



THINKING ALOUD: THE *SOLILOQUY* CYCLE

Thomas Simaku

Abstract: Beginning with *Soliloquy I* for solo violin in 1998, the author has been engaged in creating a series of highly virtuosic solo pieces for various instruments. Each piece presents a different character, yet all are framed by a single protagonist who narrates in different languages.

This article focuses particularly on analyses of *Soliloquies II, VI, VII, VIII* and *IX*, but also offers a discussion of the genesis of and processes involved in the whole cycle, which now embraces instruments from every section of the orchestra; the most recent, *Soliloquy IX*, for solo trumpet, was written in 2022. The suitability of the title *Soliloquy* is also considered; this article in turn could itself be considered a soliloquy.

Soliloquy I, for Violin

The *Soliloquy* cycle began with a piece for solo violin. I had always wanted to write for violin, but although I had composed a number of pieces involving the violin in various contexts since my undergraduate years at the Tirana Conservatoire, including a Concerto for Violin and Orchestra and a piece for violin and string ensemble, I still felt apprehensive about writing for solo violin. Not being a violinist myself, it all sounded rather daunting.

By 1996 I had finished my Ph.D. in composition at the University of York and had just returned from the Tanglewood Music Center in the US, where I worked with some brilliant musicians. Yet the question ‘what can I do with just four strings and four fingers?’ continued to haunt me. One day in the spring of 1998, however, I jumped to it and wrote *Soliloquy I* in a couple of months (see [Example 1](#)). There was no commission and no one had asked me to write it; I composed for an ‘ideal’ player! When the score was finished I showed it to a violinist, an MA student at York. She looked through it, page after page, and said, ‘I cannot do this, but you shouldn’t change a bit, because there are people who can.’ I gratefully agreed.

In the summer of 1998 I went on a composition course at California State University with Brian Ferneyhough and showed him my brand new piece. He looked at it in great detail and at the end of the session encouraged me to send it to the ISCM Festival. I did so and was delighted that the international jury, which

Handwritten musical score for a string quartet, Example 1. The score consists of five systems of staves. The first system is marked "arco" and "con sord." with dynamics "pp" and "legatissimo". The second system is marked "Tempo I" and "senza sord." with dynamics "f" and "sempre". The third system is marked "con tutta forza" and "poco a poco" with dynamics "ff". The fourth system is marked "sub. ord." and "s. tacto" with dynamics "pp". The fifth system is marked "stasto rapido" and "sempre sul G" with dynamics "pp". The score includes various performance instructions such as "Pizz.", "via sord.", "gliss", and "c.e.b.". A note at the bottom indicates "highest notes, indeterminate pitches".

Example 1:
Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy I*, pp. 8
and 9.

included none other than Irvine Arditti, selected the piece. The world premiere took place in Luxembourg in 2000, performed by Vania Lecuit, who, to my astonishment, played it from memory, although this had never been my intention. The ISCM premiere was my first international success and a breakthrough for me. After some eight years, the piece was released by Naxos on my debut portrait album,¹ recorded by Peter Sheppard Skærved, with whom I have worked closely ever since and for whom I have written a number of pieces.

Soliloquy II, for Cello

Back home in York after the ISCM festival, I could not help thinking about another soliloquy, and, staying within the string family, the cello seemed to wink at me. I have always been fond of the cello; it is a real character, capable, in my mind, of doing miracles. It can jump, slide or dance over a string or two; it can murmur or whistle, sing in two or more parts; you name it, the cello can do it. So my idea

¹ Thomas Simaku, *String Quartets Nos. 2 & 3, Soliloquies I–III*. 2008, Naxos, NAXOS 8.570428.

* Pizz. gliss; follow graphic patterns, freely alternating glissandos of various speeds
 ** Play stemless notes ad-libitum, but with accelerando towards the end of the passage.

Example 1:
 Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy I*, pp. 8 and 9.

for *Soliloquy II* was to continue this imaginary journey with a different and very distinct character. Indeed, in *Soliloquy II* the cello picks up where the violin left off in *Soliloquy I*, on the same pitch (Eb₄).

