



## **Steve Layton (1956- )    The Composer Plays III    Works for Imaginary Piano**

This latest installment of my The Composer Plays series collects not only some of my newer pieces composed for piano, but for the first time a couple realizations of pieces by other composers that I admire.

All of the performances here were realized without touch a musical keyboard. Some are works that can be played “live” by a real pianist; others contain consciously “impossible” moments, that no single pianist could perform live. The important point is that those moments happen through intention, not ignorance. In quite the same way as a painting, these are my performances, my thought and touch. Like a good film, how the effect is made doesn't really matter when the image and story are powerful enough.

*-- Steve Layton / Seattle, February 2004*



1. **And Then It Rained** (2002)

A quiet, slightly “hyper-romantic” prelude.

2. **Jeff Harrington: BlueStrider** (1994)

The first piece I found on the web by N.Y. Composer Jeff Harrington was *BlueStrider*. Even though it was as a basic MIDI file with little extra subtlety, I was immediately attracted to the driving sound, something like a car-crash between Beethoven and Stravinsky in a New Orleans bar. No available recording really did the piece justice, so I asked Jeff if I could try my hand at a realization.

3. **Pegasus** (2002)

From a suite of *Avatars*, pieces all named after mythological heroes, spirits and demons. Everyone should know the winged horse of the Greeks and Romans.

4. **Harbison** (2003)

Surfing the web and coming across the site of noted American composer John Harbison, I was struck by a small graphic used on the page: it was a scan of a sketch, a twelve-note theme with no other elaboration. I used that theme as the basis for this short piece, though in a freely contrapuntal way. Once it was finished, I contacted Harbison himself and shared the piece with him. He gave his blessing, and here it is.

5. **Appearances and Disappearances** (2003)

A large piece that all grows from the smallest germ. The first few seconds' worth of motives supply almost all the material for the rest of the work. Fragments are spun out, transposed, inverted, doubled; new and previous fragments come together and grow. Then this highly structured, athletic music suddenly starts to hang up on just a few notes and chords. Things grow slow and contemplative, then combative. A sudden return to the first section's music brings back the focus, but a focus that can't help remember what intervened.

## 6. **Kolokola and Apaches** (2004)

Written while thinking that it was almost 100 years since Ravel wrote his *Miroirs*, with its “Vallé des cloches”. As a young composer, Ravel was part of a little renegade group of Parisian musicians, the *Apaches*, in love with things slightly “barbaric” and vividly exotic. One of those loves was for Mussorgsky and the Russian “Five” composers, whose ranks included Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin. Rimsky-Korsakov was at that moment teaching a young Igor Stravinsky, who in only a few more years would live in Paris and become Ravel's friend. The giant bells Russia was famed for are called *Kolokola*. So all of these bells and composers are in my own piece -- wafting up through everything else that followed -- until they reached me.

## 7. **Dasamuka** (2001)

From the *Avatars* suite. In the Indonesian version of the *Ramayana* the king of the demons, who steals Rama's wife Sita and fights Hanuman's monkey army, is named Dasamuka.

## 8. **Unseen Figure** (2003)

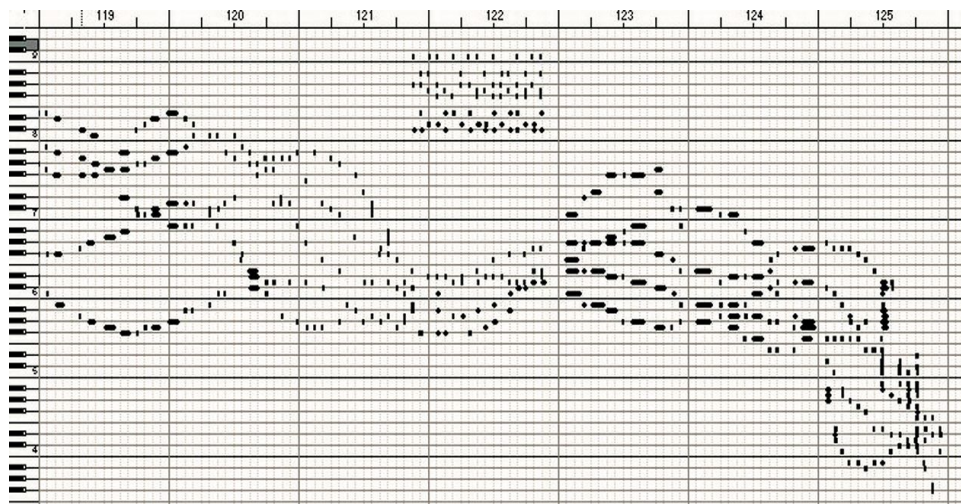
The “unseen figure” of the piece is a motive that shaped the first ideas but was then removed, leaving only its “outline”.

## 9. **Hanuman** (2001)

From the *Avatars* suite. In the *Ramayana*, Hanuman is the monkey king who becomes Prince Rama's firm ally, helps him defeat Ravana (Dasamuka) and secure the return of Sita.

## 10. Iannis Xenakis: *Evryali* (1973)

One of the great monuments of late-20th-century music, Xenakis' *Evryali* is not his largest, most complex, or even grandest piece. But in its ferocious assaults there's a kind of directness, an appeal that shines clearly even for people who have trouble with much of the rest of Xenakis' works. Part of this appeal is, I think, in the method of composition Xenakis was exploring at the time; a system called UPIC, which essentially allowed the composer to draw on a kind of light panel, and have those lines and shapes translated into notes on the staff (or staves in this case; some of the music has the pianist trying to negotiate ten at once!). Xenakis called these shapes *arborescences*: organic shapes like the roots and branches of a tree, currents of waters or even clouds. Hard to see in the traditional score, when transferred to a “piano-roll” view they become easily apparent:



## 11. American Ghost Song (2001)

In my mind the only thing I can offer is the image of Buddha hanging over ragtime pianist Jelly Roll Morton.

All pieces © 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 Steve Layton (ASCAP)  
except BlueStrider © 1994 Jeff Harrington (ASCAP) and *Evryali* © 1973 Editions Salabert  
All pieces composed or performed and recorded by Steve Layton at NiwoSound Studio, Seattle.  
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Synthesizer: Alesis QSR  
Reverb: Alesis Microverb 4  
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