Abandoned Overture

for orchestra without conductor

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(2006)

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Frequently asked questions:

Why would you write a piece for orchestra without conductor?

I have nothing against conductors. I think conductors are terrific. I am concerned with a broader set of issues. Here's the problem: as the capacity of computers to emulate human performers improves and the willingness of listeners to accept spurious representations of music increases, I fear that the two may meet and that this could obviate the need for human performers entirely.

I endeavor to write music that can only be played by humans. In *Abandoned Overture,* my solution is to allow each member of the orchestra to determine (consciously or unconsciously) how his or her part will align with the rest of the orchestra. This music reflects the individual quirks and personalities of each musician; it represents a constellation of human interactions that can not be replicated in a computer realization.

Couldn't someone use artificial intelligence to emulate the shifting alignments of parts in *Abandoned Overture*?

Of course! Someone could also use the same technology to create "rubato" in a computer rendition of a Chopin nocturne. The result would be similar: artificial and vacant. There is something essentially human about what we do as musicians and no amount of computer programming can simulate that.

How is *Abandoned Overture* prepared?

Although no portion of the piece is ever conducted, a conductor is required to guide rehearsals. Members of the orchestra should be instructed to treat their parts as solos; they are welcome to listen to their colleagues, but have no obligation to coordinate their parts unless specifically instructed to do so. However, each part is conventionally notated throughout; this is not an “open-form” composition. The piece begins with a solo vibraphone line playing eighth notes. Members of the orchestra are free to align their parts to the vibraphone if they so choose. Measure 40 serves to cue the entry of the timpani and other percussion. Subsequently, all percussion should attempt to coordinate their parts as long as possible. This is facilitated by quarter notes in the cowbell. At measure 45, members of the orchestra are instructed to align their parts to the cowbell; however, the shifting alignments of the previous section virtually guarantee that parts will not align exactly as written in the score. For example, if the second oboist arrives at measure 45 when the first percussionist is only at measure 39, the second oboe part will still be able to coordinate to the quarter-note pulse of the cowbell throughout the following section, but the second oboe part will not align to the percussion as indicated in the score - it will always be "ahead." From measure 40 to the end of the piece, the tempo never changes. However, the pulse becomes increasingly unclear. Each member of the orchestra is responsible for maintaining the tempo (in the same sense that a solo performer should maintain a steady tempo if instructed to do so), but each interpretation of the tempo will inevitably vary and the alignment of parts will continue to shift further. The piece ends when every part is finished (more specific instructions for the ending are found in the score).

Abandoned Overture requires very little rehearsal. However, members of the orchestra must know their own parts; they should be encouraged to prepare their parts as if they were going to perform the entire piece alone. During rehearsals, the conductor should comment on how closely individuals adhere to their parts and how musically they play them. Rehearsing section B (by beginning at measure 41) can be effective, but only if the orchestra understands than an actual performance will result in different vertical alignments.

How is *Abandoned Overture* performed?

The conductor does not need to be present on stage during the performance. The piece begins when the first percussionist begins.

Does the conductor have an important role in *Abandoned Overture*?

Absolutely! The conductor has significant artistic input in sculpting a performance by guiding the individual members of the orchestra. This, in turn, will influence how the musicians hear each other and how they interact. The conductor, however, should make no attempt to dictate how parts align.

What distinguishes a correct performance from a deeply flawed performance?

If each part is played correctly, the aggregate of parts is played correctly. I accept (and appreciate) that people have different senses of time and that interpretations of a tempo will vary. Although the tempo at rehearsal C is MM quarter = 126, one musician may play this section at MM quarter = 104 while another may play it at MM quarter = 132. I am not suggesting that performers fabricate their own tempos; I am simply recognizing that few musicians will be perfectly accurate in finding the tempo. Although innumerable possible alignments of parts will result, certain alignments should never happen. In a "correct" performance, one first violinist will never arrive at the harmonic in measure 72 at the same time as another first violinist plays the pizzicato quarter notes in measure 36. For this to occur, the former would have to play twice as fast as the latter; such a distortion of the notated tempo falls well outside the range of acceptable imperfection for a trained musician.

What distinguishes an exemplary performance from one that is simply "correct"?

A long time ago, composers trusted musicians to play music musically. In modern times, many composers have chosen to use such specific notation that the performer is relegated to the role of a sound-producing machine. In *Abandoned Overture*, whether the members of the orchestra are acting consciously or not, they will make microrhythmic adjustments to their parts and modify their expression to suit what they are hearing. No two performances will be the same, but good musicians will play *Abandoned Overture* in a musically compelling manner. What defines an exemplary performance of this piece is as intangible as what distinguishes a great performance of a conventional orchestral work – when superb musicians (guided by an insightful conductor) are deeply committed to understanding their parts and listening to each other, an exemplary performance is likely to result.

What if an orchestra works really hard and manages to play the entire piece as written (without shifting alignments)?

That would be acceptable, but pointless. The richness of this piece stems from the multitude of possibilities it presents and from the ways musicians react to them.

Isn't this all really confusing?

