

John Van der Slice

**A Guide to
Dennis Kam's Music**

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PREAMBLE

This essay was written and published in February 2020 on the website <https://www.dennis-kam.org> which is dedicated to preserving the compositional legacy of Dennis Kam; it was revised in April 2021. What follows here is part personal recollection, part subjective interpretation of the composer's music and part attempt at an introductory listening guide. Most of the works mentioned are arguably among the composer's most significant and can be accessed in recordings on that website. Distinctive characteristics of pieces are briefly described, occasionally in a somewhat technical manner. Some listeners may wish to simply use the highlighted (**bold**) titles as “suggested listening.” Please refer to the website for recordings as well as scores.

INTRODUCTION

Dennis Kam and I met for the first time in 1966 at the University of Hawaii. We shared a passion for contemporary art music and soon became best friends. We later roomed together at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and eventually became colleagues at the University of Miami at Coral Gables, Florida. Dennis had a prodigious musical talent that included an exceptional ear for harmonic color. He was also intellectually curious, broadly knowledgeable and especially drawn to religion and philosophy. At the same time he was an avid sports fan. He loved baseball and tennis and when I first knew him was such a successful bowler that he had briefly considered becoming a professional.

I recall him during those early years walking along, head down, totally absorbed while silently conducting some imagined music, his down beat's wrist-recoiling ictus synced to a sudden plosive “bah!” as his eyebrows shot up. That moment of incisive punctuation was something that Dennis seemed to relish viscerally, something perhaps evoking the explosive contact of ball on bat, racket or ten-pins. He had an abundance of nervous energy which was often revealed by a punctuative spontaneity in his movement and speech. I might have guessed him to be a percussionist but he was a pianist, an instrument that nonetheless uses a struck string to make sound. His playing technique revealed the pleasure he took in the percussive nature of that instrument and percussive accents were to become an enduring dramatic feature of his music.

EARLY YEARS

Dennis's early composition was “modernist,” reflecting many major composers of the 20th century. He initially incorporated two important hallmarks: rhythmic unpredictability and the avoidance of consonance. Syncopated percussive accents and tonal distortions can be heard in the *Suite for Piano* (1960) and the Hindemith-influenced *Sonata for Trombone* (1961-62). The prolonged tension of Schoenberg's atonality is felt in the *Wind Quintet* (1962) and the ***Five Pieces for String Orchestra and Percussion*** (1963).

Anton Webern's haiku-like brevity informs the *Five Phases for Solo Flute* (1965) as well as *Ensembles II* (1965). Edgard Varèse and the Polish School (Krzysztof Penderecki and Witold

Lutoslawski) impact later works with dense textures, forceful sustained dissonance and string glissandi. *Rendezvous I* for two pianos (1966) echoes the sound mass of works like Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1959-61).

Both the *Quartet for Strings No. 1* (1966) and *Rendezvous II* (1967) for trombone and piano represent a sport-like excitement of rhythmic uncertainty as well as what will remain signature characteristics of much of his music: punctuation and a motoric persistence. The *Quartet* makes use of a spasmodic pointillism, energetically pushing ahead with sustained tremolos. These last are disrupted by isolated accents and the work eventually resolves into pulsing rhythmic regularity. In *Rendezvous II* the trombone and piano engage in a brutal sparring match in which staggered marcato accents vie with shared points of coincidence. The short bursts of repeated pitches found in both works will remain a signature trait.

Two musical spoofs betray a growing dissatisfaction with European modernism by mocking its style. A third exploits non sequitur.

In the first, the Dadaist *Recitative for Pianist* (1971), the performer begins with an obsessively manic, widely spaced, and rhythmically irregular pointillism which lasts unvaried for more than two minutes before being interrupted suddenly by a strident sustained vocal pitch. The activity resumes and continues for another minute until interrupted once again... and so on ad absurdum until it ends with a cadential formula that is repeated ad nauseam (in the manner of Satie's *Embryons desséchés III*). This last may signal a tipping point for the composer's modernist ambivalence toward repetition itself, a procedure that he will later embrace enthusiastically.