But the cello in my mind’s eye also presented itself as a gigantic instrument composed of eight strings: four of them real and the other four imaginary, the latter acting as the shadow of the real instrument, a sort of musical doppelgänger. Little by little, as if with a crescendo, this idea gained a structural significance in the composition itself, in that it turned out to be the spinal cord (for which read also ‘chord’) for the entire work, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1:
Soliloquy II, pitch structure.

Eb_4 is at the centre of an eight-note chord that divides into two equal parts and, given that the eight-note chord is a symmetrical structure, Eb_4 becomes the epicentre of the whole structure, equidistant from the bottom note C_2 and the uppermost $F\sharp_6$.

Freedom of interpretation is very much part of the content of these works, hence the absence of bar lines (see Example 2). But, while the structural format in the violin piece is to a considerable extent freely organised around one single pitch-class, the pitches in the cello piece are arranged in such a way that the contours of the whole work expand symmetrically below and above its starting point, the initial Eb . In this way, the expressive power of this sound nucleus radiates as far above the centre as it does below. Each pitch of the ‘spinal chord’ becomes a centre at a local level.

Soliloquy VI, for Saxophone

Soliloquy II was followed by *Soliloquy III*, for viola; both are included on the 2008 Naxos CD, in recordings by Neil Heyde and Morgan Goff. Next came *Soliloquy IV*, for bass clarinet, recorded by Sarah Watts. But I had never imagined that I would write a piece for

Example 2:
Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy II*, pp. 8 and 9.

Handwritten musical score for a saxophone piece, Example 2. The score consists of six staves of music. The first staff is marked "c.v. battuto" and features a dynamic range from fortissimo (f) to piano (p). The second staff is marked "arco normale" and "c.l. b.", with a tempo marking "♩ = 55" and "sull pont. (arco normale)". The third staff is marked "(sempre s.p.)". The fourth staff is marked "ord." and "s.pont.". The fifth staff is marked "ord." and "gliss.". The sixth staff is marked "legato furioso" and "f". The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 2:

Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy II*, pp. 8 and 9.

recorders; I thought it was an instrument that children play for fun. So when Chris Orton approached me asking for a new piece (he had received a BBC Performing Arts Award), I insisted that I would only write it if he could teach me, because I know nothing about the instrument. He agreed, came to York with a bag full of recorders and when he began to play, my jaw dropped; how wrong I had been. I wrote the piece, and it went on to win the BASCA Award in 2009.²

I carried on with the woodwind family because an opportunity presented itself to write a solo piece for the renowned Swedish saxophonist Anders Paulsson as part of an international project of solo pieces for soprano saxophone written during the pandemic.³ Paulsson's recording of the resulting piece, *Soliloquy VI*, was released on the *Solitary Poems* CD by BIS Records in November 2023.⁴ It is the

² A recording of *Soliloquy V* can be heard at www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZzldS0tEFw&t=13s (accessed 26 April 2024).

³ A video of Anders Paulsson playing *Soliloquy VI* can be seen at www.youtube.com/watch?v=snVba1PySus (accessed 26 April 2024).

⁴ Anders Paulsson, *Solitary Poems for Soprano Saxophone*. 2023, BIS, BIS2644 SACD.

Example 2:
Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy II*, pp. 8
and 9.

most idiosyncratic work of the whole cycle and is also the most 'economical' composition I have ever written, entirely based as it is on a single chord.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the work is based on a 12-note row, but the music is not 'dodecaphonic'. There is no fixed order of pitches; the opposite is true, with pitches combined freely to obtain a variety of harmonic/linear formations, which include major and minor triads, whole-tone, pentatonic and hybrid segments. Most importantly, from the structural viewpoint, one single pitch, $C\sharp_5$, seems to possess a magnetic quality and becomes the centre around which the whole composition evolves. Not only does the music begin and end on $C\sharp$, but, while other pitches are freely transposed into higher or lower octaves, the $C\sharp_5$ tenaciously keeps its registral location, never abandoning its strategic position as the epicentre of the entire piece. Furthermore the piece as a whole begins and ends on this pitch, as does the first section; it could well be said that this work is on, if not in, $C\sharp$.

Why *Soliloquy*?

