occupy an interesting niche, programming only commissioned works and conveying, as one reviewer wrote, a "punk-rock mentality." They made for wonderful collaborators. For director they engaged Laine Rettmer, resident stage director for the New York based LoftOpera. Rettmer did an incredible job capturing the sense of urgency and physicality of the drama.

The opera is scored for soprano, mezzo-soprano, countertenor, and baritone voice, and an instrumental ensemble of clarinet, saxophone, violin, percussion and electronics. The libretto was written by Paul Schick, Artistic Director for Real Time Opera based in Oberlin, Ohio. When I approached him about the possibility of writing a text somehow related to *Pedr Solis* and his work, he too was drawn to both the author and the novel *Stillaset*. He made a connection with the play *Der turm (The Tower)* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the librettist for some of Richard Strauss's best operas. The von Hofmannsthal play involves a king who sequesters his only offspring, the crown prince, in a tower after it is prophesied that the prince will kill him. Though isolated and in many ways treated as an animal, the prince is also educated in the arts, sciences, and philosophy by his caretaker. It was his dual nature, the conflicting sides of his character, that provided the connection to Solis's novel.

Schick's libretto blends elements of Solis's life in Norway, his novel *Stillaset*, and von Hofmannsthal's play. Characters are drawn from Solis's life and novels,

while the action is derived mostly from *The Tower*. The separation of the sources is not defined clearly, leading to some intriguing ambiguity in the story line. For example Solis is both an author, with the power to alter only the realities encompassed by his works of fiction, and a king-figure, the leader of some unspecified realm. The character Ignis is both Solis's son (and heir to his "kingdom"), and the unnamed protagonist from *Stillaset*. (In reality, as far as I can discern, Solis had no children). The setting of the opera fluctuates between the undesignated "mythic time" of the novel *Stillaset*, and Oslo circa 1970.

The action opens with Ignis locked away in a dungeon-like structure, an analog to the edifice in *Stillaset*. Fearing a prophecy of regicide, Pedr has condemned him to live in isolation and squalor, essentially an animal cowering in dirt. To temper this injustice Solis has hired an assistant, Adrian, and tasked her with educating Ignis. He is to be taught the ways of civilized life, exposed to literature and philosophy, and offered the opportunity rise above his violent destiny. The fourth character is The Doctor, hired to look after Ignis's health. Loki, the trickster god of Norse mythology, is a presence as well, though the entire cast sings his lines in chorus. Both Adrian and the Doctor are horrified by Ignis's conditions and seek his freedom, although for very different reasons. The Doctor is a benevolent character, with genuine concern for the boy's wellbeing. Adrian, in contrast, is merely using Ignis as a means to power. In fact she has been fomenting rebellion by calling forth mythic forces of chaos, led by Loki.

Throughout the opera, Solis, Ignis, and Adrian vie for control over the narrative and over the forces of chaos that swirl just outside the frame of action. It being opera, by the end everyone dies except the Doctor (and of course Loki, an immortal). Lest the whole thing sound like a dry academic literary affair, rest assured there is also a healthy dose of sex, violence, and blood.

The opera consists of a single act divided into seven scenes. Preceding three of these are pre-scenes, short sections occupied by the "Loki chorus" consisting of all four singers wearing shimmering black masks. The chorus comments on the action to follow, but the commentary is meaningless, empty of content. The texts for these pre-scenes are based on passages from the *Prose Edda*, a compendium of Norse mythology written by Snorri Sturluson in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Librettist Schick started with the original Old Norse, then transcribed the passages phonetically into English. The results are entirely abstract, though the word choices reflect the larger themes of the libretto. The electronic part used in the pre-scenes is generated by a physically modeled (virtual) eight stringed instrument. This "guitar" is distorted, detuned, and fed back on itself. The result varies from a heavily distorted metal guitar sound to a screechingly dissonant crunch-fest. The voice texture in these sections is canonical, the atmosphere reminiscent of early polyphony. This combination, early polyphony with noisy guitar sounds, creates an interesting juxtaposition (see fig. 7).

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Adrian *mf*  
O-ther halls here to wall you; A ter-ror book full of er-ra-ta

Doctor *mf* *f* *mf*  
Elves beg your for-give-ness, A ter-ror book full of er-ra-ta

Ignus *mf*  
Elves beg your for-give-ness, A ter-ror book full of er-ra-ta

Pedr

Vib.

Fig. 7. Example of Loki's choral material from Pre-scene 3. The electronic part is not here notated

As the opera progresses the pre-scene material sporadically escapes its bounds, intruding upon the main action. By the final scene, Loki's musical material – choral, chant-like, emphasizing a limited set of intervals – is intermixed throughout. Loki himself finally makes an appearance, still sung in chorus by the cast, and interacts directly with the characters for the first time.

The collapsing of boundaries and gradual intermingling of material types is a central aspect of development over the course of the opera. It is reflected as well in the pitch content assigned to the characters: at the outset, each character's pitches are derived from a unique system. Solis's pitches, for example, are determined by a cyclical sequence of intervals organized according to their level of horizontal intervallic dissonance. The Doctor's pitches are derived from specific scales, the intervals of which expand and contract according to the action. These pitch distinctions between characters tend to erode over the course of the opera, and the singers come to exchange systems. The Loki chorus material, however, resists development, remaining unchanged throughout while infecting the material of the other characters like a virus.