In the second, *Go* (1971) for clarinet, cello (or contrabass) and trombone, harsh (i.e., modernistic) elements become increasingly separated by silences while the conductor executes bafflingly complex metric patterns that continue to the end, long after the instruments have stopped playing.

The third, *Blue Paradise* (1971), uses occasional quotation within a rapid succession of illogical contrasts in the manner of television channel hopping. This technique can also be found in the music of Erik Satie and George Antheil but more significantly in Michael Tippett's *Piano Sonata No. 2*, a work that proved especially influential later on.

Re-Actions (1972) for piano, three trombones and timpani is an essay in sheer brute energy and pits instrumental types against each other with unsparing aggressiveness. Undoubtedly inspired by a

favorite work at the time, Xenakis' *Eonta*, it is an apotheosis of modernist cathartic intensity to which the composer would never return.

LESS IS MORE: A NEW PATH TAKEN

Dennis Kam's later music could be impressionistic but rarely expressionistic, with little wallowing in emotional strife, deranged senses or fevered outbursts. He often could be playfully experimental but in general he was more of a neoclassicist with a predilection for unambiguous precision, clarity and rhetoric. Despite an avid curiosity about contemporary developments he felt conflicted regarding what he thought was an angst-ridden, ivory tower attitude of much late-20th century European music. He had no feeling for labyrinthine pitch schemes and the novel sounds of extended instrumental techniques. These he saw as tending to confound the average listener with bewildering complexity and gratuitous cosmetics. He was an authentic practicing Christian whose soul-searching fed not only a passion for philosophy, but also a personal sense of responsibility toward his art and his audience. (His essay "In Pursuit of the Positive," addresses this issue and can be found on his website in "Texts and Downloads/Other Articles", <https://www.dennis-kam.org/texts/artikel.html>.)

In 1968 a Columbia recording of Terry Riley's "In C" (1964) was released. The minimalism of Terry Riley (and later Steve Reich, among others) was an aesthetic reaction against modernism which offered an antidote: a limiting and simplifying which helped to focus and hold the listener's attention. Euphonious consonance replaced the sustained tension of dissonance. Relative quiet replaced strident loudness. Sustained sounds and extended repetitions replaced rhythmic complexity. Thus the fleeting pointillistic "moments" of Webern-influenced modernism could be arrested, tamed and expanded, enabling music to be leisurely absorbed, dwelled in and savored.

This had a major impact on Dennis Kam's composition, notably for the period of 1970-1972 during which he was the composer-in-residence under a Ford Foundation grant for the state of Hawaii. Dennis wrote much music during this time, providing ample opportunity for cultivation of a more personal and lasting style. Examples of this new aesthetic from 1971 are *Several Times* for piano and *Mixed* for three flutes, two clarinets, three trombones, piano and percussion. A unique example also from 1971 is *Gagaku Impressions* for wind ensemble which aptly channels the 1000 year old court orchestra tradition of Japan into a beautifully effective "minimalist" experience.

The punctuative shock of the finite moment, which had been so compelling for Dennis, may have become for him a point of departure. Minimalism's repetition of limited materials could prolong and enhance a “moment” into a sustained, richly active process of self-confirming variety within tight organic unity: a music which seems to say “all is one, all is now.” This is arguably more associated with Far Eastern music traditions which stress ornamentation rather than the progressing narrative found in the West. It may be significant that Dennis was not a reader of novels nor was he what I would call a cinephile. He was more attracted to painting, and his graphic sensibility can be seen in his handwriting and music calligraphy, both of which are distinctively artful. Thus it should come as no surprise that instead of creating an evolving “story” in his music he was much more at home exploring and embellishing a unitary music “object,” presenting a variety of perspectives as when one scans a painting or circles around a solid piece of sculpture. He was born and raised on an island in the middle of the Pacific, an environment with little seasonal change. More often than not, one beautiful day followed another, something that may have contributed to his savoring of prolonged equilibrium.

Dennis had a philosophical interest in phenomenology and its emphasis on the palpable present. This interest along with his religious faith might explain his attraction to repetition both as extended focus as well as an existential “affirmation” of life, the latter expressed by the unambiguous and unwavering determination of clock-time pulsing staccatos, marcatos and pizzicatos. Thus the rocking repetitions (ostinati) along with recursively advancing scale fragments and optimistic climb of arpeggios could sketch an aural gestalt (usually involving consonant pitch intervals) which seemed to paradoxically move ahead while always remaining in place. In much of his music there is little sense of the past becoming a future; it seems rather to remain in an eternal present.

