

## ALL THE RAGE

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By the early 1980s I was feeling that my music was more and more cut off from the rest of my life, and indeed from the whole world beyond a tiny New York City art scene. I left. For nearly ten years I worked as an organizer and writer in and around El Salvador. When I returned to music at the end of the decade I wanted to make music that would help me to integrate my life instead of fracturing it. I decided to write a trilogy of pieces dealing with, in turn, grief, anger, and joy, because that seemed to be the order I was working through things in my own life.

The first piece of the trilogy is *Sooner or Later*. Completed in 1990, it is created almost entirely from a recording of a young Salvadoran boy speaking at his father's funeral. When the Kronos Quartet approached me about a commission after hearing *Sooner or Later*, the time seemed right to tackle anger.

Then, in October 1991, California Governor Pete Wilson vetoed a gay rights law that had been ten years in the making and which he had specifically promised to sign while campaigning for gay votes only a short time before. Riots broke out within hours, and in San Francisco the California State Office Building was set on fire. I took a portable tape recorder to the riot and recorded everything I could. I came home and decided what the project would be: I would have a string quartet play a queer riot.

Next, I sifted through the recorded material and ferreted out those sections that to my ear suggested music: chanting or screaming which had a sort of musical phrasing, windows smashing, and so forth. Much of the sound was colored by the omnipresence of whistles which many queers carry as a basic self-defense tool against gay bashing<sup>78</sup> and which emerged from people's pockets by the hundreds during the riot.

78. A recent survey by the *San Francisco Examiner* indicates that over one million hate-motivated assaults against queer people take place in the United States each year.

I then set up these isolated audio fragments in a digital sampling keyboard and began to shape them into a composition. I used very little conventional electronic signal processing. Instead, I broke the original sound down into very small blocks, and strung them together in sequences that were close to the way they had originally occurred yet had a more musical structure. As a visual analogy, imagine I had filmed the riot, snipped the film into individual frames, and strung them back together in such a way that movements that suggested dance were developed into a full dance form. By carefully preparing the set-up of the sounds in the sampler, I was actually able to play these creations in “live” improvisations, which I recorded and then edited into final versions.

I chose this way of working for a reason. The point was not to transform the riot into something else but to use music to bring the listener *inside* the riot. Not in the gimmicky sense of creating an audio illusion of actually being in the riot, but to get inside the energy, the passion, and most of all the anger. I found that the moment I started using more conventional sorts of electronic processing (phase shifting, filtering, delay, etc.), the riot quickly became something else. So I limited myself to reproducing the original audio as faithfully as I could, and composing with it using the methods I have described.

While I was satisfied with the results of this work in terms of the music, I worried it would be too easy for listeners to be overwhelmed by the *crowd*—that the very intensity of the crowd would become an emotional barrier for the listener. A spoken text seemed like a good addition—a text that would let the listener in by somehow presenting, in a very personal way, the emotions and passions of one individual in the crowd.

I had attempted to interview people during the riot but it proved impossible. There were undercover cops taking pictures of everything, and it was just too crazy trying to explain to complete strangers in the middle of a riot that I wanted to record their most intimate feelings because I was a composer writing a piece about anger for a string quartet.

I asked writer/artist David Wojnarowicz if he would collaborate on a text, and he agreed. But David was sick with AIDS. For months David and I talked and waited for him to get well enough to work on the project, but he never got well. David died before he could hear the finished piece.

The text was then written on very short notice by poet and journalist Sara Miles. It draws on both her life experiences and my own, and is divided into four parts, dealing with growing up queer, gay bashing, AIDS, and love.

Eric Gupton of PomoAfroHomos (Postmodern African-American Homosexuals) read the text for the recording. The composite queerness of the final result was just what I wanted: a real-life mixture of the voices of three queers—a white woman, a black man, and a white man. It was intimate and personal yet bigger than one person/gender/race. With this done I could finally turn to the writing the parts for the quartet.

My idea was to have the quartet actually *play the riot*. So, in one way or another, I developed all the string parts directly from the sounds of the riot. To put it simply, I used the computer to pick out pitches that were present in the sound of the riot, and those would become notes for the quartet to play.

In actual fact the process was much more complex. The riot audio is extremely dense sound, so using pitch analysis technology to extract anything musically useful from the barrage required considerable technological savvy and many many hours of simple trial and error. I used a different strategy with the technology for each section of the piece, depending on what aspect of the riot I wanted the quartet to play. This was directly related to how I had “played” the audio on the digital sampler, which in turn was directly tied to the content of the original riot recording. Thus, though there are many layers of work in the music, in the end it presents a pretty integrated package.

More difficult than getting the pitch sequences, however, was putting them in musical rhythm. At this point, I had a series of pitches I could listen to synchronized to the playback of the riot audio, but they were not in any musical time. So I would listen and ask myself, “If I were playing this part, what tempo would I be feeling?” Since the source audio was a riot and not a written piece of music, I found that the implied tempo would frequently wander. When it wandered too far, I had the choice of writing a tempo change into the score, or editing tiny fractions of seconds of the audio to make the tempo more steady. I used both these methods in different sections of the piece.