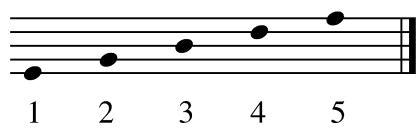
No. The first reading of this piece (before which the orchestra had not had an opportunity to see their parts) went so smoothly I had to dismiss the orchestra early because there just was not enough to work on. The concept of *Abandoned Overture* may sound complicated, but it becomes immediately clear to the musicians as soon as they begin playing.

Performance notes for percussion:

Percussion 1:

- vibraphone

- non-pitched percussion:
    - 1) low tom tom (muted)
    - 2) medium bongo
    - 3) high bongo
    - 4) medium woodblock
    - 5) gliss glong



Percussion 2:

- large cowbell

- crotales

Percussion 3:

- large bass drum (muted to sound very dry)
- closed hi hat

- glockenspiel

This piece is unconducted. However, much of the work revolves around the percussion. During the A section (mm. 1 - 44), the vibraphone part provides an eighth pulse that other members of the orchestra may choose to align with. During the B section (mm. 45 - 68), the cowbell provides a quarter note pulse to which all the orchestra should try to align. During the C section (mm. 69 - end), there is no discernible pulse in any part.

Measure 40 of the vibraphone part serves as a cue to the other percussionists. All the percussion parts should remain aligned from mm. 41 - 60. The cowbell is playing straight quarter notes this entire time. Subsequently, try to remain aligned as long as possible.

In the C section (mm. 69 - end), there should be no attempt to coordinate parts.

Performance notes for strings:

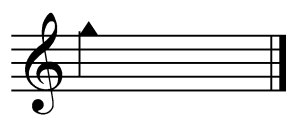
- during glissandi that continue through tied rhythms, notes without heads are used to indicate the rhythm (e.g. mm. 84 - 86)

- s.t. = sul tasto
- ord. = ordinario
- m.s.p. = molto sul ponticello

- ⟶ = indicates a gradual change in playing technique

- ø = niente

- a triangle notehead indicates the highest note possible (this is in all parts at m. 24, except the solo double bass)



- natural harmonics are indicated by the sounding pitch
- artificial harmonics are indicated by the fingered pitch

Instrumentation:

Piccolo

Flute

Oboes (2)

Clarinet in B♭

Bass Clarinet

Bassoons (2)

Horns in F (2)

Trumpets in B♭(2)

Trombones (2)

Tuba

Timpani

Percussion 1 (Vibraphone, Low Tom Tom, Medium Bongo, High Bongo, Medium Woodblock, Gliss Gong)

Percussion 2 (Large Cowbell, Crotales)

Percussion 3 (Large Bass Drum, Hi Hat, Glockenspiel)

Violin I (1)

Violin I (2)

Violin II (1)

Violin II (2)

Viola 1

Viola 2

Cello 1

Cello 2

Solo Double Bass

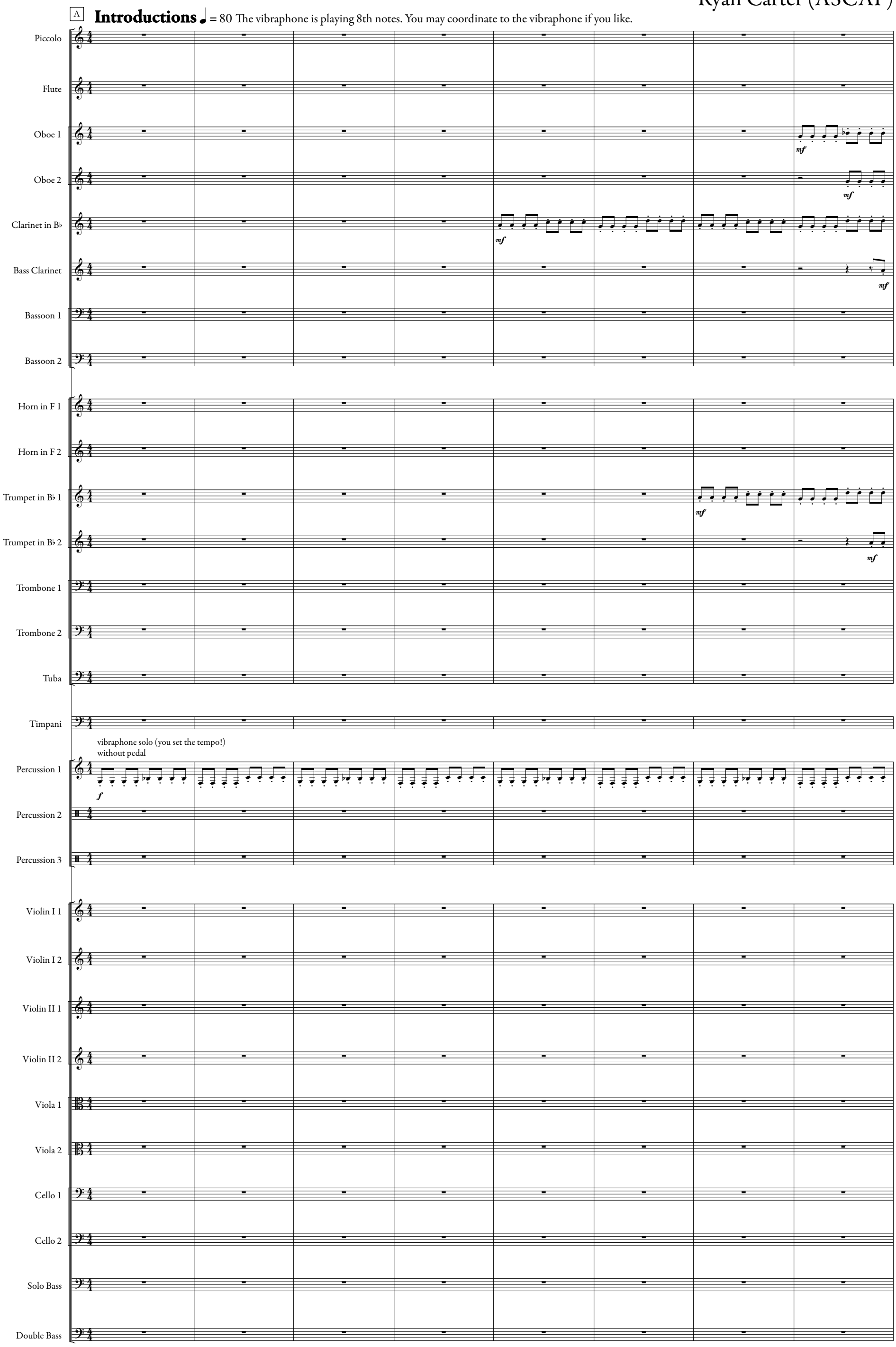
Double Bass (given to all bassists except for one)