MAJOR WORKS

Ad Hoc (1974) for ensemble signals the arrival of a mature and compelling Kam style. Here the minimalist “moment” expands beyond simple repetition into the fraught anticipation felt in a dominant 7th harmony, one which undergoes “interferences” but without ever being fully resolved. It is elaborated by means of rhythm, bouncy arpeggiated contrapuntal textures, ostinati, repetitions, sustained crescendos and colorful scoring. It is diversity within the focal point of a single suspenseful harmony. Inspiration for the piece might be traced to another of Kam's favorite composers, Alexander Scriabin, who based many of his works on elaboration of a sustained altered dominant harmony, his “mystic chord.”

Ditto Varianti (1974) for orchestra, which shares affinities with *Ad Hoc*, derives in part from a form used in Michael Tippett's *Piano Sonata No. 2* in which sections of contrasting character are juxtaposed successively into a mosaic of recursions. The form provides a novel extension of the rondo idea to achieve its unity within variety. *Ditto Varianti* expands to become a neckless-like string of returning (and thus familiarizing) differentiated “moments.” By this time the composer had enthusiastically embraced Fibonacci () proportions which he uses to establish a progressive framework of organically related durations. The resulting piece is both formally elegant, effectively scored and emotionally affecting.

The *Number 216 (Bach Variations I)* (1975) for two pianos takes as a subject the music of J. S. Bach, most prominently the choral, *Es Ist Genug*, which was famously quoted by Alban Berg in his *Violin Concerto*. These aural “found objects” are examined from a variety of perspectives, in the manner of a cubistic painting, with “moments” of fragmentation flanked by pregnant silences which ably transmute the familiar into mystery.

Alleluia (1979) for mixed chorus achieves, with an economy of means, an ecstatic, richly sonorous expression of spiritual transcendence with its cumulation of ascending, overlapping melodic figures within harmonic shifts and inflections, all of which finally peak on a faith-affirming tonic pitch.

In *Music for Celebration* (1981), an exuberant piece originally for two pianos and later scored for orchestra as well as concert band, echoes of *Ad Hoc* (at the beginning) and *Ditto Varianti* can be heard. *Ad Hoc's* sustained and suspenseful harmony is here expanded and elaborated. The texture is richly active and the celebratory brass with timpani help deliver a rousing ending.

The *Fantasy Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* (1981) has all the hallmarks of the classic “Kam style”: seductive harmonic sonorities, iconic figurations, nervously persistent staccato motion, proportional “rightness,” and a restless play of self-referencing detail. The first movement reiterates a ringing piano figure like an aural ideogram offset by sustained clarinet. The second movement begins with the composer's familiar rocking interval of a major 3rd which rises to a single repeated pitch, a repeated gestural “moment,” which outlines the dominant 7th chord of *Ad Hoc* and functions similarly to freeze that which is usually unstable into stability. This is interrupted by a jauntily contrasting section, a return to the opening, then an abbreviated second interruption followed by the ending. The third movement elaborates figures which expand purposefully upwards and which highlight a major/minor harmonic clash, a sound anticipating the opening of the Kam's *Symphony* to be composed twenty years later.

The three *Ontologies (Pre-Socratic Etudes)* (1981) for piano further recall Stravinsky and also reflect Dennis Kam's interest in philosophy. In *Heraclitus* (“All is change”) pulsing octave displacements playfully juxtapose a restriction of pitches. In *Democritus* (“All is made of atoms”) a punctuative chord successively serves to announce unfoldings of a melodic figure in a manner suggestive of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. In *Parmenides* (“All is one”) halting gestures and rhythms again suggest Stravinsky.

