

WMS (first dance). The 1990 dance piece *Correspondences* by Volans and Shobana Jeyasingh has a close connection to SQ4. No. 4 as an independent work was revised and reduced from five movements to two in 1994, the new second movement drawing on the orchestral work *One Hundred Frames*. This movement then provided Jonathan Burrows with music for the short dance-film he made with Volans and Sylvie Guillem, *Blue, Yellow*.

Deborah May approached Volans to do the soundtrack for a BBC film about changing rural-urban Africa, entitled *Plane Song*. The quartet music emerged separately as *String Quartet 5: Dancers on a Plane* and its material was derived from the large chamber ensemble work *Chevron*. *Confession of Zeno* draws on SQ3's first movement and therefore also relates to *Footsoles*. *Zeno at 4 a.m.* (later called *Confessions of Zeno Part 1*) includes material that was incorporated into SQ8. The latter also borrows from Volans's music to Davies's *Wild Air* and *Confession of Zeno*. SQ9 is like *Concerto for Double Orchestra* in approach: they both rely on one chord 'toss[ed] to and fro' (Rörich 2001), and the chord is similar. SQ9 was plundered for both the two-piano work *Shiva Dances* and the second of the *Three Structural Etudes* (*Etude 6* in Fig. 3). Indeed, all the etudes except No. 9 are self-borrowings, as Mary Rörich has shown (Rörich 2005; see also the Volans *Worklist* for more cross-references in Volans's overall output).

Enormous evidence here, then, for seeing the quartets as a whole, not as two groups, and for seeing each quartet as both an individual text and a 'permutation', as Julia Kristeva puts it (1980, 36) of other texts. Intertextuality seems inadequate a notion to cover the many kinds of quotations, borrowings, revisions, re-workings and re-usings that occur across Volans's whole output, and teasing these out in detail is beyond the scope of this article. What I focus on here is how some of the interconnectedness works materially within the quartets: how ideas generated in early works are still essential (and essentialised) in later ones. I do this in the most general way – this is an overview, not a comprehensive analysis of each work – but it does emerge that some of the minimalist procedures in the later quartets, such as multiple repetition of bars, patterns slowly shifting, and asymmetry of meter, are present in *String Quartet No. 1: White Man Sleeps*. In my analysis, then, I begin by identifying core elements in SQ1 that reappear in later works.

CORE ELEMENTS OF SQ1

When David Harrington of the Kronos Quartet requested a quartet version of the earlier work *White Man Sleeps*¹³ it was a lucky break for Volans in more ways than one. Kronos solved a problem many young composers face in contributing their first efforts at something 'at once a medium and a genre, even a form' (Griffiths 1985, 7). The quartet carries a huge burden of history as well as an 'intellectual prestige' acquired with Beethoven (Gann 1988, 76), baggage probably daunting to a young composer who had the Germanic tradition, including its most recent manifestations, drummed into him in Cologne during the 1970s. The Kronos commission freed Volans up and gave him a template: *WMS* had been based on African source material and so was SQ1; this, too, at a time in the mid-1980s when

13 Letter from Adrian Jack to Kevin Volans, 4 October 1984; e-mail from Adrian Jack to Christine Lucia, 29 September 2008.

world music was gathering momentum as a commercial category, making it a unique ‘first essay’ in quartet writing, ripe for the new CD format Kronos could exploit.

Having said all this, SQ1 is no mere arrangement of *WMS*, but a major restructuring. Both versions have five ‘Dances’, but

- the 1st dance of SQ1 was the 5th dance of *WMS*.¹⁴ The sequence of material within the dance is greatly altered and the first idea (‘A’) used more extensively;
- the 2nd dance of SQ1 was the 3rd dance of *WMS*, with its main ideas transformed;
- the 3rd dance of SQ1 was the 2nd dance of *WMS*; the same material although the quartet texture completely changes the sound;
- the 4th dance of SQ1 is derived from two motifs from the 2nd dance of *WMS*, subjected to extensive development;
- the 5th dance of SQ1 was the 4th dance of *WMS*: same material, same number of repeats, but new scoring creates a very different texture;
- the 1st dance of *WMS*¹⁵ is not used at all in SQ1.

Aside from these differences, the translation of material from a Shona-derived re-tuning of harpsichords in *WMS* to equal temperament in SQ1 gives a new spaciousness and transparency to the texture and affords a greater dynamic range. Light and colour are essential to this piece (as Volans shows in *The landscape within*). Some key ideas in his language also become clearer in the quartet version, I think, making them available for subsequent works, and it is these that I refer to as ‘core elements’. I identify seven here, which are by no means the sum total of material; they are just elements that recur.

