

COMBINATION LOCKS #2

For guitar, viola, cello and bass

By Chris Pitsiokos, or whatever

Introduction to the Combination Locks Series

Certain pieces by George Lewis, John Zorn, and Christian Wolff incorporate a set of rules that allow performers to develop form in real time. Having been inspired by this work as well as the music I see as one of its conceptual forbears (so-called jazz), I sought to develop my own systems. The first thing I wanted to try to get rid of is hand gesture. Although it serves a calculated (I presume) theatrical purpose in both the work of Lewis (e.g. *P. Multitudinis*) and Zorn (e.g. *Cobra*), I personally find it distracting. Also, while I have no problem explaining my piece to audience members if they wish to know, I am not interested in allowing them completely inside the process in real-time.

The second, and more important consideration is that I want the decisions to be interdependent. It is true that in both the music of Lewis (e.g. *Artificial Life*) and Wolff (e.g. *For One, Two, or Three People*), the musical content of one musician may be in part determined by the musical content of another. However, the structural decision-making process each performer goes through to navigate the rules (in *Artificial Life*'s case, the cells, in *For One, Two or Three People*'s case, the notations), operates by each performer or group independently. I wanted to set up something more like a chess game, where the players take a look at the board (or in this case a listen to the room), before making a choice, and have to make tactical decisions based on what the other performers are choosing in order to move the piece forward formally. In this way, the structure is generated collaboratively all of the time, rather than through a process of passing leadership (as in the case of *Cobra*, or my earlier *Finite State Machine* series) or collectively (as in the case of *Artificial Life*).

Since there are no visual cues, in order for these pieces to function, the decisions made by each performer need to be audible. In *Combination Locks #1* for viola, cello and bass, each musical cell falls into one of four categories—impulse (I), melody (M), drone (D), or silence (S). This allows each performer to hear immediately what decisions his/her colleague has made.

Each level of cells includes at least one of each I, M, or D. In order to navigate through each level of the piece, the performers must achieve a specific combination of I, M, D, and S. A separate map is supplied, unique for each performer, that shows the structure to be navigated, and which combinations must be achieved in order to navigate that specific part of the form. So let's say the viola player is currently playing D, and she needs I I I. If she hears the other performers both playing I, it would be good for her to switch from D to I, and then the piece can progress. By achieving the proper combination, she is able to unlock the next group of cells within the piece—hence “combination locks.”

Socially speaking, the series appeals to me because it allows room for performers not only to provide unique musical content (there are “free” cells in some pieces, and opportunities for “development” in others), but also to collaboratively determine the musical form of the piece.

Aesthetically speaking, it forces several issues that often don't come up in improvisations. By requiring a certain set of combinations, it is enforcing the completion of a certain set of juxtapositions and unisons either conceptually or musically.

Finally, while the aesthetic decisions my musical colleagues make in an improvisation very much interest me, I think that the process of navigating not only ones aesthetic whims, but also some problematic structure, often results in different juxtapositions and decisions than what would be made in an open improvisation.

COMBINATION LOCKS #2

Instructions for viola, cello and contrabass

1. Players may start with any of the four or five musical passages. They have the choice of either repeating the passage literally (R), developing the passage (D) or tacit (S). D can be any elaboration of the notated material, but must use it in some way. R can involve any tempo, any dynamic, but the notation should be faithfully followed inasmuch as is described. In the case of drones, like viola cell number 3, it is not necessary to re-attack the note upon repeating. **It is important that each player is familiar with the material of the other players, in order to differentiate between an R and a D.

2. In order to navigate to a new cell, the performer must refer to the map, and achieve the appropriate combination of interpretations among himself/herself and his/her colleagues, to navigate to the subsequent cell. For instance, if the viola player begins with cell 1, she must wait either for all players to be playing a silence (SSS), or for two developments and a repeat (DDR) in order to go on. If SSS occurs, she can move onto 2; if DDR occurs, she can move onto 3. In order for a combination to “count,” it must last for a minimum of 10 seconds (use of a stopwatch is discouraged, but it’s important to make a good faith attempt to have the combinations last a minimum of that time).

3. The piece is completed when all musical cells have been performed at least once. Performers may return to musical cells that have occurred previously after traveling to others, but of course they have to follow the rules of the map to navigate back.

Things to consider:

1. There is obviously strategy involved in this piece, and while the person who finishes all of the cells first is not deemed the winner, if no strategy is employed, the piece will be extremely long. Most performances of this piece have been between 19 and 23 minutes.