The Epistemology of Delicate Time in Blue Three (1982) is for either one piano or piano duo. Always sensitive to the effect of titles, Kam created here one of his most beautiful and worthy of its subject. The work can seem an extended timeless “moment” defined by sonorously ringing iconic chordal figures which are in turn harmonically stable, unstable, forceful, yielding or ethereal, and all initially sounded with leisurely wind-chime rhythms. The reiterated but inevitably ebbing sound of the piano can be poignantly suggestive of the music's beauty being swallowed by the silence of eternity. Eventually a motoric impulse sustains and swells the texture to a crest after which it gently subsides

against the lingering of tolling octaves. (The piece was the third of five works for piano comprising *Piano Epic* the others, composed in 1986, being shorter.)

The *Sonata for Cello and Piano* (1985) introduces greater diversity of expression while still retaining motoric pulse and emphasis on 3rds. The first movement hints at sonata form, with an “exposition” pitting hesitating scurries of quiet pizzicatos against a punctuating piano. After a formal repeat it continues into a “development” beginning with the piano's sonorously domineering, widely spaced major triads in dramatic juxtapositions within which the cello struggles to survive. The latter scurries toward the end pursued by the piano until it is overtaken, yet manages, after an expressive cadenza, to ascend to a high E (a tonal center) before its termination by the piano. The second movement, Variations, is slow and reflective and is asymmetrically partitioned according to Fibonacci proportions (as is much of Kam's music). The piano introduces an iconic motive: a ringing drop of a major 3rd in descending iterations. The interval of a perfect 5th is also emphasized and allowed to resonate, sometimes with portamento inflection. These basic intervals once again focus attention on the profound beauty of the consonant aural “moment.” An obbligato of pulsing repetitions is added but eventually yields to a quiet ending. The vivace third movement, Toccata Rondo, displays a familiar consistency of nervous contrapuntal texture based on the piano's pulsing arpeggiated staccatos.

The *Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano* (1985) begins its first movement in a manner similar to the second movement of the *Fantasy Sonata*, only here the repeated pitch is the upper leading tone of an altered tonic-containing dominant chord. Rocking intervals and staccato repetitions are interrupted several times by more quiet and leisurely arching legato arpeggiations, which eventually swell into a rich sonority before motoric marcatos push to the sustained resonance of a final chord. The sweetness of this movement's legatos carries into the slow, quiet second movement. It begins with a choral-like piano, a rising cello pizzicati and a violin expressively sketching rocking arpeggiations and double stops. The piano then introduces a wistful music-box-like melody, touched upon by the other two instruments. There follows a return to the manner of the first section which blossoms into a resonant richness and then returns once more to the piano's innocent melody, finally echoed by a brief passage on the violin before the piano signals a quiet close. In the third movement three textures are contrasted and then integrated: a swift, upward arpeggiated scrambling, a slower chordal shifting and a revived bouncy activity.

The *Quartet for Strings No. 2* (1986) begins with an exposition, repeating a now familiar ascending gesture, here a minor 6th (the inversion of the equally familiar major 3rd) and quickly reaching a perfect 4th above to imply a dominant to tonic relationship. This binary “moment” is repeated and developed by transpositions and variations within a textural web of mostly rapid measured tremolo arpeggiations until slowing and thinning to a quiet recapitulation of the opening. The second movement begins with a short repeated sequence of gently descending minor thirds that will be challenged by arpeggiated tremolos, pizzicati and an assertive ascending cello. This initial statement is repeated but also extended into slower phrases, the activity leading to sustained pitch, all developing and lengthening while leaving further behind repetitions of the opening statement. The third movement is a rapid, skittish texture of alternating and overlapping pizzicati, ponticello tremolos, double-strokes, and insistent martellatos, all of which arpeggiate extended tertian harmonies.

The five *Preludes for Piano* span the years 1986 to 1998. The first (“rubato”)¹ is unambiguously influenced by a favorite composer, Alexander Scriabin (whose sustained “mystic chord” may have inspired the sustained dominant 7th chord of *Ad Hoc*). The second (“with relentless drive and energy”) is an evolving perpetuum mobile and the third (“smooth, connected, steady: with sense of direction”) is a slow, chromatic, occasionally inflected “walking line.” The fourth (“lovingly, tenderly, hauntingly”) is perhaps the composer's most exquisite example of haiku-like brevity and refined harmonic sensibility. The fifth (“with uncompromising motion and passion”) is a blossoming of bitter-sweet extended tonality.

