

Vigil (1991) for violin and piano
analysis and commentary by Carson P. Cooman

American composer Gwyneth Walker's ***Vigil*** (1991) for violin and piano is an extended single 10 minute movement for violin and piano. It is one of the last works of Walker's "first compositional period" (1978-1991). Other representative works from this period include ***Touch the Sky*** (1986) for cello and piano and ***Though Love Be a Day*** (1979) for voice and piano. These works share many stylistic traits with ***Vigil***.

Walker describes the work as follows in her program notes:

*The opening theme and title of ***Vigil*** were formed during a late night drive on a deserted country road. The feeling arose of people caring for and protecting others – of keeping watch at night.*

****Vigil*** is through-composed, expanding upon one theme (initially presented in the violin), appearing in a variety of guises. Although the work may be heard in three sections (slow—fast—slow), it is essential one extended movement. The intent was to allow the theme to unfold, seemingly of its own accord.¹*

This analysis and commentary for ***Vigil*** will focus on the structure and trajectory of the work, also exploring its harmonic and rhythmic energy. It will also look at stylistic elements of this work in relation to techniques of Walker's "first compositional period" works and how they relate to her compositions after 1991.

Although Walker comments that ***Vigil*** can be seen as having a "fast—slow—fast" structure, indeed it is not particularly helpful to examine it this way. Trying to force it into a cyclic three-part form ignores two important aspects: 1) the trajectory of energy throughout the whole work; 2) the many different sections and character changes within.

The harmonic language of the work provides an example of Walker's characteristic vocabulary. At its heart, her language is basically built on a non-functional diatonicism, extended through modal borrowings both for harmonic motion and color. The language of ***Vigil*** shows her language at its most extended – with the modal borrowings playing a crucial role throughout and taking the harmony into wider reaching areas than found in many of Walker's other works. Thus, the tonal language is very important to the work.

The harmony of ***Vigil*** is much more extended than almost any of Walker's other published works. There is a sense of free-wheeling fantasy to its harmonic explorations. Musical ideas are connected via gesture, theme, and modal relationships (transpositions). There is an improvisatory character to the work's language, which also makes it unlike many of

¹ <http://www.gwynethwalker.com/vigil.html>

Walker's other compositions. There is a feeling of times of an improvisation session between two very like-minded and sensitive instrumentalists who have agreed before-hand on a basic set of musical material to transform in any way that their imagination can conceive.

Another very important musical aspect of the work is the use of aleatoric techniques. Aleatory has played a role in all of Walker's work, although its uses are much more prominent and pronounced in music of her "first period." This essay will examine what aleatory means for Walker's music and how it is deployed.

The work begins with the piano alone. The opening key signature is three sharps, implying A major and the time signature is 3/4. It is marked "Slowly, gently" with a quarter note pulse of 108. The opening rhythmic pattern in the piano of an A-E 5th has a "tolling" feeling to it. After a few bars, the first modal borrowing of many appears – the including of D# from the A Lydian scale. The Lydian mode (with its characteristic sharpened fourth scale degree) occurs throughout the piece. Although the key signature never becomes a Lydian one, there are many passages where this modality is so prominent that the work really sits in A Lydian more than it does in A major.

Slowly, gently (♩=108)

Piano

una corda
Ped. stays

At the end of the first line, after the addition of the D# (and a diatonic F#-C# 5th in the left hand), the opening "tolling" figuration breaks off into an aleatoric box, marked "repeat pattern a few times" before proceeding to a second box which adds an additional bass chord in a new rhythmic pattern. The marking on this box is "repeat pattern, vary ad lib." Over this texture the violin enters with its opening melody, unsynchronized with the piano.

Violin

p cantabile

repeat pattern, vary ad lib.

The violin's opening melody is the principal musical material of the work. As Walker's program note alludes, most every other important musical idea in the work is derived from this basic melody. The melody is spacious and in A Lydian. Most important to note in the

melody are its shapes. In some of the further derivations, the exact pitches changes, but the basic melodic contours remain the same.



