

***Parzival & Fierefiz***  
**A New Musical Narrative**

A contemporary musical re-interpretation/re-telling of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* through the collaborative co-creation and performance of an original composition for classical string quartet & African drums by John McDowell and Emmanuel Vukovich

**PRESENTATION (25 mins)**

**Slide 1: title**

**Introduction (5 mins)**

Good morning everyone. Thank you all for being here this morning.

I would especially like to thank and introduce our special guests from Benin, Mathieu and Samuel Gnonlonfoun, for sharing their musical gift with us today. I would also like to thank Sheila Silver, Faith Conant, Brian Smith, Lusha Anthony, Shane Mulligan, Linnaea Brophy, Jorge Heulga-Garcia, Julian Langford, and Tommy Wu, for their collaboration in this project. Finally, I would like to thank John McDowell with whom I have shared this work for many years.

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The piece I wish to share with you today is a story about human empathy. In the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, it is an exploration, into that art form, *for which all the other art forms are a preparation. This is the social art, the meeting of one human being with another.*"

Inspired by Wolfram von Eschenbach' grail myth, *Parzival & Fierefiz* is an original collaborative composition between diverse musical traditions including early renaissance gamba playing inspired by the work of Jordi Savall, western classical string quartet inspired by the work of Béla Bartók, Sabar music of the Wolof people from Sene-Gambia as taught by Karamo Sabally, Gahu music of the Ewe people from Ghana as taught by Faith Conant/Nani Agbeli of the Stony Brook Volta African Drum ensemble, and original music composed by American composer John McDowell and myself.

**Slide 2: program**

I will present the five movements of this composition and their different musical influences, and show how they relate to Eschenbach's story. Through a discussion of this work, I hope to contribute to the uncovering of a new musical narrative of the Parzival story; one which helps to transform our collective narrative of the Grail myth from an individual quest – into a collaborative journey. With the generous help of my colleagues, we will then perform parts of this piece for you.

### Slide 3: Parzival

#### I. Parzival (5 mins)

Translated from the French *'perce le voile'* meaning to *'pierce the veil'*, **Parzival**, is an epic medieval poem about the Grail myth written by the German knight and troubadour Wolfram von Eschenbach at the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century. It is also, according to thinkers such as Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell, a story expressing the modern individual's search for identity and reconciliation in the modern time age.

The reconciliation of polarities as a pathway towards understanding is present throughout Eschenbach's poem. The story centers around a great wound which can only be healed by a question. A question that is to be asked by a fool who is pure at heart. Parzival, the fool of this story, is described by Wolfram as *'a brave soul, yet slowly wise'* who comes unknowingly to the wound, but fails to ask, out of ignorance, the healing question. Only after years of struggle and a critical encounter, does the necessary transformation from ignorance, through understanding, towards compassion occur thus enabling the healing question of the story to take place.

I would like to read the opening lines of Eschenbach's poem:

#### Slide 4: poem

*"If unfaith in the heart find dwelling, then the soul it shall reap but woe;  
For shaming alike and honor are his who such doubt shall show,  
For it standeth in evil contrast with truth and dauntless might,  
As we see the magpie's plumage, which at once is black and white.*

*And yet we may win to blessing; since I wot well that in our heart,  
Darkness, and light, alike have their lot and part.  
He who is false and unsteadfast, his soul is dark as the night,  
While the soul that hath never wavered, stainless its hue as light."*

The music in the opening movement of this piece is inspired by these opening lines of the poem. It speaks of the trial and doubt in any human undertaking. Reflective of the medieval and early Renaissance Troubadour tradition –which Wolfram came out of, this movement was inspired, in part, by the work of early music scholar and Gamba player Jordi Savall. It is my personal hope, one day, to set Eschenbach's entire poem to musical form.

As is widely known, Eschenbach's poem was the principal source of inspiration for Richard Wagner's Opera *Parsifal*. However, somewhat alien in spirit to the work he professed to dramatize, Wagner omits several important elements of the story, most importantly in my opinion, he omits the climactic encounter between *Parzival* and his half-brother *Feirefiz*. Eschenbach's describes how their father, Gamuhret of Anjou, travels to Africa, a land called

Zazamanc, where he marries Queen Belekané. They have a son whose skin is spotted like parchment paper, like the magpie whom name him Fierefiz: meaning he of many colors.

In Eschenbach's poem, the meeting of these two strangers and their ensuing fight, leads to the re-discovery of their common origin and identity; a realization taking place in both individuals, which enables them, together, to return and redeem the healing question which Parzival had failed to ask alone. This is, in essence, the element of Eschenbach's story that Wagner decided to leave out of his opera, but which this composition, proposes to re-tell.

### **Slide 5:**

#### **II. Fierefiz: (7 mins)**

The seed for this project began many years ago, when I met composer John McDowell, who first introduced me to Senegalese drumming. John and I began working together on a joint composition which became the birth of some of the work you will hear today. I then traveled to Tanje, a small fishing village on the coast of The Gambia, to live and study with John's teacher Karamo Sabally. The opening of the second movement of this work is a drum call from the Sobar music of the Wolof people which I learned during my time in the Gambia.

### **Slide 6: Bartok**

At this point, I would like to introduce the work of another inspiration for this project. It is not widely known that Bartók extended his ethnomusicology research of peasant and folk music to Northern Africa and traveled, in 1913, to Algeria to record and study folk music around Briska. As his ethnomusicology work developed, Bartók became increasingly interested in this music, because, having encountered it in Serbo-Croatian folk music, it was for him a key to the transformation of Western Europe's musical harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic structure. "There are very few areas where melodies or even a melodic style exists which sound as if they are based on a genuine chromatic system...such a chromatic style exists in areas of Northern Algeria and in Dalmatia ... These people accompany almost all their songs with percussion instruments; sometimes in a very complicated rhythm. These are the most pronounced difference between their music and ours." Béla Bartok, Harvard Lectures, 1943.

