

Babel

for five or more vocalists
by Gordon H. Williams

“What is a self and how can a self come out of stuff that is as selfless as a stone or a puddle?”

-Douglas Hofstadter

Glossary

Guidelines for interaction- outlined in part III and modified in Part IV and V

Linguistic sound- a sound found within the language(s) that you speak. Vowels, consonants or short combinations thereof

Moving musician- a musician who is moving freely about the stage, or in a specified manner

Snippet- a combination of multiple (approx. 2-10) linguistic sounds. Developed continuously through variation in parts II, III and IV. A snippet should often consist of a word or short phrase

Standing musician- a musician who is standing still

Statement- a combination of multiple snippets. Primarily developed in Part V, VI and VII

Recommendations for rehearsal

- Rehearse individual sections before attempting the whole
- Incorporate movement from the very beginning
- Insist on the use of linguistic material (over material that is driven by noise, sound, or (to a lesser extent) musical ideas)

Part I. *a bit longer than comfortable, approx. 1 minute*

Musicians stand still, scattered across the stage. If Babel is performed at the the start of the concert, musicians should already be in place as audience enters the hall. If it is performed after another piece, the musicians should walk quickly and intently to their positions and then freeze

The musicians remain silent.

Part II. *as long as necessary (but not longer), dependent on the size of the ensemble*

One musician begins to move. They pass by the other musicians, but do not interact or engage with them at first

The standing musicians remain silent. The moving musician begins to play with a linguistic sound. They may vary the volume, timbre, duration, rhythm, articulation, and/or pitch. The moving musician develops the material into a linguistic snippet through repetition and variation. The material should reflect the cultures (linguistically and musically) of the group and of the audience.

Part III. *as long as necessary (but not longer), dependent on the size of the ensemble*

The moving musician begins to interact with the standing musicians. As the moving musicians move across the stage, they come to stand back to back with the standing musicians. Following their interaction, both musicians function as moving musicians

Musicians adhere to the following guidelines for interactions: The moving musicians introduce the snippet that they have developed. The standing musician should attempt to imitate their snippet as closely as possible. Once the the moving musician feels that the standing musician has learned their snippet, they should introduce variation into the call and response. Once the standing musician hears a variation that they find inspiration in, they should break off from the pairing and begin to function as a moving musician.

Part IV. *more briefly than in the previous section, even half as much so*

The process in part III continues until all of the musicians are moving. The musicians now form pairs of two moving musicians. Any musician can initiate the move to the next section, once the actions described in this section have been completed

The guidelines for interactions necessarily begin to loosen at this point. The musicians continue to listen and imitate each other, however the roles are less clear at this point. The musicians may repeat incessantly or raise their volume in an attempt to press their own snippet on to other musicians. Likewise the musicians may choose to not respond or to leave the interaction preemptively. The overall goal of this section is to increase the intensity and rate of the interactions.

Part V. *rather quickly, with only enough delay to allow the audience to grasp what is occurring*

The musicians begin to find a circle, each facing outwards. During the final variation, the musicians should quickly move towards the formation for Part VI.

The musicians become silent as they enter the circle. The musicians now share the snippet they have developed. Listening is key in this section to avoid individuals speaking over each other. After an individual has shared, the group should adhere to the original guidelines for interaction- that is, attempt to imitate the sound as closely as possible, then begin to introduce their own variations. A brief silence should occur between variations.

Part VI. *quickly, do not let the sense of motion and progress drag or worse, cease*

The musicians form a line stretching diagonally across the stage. The musicians face out towards the audience. Once the full statement is complete, musicians who know the statement begin to move freely around the stage once more.

The musician furthest upstage sends their snippet down the line. As each musician repeats the snippet, they may add to the snippet from their own snippet (they also have the option to not add to the snippet). Repetition may be used when passing the snippet. Once the material reaches the musician furthest downstage, the statement is complete. The musicians then pass this information back up the line until the whole line is aware of the fully developed statement.

Part VII. *as long as possible*

Once a unison is reached, one of two actions is completed. If Babel is the last piece performed on a concert, the musicians leave the stage. If Babel is not the last work in the concert, the musicians move back to the original positions that they were standing in at the beginning and transition as seamlessly as possible into the next work

The musicians speak their statement as they move across the stage. The statement must be spoken with a great intensity, gradually seeking and achieving a unison. If the musicians leave the stage, they should do so in a staggered fashion repeating the statement as they exit. If the musicians return to their initial positions, they should do so in a staggered fashion, repeating the statement until they arrive at their point of origin.