Abandoned Overture was composed for the Stony Brook Symphony Orchestra while in residence at Copland House, Cortlandt Manor, New York, as a recipient of the Aaron Copland Award.

Abandoned Overture

The score is NOT in C.
Parts will NOT align as written.

Ryan Carter (ASCAP)



9

poco a poco accel. (♩ = 80 to ♩ = 126 over 27 measures)

Picc.
Fl.
Ob. 1
Ob. 2
B♭ Cl.
B. Cl.
Bsn. 1
Bsn. 2
Hn. 1
Hn. 2
B♭ Tpt. 1
B♭ Tpt. 2
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
Tuba
Timp.
Perc. 1
Perc. 2
Perc. 3
Vln. I 1
Vln. I 2
Vln. II 1
Vln. II 2
Vla. 1
Vla. 2
Vc. 1
Vc. 2
S. D. B.
D. B.

mf

(play 8 notes in the span of one measure, quasi accel.)

(play 8 notes in the span of one measure, quasi rit.)

ff

mp

ff

p

f

sempre f

muted s.t.

m.s.p. s.t.

m.s.p.

ff

sempre f

17 **(poco a poco accel.)**

Picc.
(play 9 notes in the span of one measure, quasi accel.)
(play 7 notes in the span of one measure, quasi rit.)
f

Fl.
p *ff* *pp* *ff* *pp* *ff*

Ob. 1

Ob. 2

B♭ Cl.
ff *pp* *ff* *pp* *ff*

B. Cl.

Bsn. 1

Bsn. 2

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

B♭ Tpt. 1
ff

B♭ Tpt. 2

Tbn. 1

Tbn. 2

Tuba

Timp.

Perc. 1
ff

Perc. 2

Perc. 3

Vln. I 1
muted s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. *sempre* m.s.p.
ff

Vln. I 2
muted s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. *sempre* m.s.p.
ff

Vln. II 1
muted s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. *sempre* m.s.p.
ff

Vln. II 2
muted s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. *sempre* m.s.p.
ff

Vla. 1
s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. *sempre* m.s.p.
ff

Vla. 2
m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. *sempre* m.s.p.
ff

Vc. 1
s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. *sempre* m.s.p.
ff

Vc. 2
muted s.t. → m.s.p. s.t. → m.s.p. *sempre* m.s.p.
ff

S. D. B.

D. B.
ff

23

Picc.
Fl.
Ob. 1
Ob. 2
B♭ Cl.
B. Cl.
Bsn. 1
Bsn. 2
Hn. 1
Hn. 2
B♭ Tpt. 1
B♭ Tpt. 2
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
Tuba
Timp.
Perc. 1
Perc. 2
Perc. 3
Vln. I 1
Vln. I 2
Vln. II 1
Vln. II 2
Vla. 1
Vla. 2
Vc. 1
Vc. 2
S. D. B.
D. B.

remove mute

pizz.

flessibile (play rhythms as accurately as you can,
but these pitches are more important than these rhythms)

29 (poco a poco accel.)

Picc.
Fl.
Ob. 1
Ob. 2
B♭ Cl.
B. Cl.
Bsn. 1
Bsn. 2
Hn. 1
Hn. 2
B♭ Tpt. 1
B♭ Tpt. 2
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
Tuba
Timp.
Perc. 1
Perc. 2
Perc. 3
Vln. I 1
Vln. I 2
Vln. II 1
Vln. II 2
Vla. 1
Vla. 2
Vc. 1
Vc. 2
S. D. B.
D. B.