Once I had a “map” of implied tempos, I added time signatures (which in some places had to change quite rapidly) and rounded off the durations of the pitches generated by the computer into musically meaningful values.

Asking an ensemble to perform in this manner with an audio tape created unique kinds of problems. Most compositions that combine audio tape with live ensemble performance either use a tape which has audio content with an obvious pulse or a click track the musicians hear via headphones during performance, or they are written in such a way that the live performance does not have to be minutely synchronized with the audio from the tape.

Since my objective was to have the quartet *play* the riot, there was no alternative to the musicians taking the tempo from listening to the riot, despite the fact that the implied tempos changed frequently, wandered, and at times were far from obvious. A good deal of rehearsal time was spent listening to the tape repeatedly while I explained, “Here the tempo changes from such-and-such to so-and-so. Count the time from when the window breaks to when the woman screams. At the new tempo, that’s a quarter note.”

Some examples will make all this much clearer.

Fairly early on there is a section I created from the sound of a woman screaming. Using the sampler, I looped the section so it repeated again and again. I made two separate copies of the sound, heard from opposite extremes of the stereo field. Each time it repeated, I inflected it. But I set it up so that the same inflection gesture would force the left copy sharp and the right copy flat. The whole section is played twice. The first time the inflections are very slight, so they are perceived more as a phase shift within one scream. The second time they are more drastic, and eventually pull the two copies of the scream out of synchronization with each other altogether, so the listener perceives the result as two screams in a sort of hocket.

I wrote the string parts so that each violin “plays” one of the screams. First I made a working copy of the audio, and filtered out, as close as I could, everything but the screams. Then, after much fiddling with the software, I made an extremely detailed analysis of the pitch movement within each scream. I then took that information, rounded off the durations down to a 32nd note, and spread it across measures counted at the tempo implied by the length of the loop of the scream. The end result was a finely nuanced transcription of each scream, and violin parts that at first glance made no musical sense whatsoever but when considered while listening to the tape were quite comprehensible (though still dauntingly difficult to play) [Fig. 1-2].

Figure 1. Bars 78-81.

80

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vc.

Figure 2. Bars 78-81, CONTINUED.

Here the inflections are quite small, and you can see how the two parts are slightly out of sync, with the first violin playing a little earlier and higher [Fig. 2].

106

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

108

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Figure 3. Bars 106-109.

This is the second time through. The inflections are much more dramatic, and the parts are farther apart both in time and pitch.

The above example shows a section where the relation of string part and audio is directly perceived by the listener. Here is one where that relation becomes much more opaque. The tape contains sounds I created by piling up sound upon sound of windows breaking in various rhythms, to the point that

the composite sound becomes a sort of roar of broken windows. Perplexed at first as to how to create string parts from it, I finally decided that since what was interesting about the sound was all the movement in the upper reaches of the audio spectrum, I would work with that.

I made a working copy of the audio and filtered out everything but the high end. Then I made a very finely detailed analysis of the pitch content, resulting in hundreds and hundreds of very short “notes.” Then I simply sifted through them, keeping those I thought most important, throwing out others (in fact the vast majority), moving things a bit here and there, until I had shaped them into what seemed like a musical line. I then spread them across measures at a tempo that was close to arbitrary, as there was little in the original data to imply a tempo. Even at this point the notes flew by quite fast, and I wanted to go for a harsh, dissonant feel in connection with the breaking windows. So I collapsed many notes into double stops at a duration of the original two combined, which then of course required further adjusting to make them playable on the various instruments. Finally, I transposed whole part down five octaves and made it the cello part, and orchestrated the other instruments to enter one at a time, each doubling the part an octave up from the previous instrument to enter [Fig. 4].

Figure 4. Bars 175-184.

For those sections of the piece where the tape contains nothing but text, I transcribed the voice line, word for word and inflection for inflection, and had a soloist “play” the voice. I was in part inspired to do this by the work of René Lussier, whose composition *Le Trésor de la Langue* works in a similar way, though René develops it in another direction entirely. Here again the problem of notation was tricky since the text was spoken in a natural, conversational style and thus had no real tempo. In *Trésor*, René opted for notating accurate pitches but approximate durations, which served the purpose of emphasizing to the musician that in the end the part is not to be synchronized to a tempo but to the spoken voice. I opted for spreading the rhythms very precisely across measures counted at a fixed tempo that was again fairly arbitrary. This way, the musician could still ultimately perform to the actual spoken voice, but could also rehearse any section desired with a metronome and precise rhythmic markings [Fig. 5].