At this point, because it has already appeared in the piece, it seems an appropriate time to discuss aleatory in Walker’s work. The term “aleatoric” came to be used first with the music of American composer and philosopher John Cage (1912-1992) in the 1960’s in works called called “chance pieces.” The work “aleatoric” comes from the Latin “alea”, meaning “die” or “lot.” Though Cage’s application was extreme, what was “left up to chance” in these pieces is the exact coordination of performers. Players would have certain material (or in Cage’s case an entire piece) to play in their own tempo and without coordinating with a conductor or the other instruments. Thus, the exact realization of the piece would sound slightly different each time it was performed, even if the basic “affect” would always be the same.

It was the mid 20th century Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski (1913-1994) who brought aleatory into the realm of traditionally notated concert music. His copyist and wife Danuta Lutoslawski was the individual who devised much of the trend-setting notation for aleatoric procedures which publishers and composers to this day continue to use. Lutoslawski’s vision of aleatory was that although the coordination and specific tempo for each performer might be varied, the notes to be played and harmonies would be clearly and completely notated by the composer.

Walker’s use of aleatory thus comes from the tradition which Lutoslawski had developed and refined from Cage’s basic inspiration. Many composers in the 1970’s, when Walker was in graduate school, used aleatoric techniques in their works – usually with an atonal musical language. However, from her very earliest works composed as a small child, a personal tonal language was always an important part of Walker’s style. Thus, even when she was exposed to aleatoric techniques and procedures, she found a way to integrate it into her own style in a personal manner.

The important principle always behind any instance of aleatory in Walker’s music is consistent harmony. Whereas Lutoslawski and others would use aleatory within their personal atonal language (where harmonic motion was not a consideration), for Walker each aleatoric unit maintains a consistent harmonic identity. Thus, the effect of aleatoric sections is always one of freedom. The instruments proceed towards the same goals in their own time.

Often, the effect is also textural. Such is often the case in *Vigil* where the piano may provide a texture in an aleatoric box out of synchronization with the violin presenting melodic ideas. The opening pages of the work provide examples of exactly this effect. The boxes are marked “repeat pattern, vary ad lib.” which allows for small variations in the texture and order of the ideas presented within the boxes within the same gestural ideas presented therein.

The next section of work, leading up to letter D, is one of increasing energy. The piano textures continue to get more complex (although the quarter note pulse always remains) and the violin melodies get more and more extended. The mode is still D Lydian and the melody continues to be developed more energetically. For example, compare these transformations of the melody with the opening ideas. The basic melodic and tonal ideas of the base melody are present, but they are presented in faster time in new rhythms – a transformation.



The energy of this aleatoric passage continues to build – including an accelerando to letter D. At this point, the tempo has increased and a strict, coordinated metrical meter comes into play.

The image shows a musical score for a piano and violin. The piano part is in the lower register, and the violin part is in the upper register. The score includes markings for *accel.*, *ff*, and *Broadly* with a tempo of 72. A section marked **D** is highlighted. The piano part features a bass line sequence of F#-E-D-C, and the violin part features a melodic line with triplets and a faster tempo.

This passage is a modulatory one, moving from A major/Lydian to C major/Lydian. The modulation is accomplished through a whole-tone bass line sequence of F#-E-D-C. At the “Slower” section, the bass chord is an A open (no 3rd) chord so as to connect to the previous section. However, the upper register piano figurations clearly establish C Lydian

as a tonality. This section, however, exists in multiple tonal centers at the same time. The unifying force of this section is the transposable Lydian mode, however.

The remainder of this section introduces non-harmonic tones from other Lydian transpositions for colorist effect. The violin's cadenza-like material at letter F is a free sweep through all of the harmonic implications and transpositions that have occurred in the past section – leading back to an establishment of A Lydian at “Quickly.” The violin is left holding D# at the end of this section, the raised 4th which differentiates the Lydian from the major mode. This cadenza presents a transition to the “second pole” (the furthest harmonic area from where we have been – separate by the interval of a tritone.)