The influence of literary source material on the various musical elements of *Pedr Solis* is much less restrictive than it was for *Elsewhere is a Negative Mirror*. By the time I came to *Pedr Solis* I found the tightly derived connections used in *Elsewhere...* to be overly confining, and have since favored more abstract connections. As most composers who engage with extra-musical material seem to agree, none of the aforementioned is essential knowledge for the listener. The music is meant to be heard and appreciated as absolute music, placing no burden of preparation on the listener. That being said, the possibility of adding depth and richness to the experience is available.

This last point brings up a glaring deficiency in my entire *Pedr Solis* project. A novel such as *Invisible Cities* is widely read, with a variety of extant analyses easily locatable. The work of my author, however, is virtually unknown, rendering the

veiled musical connections unavailable except at the meta-level, via my own written descriptions. Nonetheless having access to such literary works as a composer, drawing on their depth, internal coherence, and structural integrity, has great potential to enrich the musical content despite the inherent ambiguity.

So here we stand, at the end of the saga, with many questions remaining. How can an author with any critical acclaim remain so profoundly obscure? And how is it possible for someone with a public presence to disappear so completely and suddenly? What remains? A few scattered writings, some of which have been translated but never published; the fragmented paragraphs included in this text; my narrative tracing the saga of his literary oeuvre, distorted and disfigured by the vagaries of my memory and interpretation; and finally, the convoluted fictionalized account of an author's life, intertwined with both his own account of his most famous protagonist and a play by a potentially ekphrastic composer's librettist. At a certain point one can't help but wonder: did Pedr Solis ever actually exist? After all, if Thomas Mann can create a composer to write about, what's to prevent a composer creating an author to compose about?

[1] Roger Scruton, "Programme music." *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root, accessed December 18, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

[2] Siglind Bruhn, *Musical Ekphrasis* (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2000), p. xix.

[3] See, for example, *Richard Strauss, A Critical Commentary On His Life and Works*, by Norman Del Mar, or Michael Kennedy's *Strauss Tone Poems*, or any number of other written commentaries on the piece.

[4] A great deal more on this topic can be found in Charles Youmans' book *Richard Strauss's orchestral music and the German intellectual tradition: the philosophical roots of musical modernism*, pp. 180-213.

[5] Richard Barrett, "I open and close - notes supposedly concerning Samuel Beckett," available on his website: <http://richardbarrettmusic.com/writings.html>.

[6] Richard Toop, "Four Facets of the 'New Complexity,'" *Contact* 32 (Spring 1988): 31-32.

[7] Catherine Laws, "Richard Barrett's *Ne songe plus a fuir*," *Samuel Beckett: Crossroads and Borderlines*, Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui Series 6 (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997): 297-298.

[8] This diagram is adapted from Albert Howard Carter, *Italo Calvino* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 110.

[9] For more information on this device, see [magneticpiano.com](http://magneticpiano.com).

[It should be noted that several unattributed quotes appear in Solis's paragraphs above:

- "zodiac[s] of the mind's phantasms" (from excerpt 2) was likely drawn from Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, p. 22 in my Harcourt edition.
- "Thyrstr ek..." (from excerpt 5) is from the *Poetic Edda, Lokasenna*, verse 6.
- The paragraph beginning with "All was seen to be ruinous throughout..." (from excerpt 5) appears to have been extracted from *Gesta Danorum* ("Deeds of the Danes"), by the 12th century author Saxo Grammaticus.]



## BIO

Per Bloland is a composer of acoustic and electroacoustic music. His compositions range from short intimate solo pieces to works for large orchestra, incorporate video, dance, and custom electronics, and often draw on a variety of other art forms. He has received awards and recognition from organizations including IRCAM, SEAMUS/ASCAP, Digital Art Awards of Tokyo, the Martirano Competition, and ISCM. His first opera, *Pedr Solis*, was commissioned and premiered by Guerilla Opera in 2015. A portrait CD of his work, titled *Chamber Industrial* and performed by Ecce Ensemble, was recently released on Tzadik.

He is currently an Assistant Professor of Composition and Technology at Miami University, Ohio. He previously taught at Oberlin, where he served as the founding director of the Oberlin Improvisation and Newmusic Collective (OINC). He received his D.M.A. in composition from Stanford University, and his M.M. from the University of Texas at Austin.

The Electromagnetically-Prepared Piano, of which he is the co-inventor and primary composer, continues to receive attention after nearly ten years. In addition to giving numerous lecture/demonstrations, he has composed a number of pieces for the device, written a paper, and developed the website [magneticpiano.com](http://magneticpiano.com). Building on this work, he was awarded a Musical Research Residency at IRCAM to create a physical model of the coupling between a resonator (such as a piano string) and an electromagnet.

For information see: [perbloland.com](http://perbloland.com), for scores: [babelscores.com/perbloland](http://babelscores.com/perbloland)

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