Figure 5 shows musical notation for four staves, labeled 219, 221, 223, and 225. The top staff is labeled "Tape" and includes a tempo marking  $\text{♩} = 160$  and a box containing the letter "H". It features rhythmic markings of 6, 3, and 6. The lyrics for the Tape staff are: "The first time I watched a friend die". The second staff is labeled "Vla." and includes the marking *mp*. Its lyrics are: "Back when only some government doctors knew what was". The third staff is labeled "Vla." and includes the marking *port.*. Its lyrics are: "spread - ing and they kept quiet. Phil". The fourth staff is labeled "Vla." and includes the marking *port.*. Its lyrics are: "ly - ing by the win - dow scared and surprised, and the".

Figure 5. Bars 219-225.

Each member of the quartet was given a part with two staves, the instrument's and a tape staff on which I notated the tape as precisely as I could. What is on the tape staff varies considerably section by section. Here the tape staff actually has two voices: the chanting of the crowd, and the comments of one individual heard on the tape [Fig. 6].

165

Tape: I think we should have the fuck - ing, sing down  
Queers Fight Back! Queers Fight Back! Queers Fight Back!

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Figure 6. Bars 165-167.

Here is a section where I have indicated only the broadest rhythms of very dense sounds from the riot. Notes with xs for heads indicate windows breaking; standard heads indicated pitches that can be picked out from the din but have no easily identifiable source [Fig. 7].

303

Tape: Glass Shake Glass Shake Glass Shake

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

306

Tape: Glass Shake faster

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vc.

Figure 7. Bars 303-312.

Here I have notated a simple outline of the sounds on the tape from which the violin parts were made. Note they are provided with two “cue” screams first to provide them nine beats during which to establish the tempo [Fig. 8].

The musical score for Figure 8 consists of three systems of staves. The first system, labeled 'Tape', contains measures 52-55. It begins with a 'Glass Break' sound, followed by a tempo change to 'A Tempo' with a metronome marking of quarter note = 98. Two 'Oooow' vocalizations are placed over the tape. The second system, labeled 'Tape', contains measures 56-58. It starts with a boxed 'B' and two 'Oooow' vocalizations. Below the tape are two violin parts, Vln. 1 and Vln. 2, with complex rhythmic patterns. The third system, labeled 'Tape', contains measure 59. It features 'Oooow', 'Thud', and 'Screams...' markings on the tape, with corresponding violin parts for Vln. 1 and Vln. 2.

Figure 8. Bars 52-59.

The final section presents issues which make it, I think, the most beautiful and also the most difficult to play. I had an image of someone smashing windows with tears pouring down his cheeks.

I began with a section of the riot where someone yelled “Burn it” three times. When looped appropriately, the shouting became a very musical phrase lasting for four bars of 4/4 time at a clearly implied tempo. I set up the sampler so that, with each repetition of the phrase, I could improvise with looping tiny sections of the sound back on itself. This gave the sensation that with each repetition of the phrase different parts of the sound get stretched, or snag on something before flowing on down the stream. After recording my improvisations, however, I edited the results so that the phrases were spread over 4/4 bars counted at a tempo that held steady. The result was that while each individual phrase would stretch and snag, the following one would arrive on a downbeat that had not snagged at all but came on an absolutely steady pulse.

This gave exactly the effect I wanted: the music seems to stumble and sway under its emotional weight, but at the same time marches resolutely forward.

The string parts here are essentially are extremely detailed transcriptions of the voice shouting "Burn it," and the parts follow every little crack and choke. This was also the effect I wanted: to put the moment under a microscope and magnify every detail, then help others get inside of it by making it into music.

Here again the notation posed a problem: I could notate simple rhythms against a tempo which staggered in complex ways, or I could notate rhythms that would appear much more complex against a steady tempo. While the former approach would have produced a part that would appear much simpler on the page, I chose the latter method since it reflected what I really wanted to happen in the music. Also, this way the part could be rehearsed correctly without the tape.

For the quartet, I think this is the most difficult part of the piece. In order to be effective, the string playing must be exactly synchronized with the tape, otherwise the effect of the detail of the transcription is completely lost. However, hearing the tape strongly skews the musicians' sense of tempo. If the musicians' sense of time wanders with the tape the parts no longer synchronize with the audio, and they always find the downbeat of the next phrase comes sooner than expected since that actual tempo does not "snag."

The piece closes with the viola playing the "Burn it" melody unaccompanied by either the quartet or the tape. In part this decision flows from the entire logic of the piece, of bringing out the essence of the moment through music. And the lyric, almost vocal qualities of the viola make it ideal for the solo passage.

But I had a more personal reasons as well. Hank Dutt is the violist in the Kronos Quartet, and his lover Kevin is living with AIDS. I want *All the Rage* to be a piece that speaks to a general, human anger anyone can feel. But first and foremost I want it to be a piece for queers. I wrote it for *our* anger, for who we are and how we feel with violence coming at us from every side, with the intimate parts of our lives discussed every day in the media by arrogant bigots who have not the slightest clue what they are talking about, with so many of us sick and dying. I wanted *All the Rage* to end with Hank alone playing his viola, playing the most passionate music I could write. It is a sort of present for Hank, and for Kevin.