This whole section, from the “Slower” through the “Quickly” can be seen as a diversion within the A major/Lydian tonality. Both the previous and following sections sit comfortably within the ground of those two tonalities. This intervening section, however, provides a “color elaboration” by borrowing from other Lydian transpositions.

At letter G, the piano begins an atmospheric gesture that, although not in canon, gives the feeling of one.

6

G *Slowly, gently* (♩ = 120) *accel.* -----
p
poco & ad lib.

Over a pulsing piano low-register chord which hints at both D major and F# minor (F#-C#-D), the violin, unsynchronized with the piano, presents a hint of the melody of the forthcoming fast section. Note how the melodic contours and the focus around the D# show it to be a transformation of the opening melody of the entire work.

(♩ = 120)
p furtively *f sub.*
pp
una corda (& stays)

At letter H, a harmonic change occurs as part of the modulatory material into the fast section. The fast section is characterized by the 6/8 rhythm which it employs for most of its duration and also a free-wheeling sense of harmonic color. Unlike the sections which establish and color a specific tonality, the fast section has a scherzando character and roves through chords and transposed figurations. A unifying harmonic factor is the use of 3rd relationships (or mediant relationships) between the harmonies employed. 3rd motion is often used to move between two distinct harmonic entities.

Musical score for section H. The score consists of a piano accompaniment and a melodic line. The piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand. A marking "(ped. stays)" is present under the first few measures. The melodic line includes triplets and a dynamic marking *p*. A box labeled "H" is placed above the piano part.

At letter K, the fast section modules triumphantly to D Lydian, although all the non-harmonic colorations are still present.

Musical score for section K. The score features a melodic line with an 8va marking and a piano accompaniment with an 8vb marking. The piano part has a complex texture with many non-harmonic tones. A box labeled "K" is placed above the first measure of the piano part.

At three bars after letter L appears the only example of chromatic tone clusters in Walker's published work, employed here for colorist effect, as the previous Lydian clusters become blurred by the addition of non-harmonic tones.

Musical score for section M. The score features a melodic line with a "gradual cresc. to M" marking and a piano accompaniment with an "R.H.: gradual cresc. to M" marking. The piano part has a complex texture with many non-harmonic tones. A box labeled "M" is placed above the first measure of the piano part.

At letter M, there is finally a return to the original A Lydian tonality in which the "fast section" theme was first presented (back of the pulsing chords after letter G). However, the piano colors this with a variety of non-harmonic tones. A few quiet gestures of winding down leave the section quietly.

The piano's last four chords of this section provide a summation of the section and a hinting of the next full-scale harmonic area (Bb). The first two chords exist within the world of D Lydian of the climax of the fast music. The last two chords move to an extended Bb Major, which is where, after a violin cadenza, the harmony of the work will next settle.

At letter N, an extended violin cadenza begins in D major, colored however with Bb and also the G# borrowed from D Lydian. This passage establishes by its end a duality between D major and Bb major which are, again, connected by a mediant/3rd relationship.

By the “a tempo”, the violin is firmly in Bb major, extended by diatonic tones hinted at from the last two chords of the piano’s above-mentioned gesture.

Thus, at the end of the passage the violin holds a D in natural harmonics after a passage of D open 5th harmony. Then, the piano enters decisively in Bb major, setting the harmony of the next section. The mediant relationship is thus used as a modulatory tool, focusing on the D itself as a pivot between the two harmonies.

The image shows a musical score for violin and piano. The violin part begins with an *accel.* marking, followed by a *rit.* marking, and ends with *a tempo*. The piano part starts with a *p* dynamic and a *rit.* marking, followed by a *dolce* marking. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 60. The key signature is Bb major.

In this brief Bb section, the D# of the D Lydian harmony continues to re-assert itself. The violin plays wisps of figurations from earlier sections.

A brief modulation begins to C Lydian ending with chords in A minor, with a raised 4th borrowing (D#). Again, this provides a pivot note, a C to use a mediant relationship to land firmly in C Lydian at the “a tempo.”