The first is the idea of interlocking. From the first bar of SQ1 one is reminded of the ‘in-out’ Basotho concertina chords that inspired *WMS* fifth dance, here coming over as even more of an interlocking device because of the dispersal of the chords across two pairs of instruments (see Ex. 1).¹⁶

14 It was the fifth dance in both versions until after the ICA premiere, when Volans felt that as the ‘weakest movement’ it should come first (Volans 1990).

15 Based on a transcription of a Tswana panpipe dance by Christopher Ballantine.

16 I re-typeset all the musical examples for this article in Sibelius 5.4. They are reproduced by kind permission of Chester Novello, In retype-setting examples I have faithfully following the published scores, even where there are apparent inconsistencies: for example, some rhythmic groupings have brackets as well as numbers, some not.

* Section A is played four times. The variant endings a, b, and c may be used at any point and in any order, this to be decided in advance by the players.

Ex. 1 SQ1, first dance, bar 1¹⁷

The second core element is asymmetrical phrase structure and (hence) meter. Phrases or cycles in most indigenous southern African musics are not as Volans has them in the opening bars of the first dance, namely alternately 10, 13, 3 or 4 ‘beats’ long.¹⁸ The rapid alternation of 10/4 and 13/4 with 3/4 and 4/4 is a modernist European trait, indebted to composers such as Stravinsky. However, the quaver is an important unit of time in this movement and its regularity as a *pulse* (a rhythmic feature of most sub-Saharan African musics) offsets the irregularity of meter (10/4 + 3/4), the combination confusing our sense of where strong or weak beats occur or even what constitutes a ‘beat’.

A third core element is repetition. All bars are repeated multiple times, although because of the metrical irregularities, the lightness generated by an emphasis on pulse rather than beat and the unpredictable number of repetitions, they sound less mechanistic than they do (for example) in mainstream minimalist music by composers such as Philip Glass or Steve Reich.

It is worth pausing to consider how interlocking of pulses, asymmetrical phrasing and repetition are used: these three elements had also strongly informed the material of *WMS*, already evident in the first dance of SQ1. In earlier ‘African paraphrases’ such as *Matepe* (1980) Volans used *mbira* tunes of regular length: four equal phrases of 12 pulses each. Ex. 1’s irregularity can be read in several different ways: as a 10-beat followed by a 3-beat phrase, as a 20-pulse followed by 6-pulse phrase, or one can hear it as a 12-pulse followed by a 14-pulse phrase. In no case, however, is there a 3rd or 4th phrase to round out the form – as one would expect in *mbira* music or most other forms of African cyclic music. The notion of ‘cycle’ or ‘tune’, then, is absent here. Also absent is the chord sequence that would articulate the cycle *as* tune in (for example) *mbira* music. Here there are just two alternating chords, one of which is an open fifth.

17 I am grateful to Kevin Volans for copies of the unrevised ‘Movement’ and unrevised SQ7.

18 They are usually 8, 12, 16, 24 or 48 pulses in length, although in Xhosa musics for example (Eastern Cape; see Dargie 1988, 84-85) there are sometimes ‘irregular’ cycles.

Repeating a phrase thus becomes far more important compositionally to Volans than repeating a cycle, and this allows form to unfold non-cyclically as a metrical journey of intuition based on the setting up and modification of patterns and an asymmetry of phrasing. If this aesthetic relates to Africa at all, I would say it is to African weaving or basket-making rather than music.¹⁹ It is an aspect of Volans’s ‘paraphrase’ of the African originals, as Martin Scherzinger has pointed out, that subverts them: they are no longer quotations, they ‘metamorphos[e] into formal play’ (Scherzinger 2008, 220). Formal play or play with form here also means that the whole cycle is eschewed in favour of constituent parts, or patterns.

This then, is the fourth element that Volans presents in SQ1 and which permeates his later writing: asymmetrical patterning. In Ex. 1, the phrase of 12 pulses immediately becomes a phrase of 14 pulses, but this repetition, even if not exact, sets up a pattern. This is why a flow of ‘regularly patterned displacement’ (Ibid.) driven by small-scale repetition can be more easily associated with African visual design than with the more regularly repetitive and *performance*-driven (dance – or body-driven) structure of African musics. Note how the time signature of 10/4 + 3/4 in Ex. 1 throws the weight onto the end of the phrase. The 10/4 section could have been notated in 6/8 with the last 8 quavers in 8/8 (which is how some players may feel it), but this may have weakened the sense of frustrated expectation just before the repeat, which seems to be what Volans is after.