I care about titles. Sometimes one begins with a title; sometimes it comes in the middle of the compositional process; sometimes one finishes the piece and still hasn't decided. The prize here probably

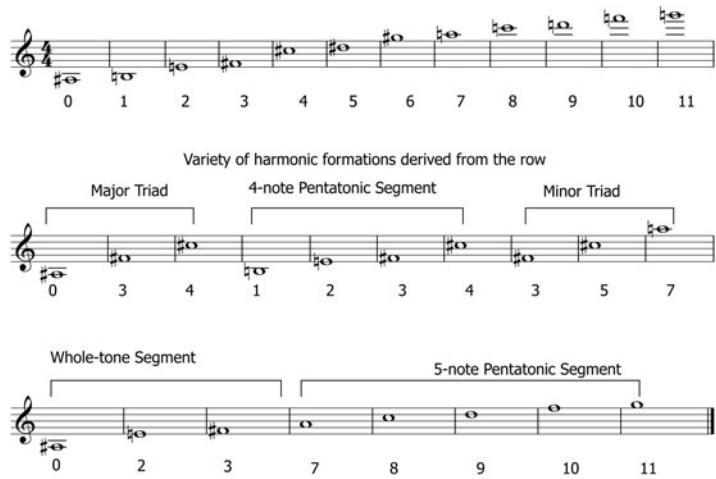


Figure 2:
Soliloquy VI, pitch structure.

goes to Ligeti, who came up with some 13 versions of the title for his first piano étude, before deciding on 'Desordre'. Titles are the first contact the composer makes with the listener, and I see them as a shop window, as it were.

As Rodin put it to Debussy on one of their walks, 'a good title is the one which has at least two meanings', and I have invented a number of titles that did not previously exist in any dictionary, yet their meanings can be clearly understood: for example, *Canticello* (for cello and orchestra), *Luxonorité* (written for the Luxembourg Sinfonietta), *Clarimbasso* (for bass clarinet and marimba) and most recently *Paul (K)leephony* (for female choir a cappella). *Soliloquy*, however, was a title about which I initially hesitated; it seemed rather prosaic, but I later discovered that there was more to the word that I had realised. It derives from Latin (*solus* – alone; *loquy* – speech), but what appealed to me most was the Oxford English Dictionary definition: 'a speech in which a person expresses his thoughts aloud without addressing any specific person'.

Soliloquy VII, for Clarinet and Resonant Piano

The latest triptych within the cycle is made up of pieces for clarinet, marimba and trumpet, respectively written for and dedicated to three amazing musicians, Jérôme Comte, Aurélien Gignoux and Clément Saunier, soloists of Ensemble Intercontemporain. They began in 2018 when I heard Jérôme Comte performing clarinet pieces by Stravinsky and Bruno Mantovani on YouTube. I contacted him to tell him how much I had enjoyed his fabulous performances. I also sent him the recording of *Soliloquy V – Flauto Acerbo*, for recorders – and offered to write a piece for him. Another 'French connection' was involved: in September 2019 I was awarded a residency at the Dora Maar House, in Provence, where I worked in earnest on the piece, sending sketches to Jérôme, who would look at them and send me back audio files. But then came the lockdowns, and the world premiere had to wait until the 2022 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival.

This, like all the *Soliloquies*, is a challenging piece, but Jérôme's apparently effortless performance in Huddersfield made it sound rather easy. As Tom Service put it, 'the vertiginous virtuosity of Comte's playing takes in the whole range of the instrument, from

145

sf

146

sf

147

Tempo primo
♩ = 53

148

sempre ff *mf*

♩ = 53

151

sf

152

sf

***NB - move near the piano - this section till the end of the piece should be played in that position.**
**** NB - All trills are to be played with the upper semitone, as fast as possible**

Example 3:
Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy VII*, bars
145–52.

whispering murmurations to declamatory violence, turning the clarinet into a percussion instrument'.⁵ Jérôme's playing and encouragement was an inspiration in writing the piece, and it is wholeheartedly dedicated to him.⁶

The short tempo primo episode in Example 3 is based entirely on trilled quintuplets. Trills and tremolandi are ubiquitously present throughout the piece, but the quaver quintuplets appear here for the first and only time. This passage is inspired by Boulez's *Dialogue de l'ombre double*, which Jérôme was practising before and after our rehearsals. The pitches are, of course, totally different from Boulez's *Dialogue*, but this homage to Boulez found its way into my piece; most importantly, it fits seamlessly at this particular juncture, coming as it does straight after the 64th notes' quintuplets. Later the music is closely linked to the iso-polyphonic singing of southern Albania, the slap tongues in

⁵ Tom Service, *New Music Show*, BBC Radio 3, 29 April 2023.