The image shows a musical score for violin and piano. The violin part starts with a *(8va)* marking, followed by a *rit.* marking, and ends with *a tempo* and a tempo marking of quarter note = 72. The piano part starts with a *p* dynamic and a *rit.* marking, followed by an *mf* dynamic and a tempo marking of quarter note = 72. The key signature is C major.

At letter Q, the harmony unexpectedly lands on E Lydian with energetic piano figurations emphasizing the harmony. (These figurations are derived from earlier ones appearing at four measures before E, but have more energy and a faster rhythm this time.)

Musical score for page 12, measures 70-72. The score is in 3/4 time and features a piano and a violin. The piano part has a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and sixteenth notes. The violin part has a melodic line with trills. Dynamics include *mf* and *sm.* Tempo markings are $J=80$. There are performance instructions like "accel." and "8vb. -1".

The final section of the piece is providing a long trajectory towards the final decisive A Lydian of the closing bars. At “with energy” a brief foray in D major leads (after a piano’s gesture involving “random fourths”) to a brief excursion in B minor, with Lydian borrowings.

At letter S, the harmonic world is one of D Lydian, A Lydian, and F# minor existing together.

Musical score for page 12, measures 72-74. The score is in 6/4 time and features a piano and a violin. The piano part has a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes and a fifth interval. The violin part has a melodic line with a fifth interval. Dynamics include *p dolce* and *mf*. Tempo markings are $J=72$. There are performance instructions like "Red." and "*".

When, at letter T, the piano begins pulsating, F# minor with the raised 4th Lydian borrowing is the harmony before a moving bass line draws it downwards to A Lydian and the final climax.

14

gently ♩ = 72

T gently ♩ = 72

p

ad. * sim.

The violin, after aleatoric flourishes in the full harmonic spectrum of those tonalities finally plays its last gesture of open 5ths in A, before very decisively adding the D#, the Lydian raised 4th.

repeat pattern, gradually cresc. and accel.

gradually cresc. and accel.

Faster ♩ = 88

Faster ♩ = 88

ff

Red. stays to end

(Red. stays)

Thus, after a long excursion, the piece ends where it began harmonically.

The gestural language of *Vigil* is one of collaboration and freedom. Besides the use of aleatoric techniques, there are countless passages of material which is not strictly metered or coordinated. This is a stylistic trait which other works of Walker's first compositional period share. *Vigil*, however, coming at the end of this period serves as its final summation and also the furthest extension of its harmonic ideals. It represents, in a sense, the contemporary techniques of Walker's musical training (particularly the climate and community of her doctoral studies at the Hartt School in the 1970's) interacting with her basically diatonic harmonic language that has been a part of her style since the very beginning.

The sense of colorist harmonic motion would remain in Walker's work in the years following, although the later applications are not as extreme as they are in *Vigil*.

However, the later works usually have clearer formal structures and do not unfold with quite the same amount of “fantasy” as does *Vigil*.

Walker’s personal application of aleatoric technique has, however, remained an important part of her musical language – particularly when creating “accompaniment” textures in later choral and chamber works, or in string/wind textures within orchestral pieces.

Vigil is a work that begins in extreme tranquility and builds to a point of great energy. It is as though the very basic theme is being invigorated with its own life-force to the point where it takes over. Finally, at the end of the piece, there is a build up of energy before the theme evaporates up into the sky. It is unusual in Walker’s output in that it is a work based on a single theme which is explored to an extreme. It is also unusual in being an extended single-movement work. Although it has a variety of sections, these sections unfold into each other naturally (despite their sometimes extreme contrasts). Thus, it is clearly not a work in multiple movements played attacca.

However, like most of Walker’s other works, it is a musical journey of life and energy. At the end of it, we as the listener are left with a feeling of having gone somewhere. This aspect of Walker’s work has remained a constant, from her earliest available works through the new works of the present day.

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Carson Cooman is an American composer and musicologist. As a composer, his music has and continues to be performed around the world and has been commissioned by numerous organizations. As a musicologist, he has written many articles and given lectures on subjects relating to American and Australian contemporary music. He holds a degree in composition and musicology from Harvard University.