The second dance of SQ1 provides a good example of a regular 24-pulse cycle, because it was originally a Nyanga (Mozambican) panpipe dance, transcribed by Andrew Tracey. Tracey’s ‘condensation’ of the tune into an essential chord progression (see Ex. 2) was reworked in the analysis of *WMS* by Clarkson Fletcher et al. (1998, 14), and I have added the figures 1-7-13-19 above the staff in this example to show the beginning of each phrase on every sixth pulse in this 24-pulse cycle.

The image shows a musical score for a 24-pulse cycle. It consists of three staves. The top two staves are a grand staff for panpipe notes, with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The bottom staff is for voice notes, with a treble clef. Vertical dashed lines are drawn through the staves at pulse numbers 1, 7, 13, and 19, indicating the start of phrases. The panpipe part features a series of chords and single notes, while the voice part features a melodic line with various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes.

Ex. 2 *WMS*, third dance; Condensation of the pipe and voice parts (Clarkson Fletcher et al. 1998, 14)

19 Robert Farris Thomson has drawn attention to the way Mande strip-weaving displays ‘off-beat phrasing in the unfolding of overall design’ (1983, 209) through the use of ‘frequent, seemingly imperative suspension of expected patterning’ which results in a ‘tendency towards metric play ... surcharged with visual syncopation’ (Ibid., 221). Nothing could better express what Volans is doing here.

In SQ1 this chord sequence undergoes many transformations. First, it is wrapped in a 4/4 time signature, so that three bars of quaver pulses constitutes the cycle (see Ex. 3).

♩ = 180 *senza sord.*

Ex. 3 SQ1, second dance, bars 1-3

Given the fast tempo, barlines become metrically significant here only where new sections begin (bars 16, 31, 54, 63). Second, pitches are distributed across the much wider range of the quartet, later often exploiting the violins' high register. Then, through many repetitions the harmonies also change quite significantly; and they are slightly different from the panpipe chords right from the start, in any case. Towards the end of the movement, the sequence rises into a rarefied space, played *sul ponticello* so that it seems to be a mere memory of the original pattern (see Ex. 4).

♩ = 132 [*ppp sul pont. détaché*]

Ex. 4 SQ1, second dance, bars 107-110

Such 'rarefied' high, extremely soft writing is the fifth element, itself already a development of the chord patterning but in later quartets becoming quite divorced from the idea of patterns.

The dovetailing or merging of sound, blurring the boundaries between one (implied or actual) harmony and the next, is the sixth core element. An even more radical transformation of the cycle than I have just described, for example, is the slowing down and simplification of the chord sequence in the middle of the second dance of SQ1, so that it becomes a series of suspended intervals, each resolving onto the next. This creates a new section, in which the original 24-chord sequence becomes a dream-like phasing in and out of single pitches, the harmonic implications blurred (see Ex. 5).²⁰ There are 24 bars, corresponding to the original length of the cycle.

$\text{♩} = 180$
C
 vn I
 vn II
 (pp) marcato
 vl
 vc
 pp marcato

Ex. 5 SQ1 second dance, bars 31-53 in short score (viola and cello at actual pitch)

In the fourth dance, Volans extends this ‘dream sequence’ in a way reminiscent of *WMS*, retaining the 24 pulses, fleshing out the chords again, and using compound meter (see Ex. 6).

²⁰ This section might be read as a substitute for the abrupt halting of the harpsichords in the third dance of *WMS*, the famous ‘white man sleeps’ moment, where only the rattles continue for a few bars.

Ex. 6 SQ1, ‘fourth dance’, bars 131-134

This cross fading or overlapping becomes a crucial technique in later quartets such as SQ6, the quiet sections of SQ10’s first movement, and the overlapping chords of its second movement.

Aligned with it is the seventh of the core elements, namely Volans’s discovery through writing SQ1 of the beauty of harmonics and open strings. The third dance is entirely based on the harmonic series above G, recalling the African tradition of one-string bow music. Here he uses the harmonic series on G quite loosely, transposing some notes (the violins’ opening G, for example, or the cello’s A; see Ex. 7).

Ex. 7 SQ1, ‘third dance’, bar 33

These core elements or procedures – interlocking, asymmetry, repetition, patterning, high register, soft dynamics, overlapping sounds, harmonics and open strings – haunt Volans’s quartets. Most of them are strongly present in all 11, and indeed can be said to create Volans’s identity as a composer in broader terms.