Triple Play (1987) for chamber ensemble is rooted in the by-now-familiar exuberant Kam style of upwardly bubbling arpeggiations and clock-like recursive bustlings.

Green by Five (1993) for three violins and two violas is a languorous essay on gentle, subtly shifting dissonance.

Quartet for Strings No. 3 (1998), notable for its breadth and depth of expression, is in five movements.²

¹ Expression mark in score.

The first movement (“sustained; intense; full and sonorous”) is restrained and drawn out with sporadic “awakenings” of active ascending figures. The second movement (“steady and forceful”) recursively explores scalar figures in unison. The third movement (“lyrical, free and expressive, but with motion”) seems to have attained a plateau which is interrupted several times by further scalar ascents. The fourth movement (“quick; intense/calm”) begins with active ascending figures yielding to more passive and sustained “ruminations.” The fifth movement (“forceful and relentless”) builds vigorously and confidently, an answer to what could be felt as the work's previous struggles with uncertainty.

Kam was nearly 60 when he wrote his only *Symphony* (2001), the sombre opening echoing the opening of favorite composer Michael Tippett's Fourth Symphony (1976-77). By this time the composer's “moment” has become vastly elongated with pitches stretching darkly across the musical landscape like those mysterious shadows in paintings by Salvador Dali. In the first movement the music's mildly dissonant undulations are occasionally interrupted by an aspiring climb into a glint of flutes and piccolo. The second movement projects an iconic repeated figure which gradually modifies to bloom expectantly into a sustained (albeit “embellished”) dominant 7th harmony (again recalling *Ad Hoc*). The third movement is launched vigorously with a rocking major third, tense with anticipation, eventually giving way to both return of the symphony's sombre opening and a cautious sense of resolution.

The *Sonata for Piano* (2002), another work expressing a spirit of gravitas, opens rhetorically with a single, sustained and sonorous “A” stretching a span of six octaves (a “Behold!”) followed by a stark, scripture-like, monophonic line (“sacred”?) which periodically erupts into propelling stretches of motoric activity (“profane”?), undergoes provocative integrations of the two and eventually ends with resonant grandeur. I hear this as an intimation of the composer's religious faith and am reminded of late Beethoven: String Quartet Op 132: 3rd movement and the two-movement Piano Sonata, Op. 111, both of which juxtapose the spiritual with the mundane. In 2005 a clarinet was added to the above to create a *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano*.

Lokahi (2003) for clarinet, cello and piano is a musical homage to the composer's Hawaiian roots and begins with a repeated minor 3rd, an interval associated with ancient Hawaiian chant. Typical

2 Quartet No. 1 is in two movements, No. 2 in three and No. 4 was to have been in eight, the number of movements increasing in accord with the Fibonacci series: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc

of many of his other works it becomes the musical “object” to be modified, embellished and, here, given a tinge of jazz.

Miami Mix (II) (2003) for chamber ensemble projects a texture of rocking intervals within an attractively kaleidoscopic scoring.

Mix Five (a) (2006) for solo clarinet creates a mosaic of juxtaposed contrasts somewhat in the manner of *Ditto Varianti* (1974).

D-Bop: Sonata for Piano No. 2 (2010), recalls the neoclassicism of Stravinsky by pulsing lively octave displacements of “D” across the full tessitura of the keyboard, then successively introducing other pitches. Kam illustrates his mastery of pitch play in the following contrasting sections of sustained sonorities and harmonic nuance. It confirms a refined aesthetic sensibility cultivated over a lifetime of composition.

EPILOG

Dennis Kam has left a legacy of more than 170 works. He was revered by many as a teacher and mentor, in large part because of his insights, patience, humor and enthusiasm. During his final years his time and effort were allotted increasingly to his church choir and the Miami Youth Symphony. His compositions had become, like their author, transparently unpretentious, and it should come as no surprise that he gave considerable attention to making multiple versions and variations of a modest album leaf from 1980, eventually to be called simply “Simply.”

I listened to his works as they accumulated over more than half a century and continue to hear a music that revels in the present moment, fully awake and often infused with an eager, restlessly striving energy. For me it is a faithful expression of the man himself.