2. The three ensembles who have performed these works so far have all expressed a lot of anxiety about how to know when the piece is over. In practice this has never once been an issue. People look up, make eye contact, something like that.

3. These are combinations, not permutations. Order does not matter. (DDR is equal to RDD and DRD)

Instructions for guitar

Unlike the other instruments, the guitarist is confined by a simple set of “if...then” statements. The parameters of her musical content are determined by the combinations of interpretations played by the other three players.

There are four musical possibilities for the guitar:

1. EVENTS: each event lasts less than 2 seconds; between 4 and 10 seconds between each event.
2. DRONE: some sort of persistent sound; not necessarily a drone in the literal sense of the word, but must be constant, unchanging, or very slowly changing sound. (Tremolo picking a single note is a good example, but also repetitive rapid tapping of the body of the instrument would be fine too).
3. STREAM: a stream of changing sound using timbral, harmonic or intervallic material.
4. SILENCE

The musical material performed by the three others falls into three categories: REPETITION, DEVELOPMENT, or SILENCE (R, D or S). Each musical possibility for the guitar is triggered by one or two specific combinations of musical interpretations expressed in the viola, cello and bass. Each musical possibility for the guitar lasts until the next possibility is triggered. Don't rush, keep on the current possibility until you are sure about what you are hearing—there will be a natural delay between the changes in the string trio and in the guitar—that's a calculated element of the piece.

1. EVENTS: RDD, or SSD
2. DRONE: DSS
3. STREAM: RRR
4. SILENCE: RSD

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Viola

1

5 5 5

Vla.

4 2

3

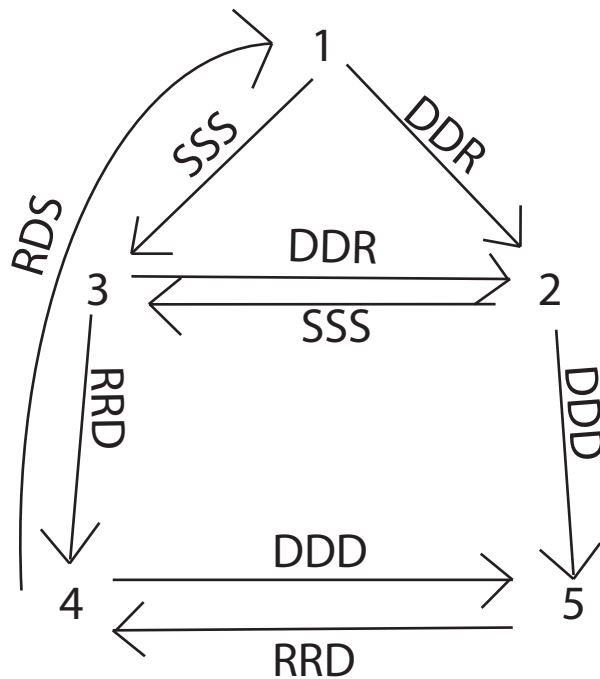
high bow pressure
slow bow speed

Vla.

4 glissando

5 pizz

x=behind bridge



By Chris Pitsiokos

Violoncello

1 pizz

3

2 arco

3 arco

3

5

7 4 pizz

arco

pizz

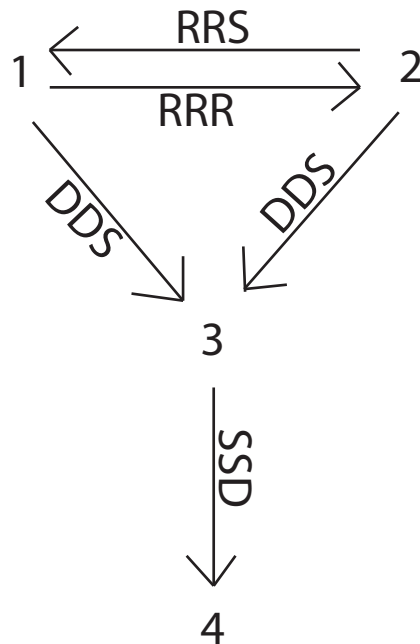
arco

pizz

arco

3

1 minute



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1 arco

Contrabass

3 2 pizz

Cb.

6 3 pizz behind bridge arco sim.

Cb.

8 4 arco

Cb.