### **Slide: 7 Agawu**

I would like to respond to Bartók with a quote by the music scholar Kofi Agawu:

"The notion that the distinctive quality of African music lies in its rhythmic structure, and consequently that the terms *African music* and *African rhythm* are often interchangeable, has been so persistently thematized in writings about African music that it has by now assumed the status of a commonplace. And so it is with the related ideas that African rhythms are complex, that Africans are essentially rhythmic people, and that Africans are different from 'us' – from Euro-Americans." Kofi Agawu, *The invention of African rhythm*, 1995.

With these words by Agawu, I acknowledge the incredible body of work that exists, that stands as a witness, and that continues to grow in awareness around a historic social wound. A wound, which, in my estimation, is the same wound described by Eschenbach in the story of Parzival.

Guided by this story, I seek to ask my question through the eyes and ears of the music. Over this past year I have participated in Volta, Stony Brook's African Drum Ensemble class led by Faith Conant. I would like to share three observations from my experience there.

The first observation, is the realization that a musical work or composition can be a collaborative, social, and even multi-generational creation. A work does not have to be composed only by a single individual at a given moment in time, but can be in a process of continual creation by several individuals over an indefinite time frame.

The second observation involves the possibility of a complete unity and interconnectedness between the various artistic expressions of a work. In learning a new piece, there is a necessary interdependence between learning the melody and words of a particular song or poem with learning the rhythms of the corresponding drum parts, with learning the steps of the dance that move this music. Melody, meaning, rhythm, and movement, are all aspects of a single expression. Whether a piece of music has words or dance to it or not, the potential to 'be moved' or to 'understand' – are always inherently present.

The third observation is related to how a drum ensemble is built up of different voices that fit together to create a musical whole.

#### **Slide: 8 Locke**

In his description of Gahu, David Locke describes this in the following way:

“Each instrument contributes its own powerful rhythm and as the parts repeat, the players achieve their aesthetic goal, a beautifully integrated polyphonic whole. Each part asserts its musical character but remains sufficiently stable to be influenced by the others.

Clearly, repetition is more central to this idiom than variation. The music moves in spirals, not lines. Depth, not development, is key.”

- David Locke Drum Gahu, 1998

Like all music, a Gahu drum ensemble is built around a reference on which all the other parts depend. This is the what David Locke calls 'the Time' played by the Gangouki or bell, Axatse or rattle, and Kaganu the highest pitched drum. The other drum parts to revolve around this central axis. I have found it very interesting to think about how in western classical music, it is often a single base line played by the lowest voice, upon which the music is built. Moreover, in a string quartet for example, we often speak of building or tuning a chord or phrase from the bottom upwards.

Add: roles are inverted: bell/kagan is highest pitch, lead drum is lowest pitch, melody is highest/

### **III. Zazamanc**

I now would like to speak about the compositional process of creating this work:

Bartók is said to have believed, that the only way to really incorporate or integrate a different musical culture into one's one composition, was to create it a new:

“We may, for instance, take over a peasant melody unchanged or only slightly varied, write an accompaniment to it and possibly some opening and concluding phrases. This kind of work would show a certain analogy with Bach's treatment of chorales. ... Another method ... is the following: the composer does not any make use of a real peasant melody but invents his own imitation of such melodies. There is no true difference between this method and the one described above. ... There is yet a third way ... Neither peasant melodies nor imitations of peasant melodies can be found in this music, but it is pervaded by the atmosphere of peasant music. In this case, we may say, the composer has completely absorbed the idiom of peasant music which has become his musical mother tongue.”

#### **Slide 4: Zazamanc B**

In the opening of Zazamanc, the quartet emulates a Sobar Drum ensemble: Time – played by the cello, support drum parts played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> violin and viola, and a solo/lead drum part played by the 1<sup>st</sup> violin.

#### **Slide 4: Zazamanc A**

The central challenge of working in this kind of collaborative project, is that we are working with a music that defies notation.

This ostinato begins with a rhythmic pattern, taken from a Sobar support part, that is somewhere between triplet 8<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> notes.

#### **Slide 4: Zazamanc B**

A further example of this is when the different voices are playing in different meters simultaneously.

A central obstacle which we faced was that a particular song I wished to integrate into the composition – Ali ma yi Se go (which I will present in a moment), is part of a piece Agdadza, is in 12/8 time, but the composition Zazamanc was in 4/4 and 6/8.

I really wanted to make this work somehow, but didn't know how ...

### **IV. Encounter**

#### **present Ali ma yi Se go**

I would like to ask my colleagues if they would be willing to come and sing this song for you in its original form :

Then I would like to demonstrate the 4/4 rhythm of Gahu – that we end up with:

last night - Samuel and Mathieu - sing the 21/8 song in 4/4 !

This was a moment of 'improvisation/intuition ... asking

## **V. Reunion**

The final movement of the piece will unfortunately not be performed today, however it weaves together the theme of Percival, Fierfiz, and the melody of the song Ali ma yi Se go.

I would like to end with the following picture:

Eschenbach's Percival, is in an arch form – return to the question

Bartók – quartets – arch form

Propose the social process of collaborative leadership – as an arch form

Presenting/intuition/improvisation

Art of listening/of conversation/social art ... is the new 'grail quest'

## **VI. PERFORMANCE (25 mins)**

## **VII. QUESTIONS (10 mins)**