⁶ Jérôme Comte's performance of *Soliloquy VII* can be heard at www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXhEtiNYH_s (accessed 27 April 2024).

The musical score consists of six staves of music. The first staff (bar 153) features a melodic line with a long slur. The second staff (bar 154) has a similar melodic line with three *sf* markings. The third staff (bar 156) shows a rhythmic pattern with *pp* and *sf* markings, and 'ST' markings above the notes. The fourth staff (bar 161) continues this pattern with *pp* and *sf* markings. The fifth staff (bar 166) also continues the pattern with *pp* and *sf* markings. The sixth staff (bar 170) is marked 'Lunga' and 'Duration: ca. 13'' and ends with a *ppppp* marking.

Example 3:
Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy VII*, bars
153–75.

the final section providing a percussive accompaniment to the emulation of the throat singing of the tremolandi.

Soliloquy VIII, for Marimba Plus

As the title suggests, there are several percussion instruments involved here, but there is no doubt which one is leading in this imaginary journey. I find the marimba a very exciting instrument to write for, and in this work no note within its five-octave spectrum is spared. My idea was to treat the marimba as if it were an orchestra with a huge range of colours and a number of individual lines that constantly interact with one another. My intention was to explore thoroughly the technical vocabulary of the instrument (and in this respect it is a virtuosic piece), but there are also substantial slow and slower sections that focus on the expressive elegance and the warmth of the mellow sounds in the middle and lower registers, presenting every aspect of this multifaceted and versatile instrument. Example 4 shows an example of a four-layered polyphonic network.

Mar.

79 *sf* *sf* 7/4

80 *sf* *sf* *sf* 7/4

81 *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* 3/2

Mar.

ff *ff sempre* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* 7/4

Example 4:
Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy VIII*, bars
79–81.

A strategic moment in the overall structural design of the work is the slow central section, where other instruments of the percussion family – vibraphone (bowed or otherwise), tubular bells, gong, cymbal, metal chimes and tam-tam – are called upon. This is the moment in the formal structure where, traditionally, there would be a cadenza, but this is anything but a cadenza; indeed, ‘anti-cadenza’ would be the right name for it (see [Example 5](#)). Not only is the protagonist missing here, as if the marimba is asserting its primary role by its absence, but also the texture is the simplest in the whole work, while the contrast in colours is greater than anywhere else in the piece.

This section could well be described as a moment of *reflection*, emphasising certain harmonic pillars that have played a crucial role in holding the whole sonic edifice together but creating a new atmosphere within a substantially different sonic environment.

Example 5:
Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy VIII*,
'anti-cadenza', bars 97–108.

* The speed of the arpeggios should vary constantly, and this is best left to the performer; but as a guide, the louder the dynamics the faster the arpeggios - the final arpeggio should be the slowest, so that the 'melody' inherent in the chord is clearly projected.

Soliloquy IX, for Trumpet and Resonant Piano

The trumpet is the sole representative of the brass section in the cycle so far, and *Soliloquy IX* was commissioned by the Ensemble Intercontemporain with the support of Diaphonique, a London-based Franco-British fund for contemporary classical music. The first part focuses on the powerful expression and the virtuosic engagement of the instrument, building up a succession of events that seamlessly follow one another to display a wealth of multi-layered textures, colours and dynamics (see [Example 6](#)).

The musical score consists of seven staves, numbered 65 through 71. Each staff contains a complex rhythmic and melodic line. Dynamic markings are placed throughout the score: *ff* at the beginning of bar 65, *ff sempre* spanning bars 65-66, *sf* markings above bars 65, 66, and 67, *pp* at the start of bar 66, *ff* at the end of bar 66, *pp subito* at the start of bar 67, *ff* at the end of bar 67, *ff* at the end of bar 68, *ff sempre* and *pp subito* spanning bars 69, *sf* above bar 70, *pp subito* at the start of bar 70, *ff* at the end of bar 70, *sf* above bar 71, and *sempre ff* at the start of bar 71.

Example 6:
Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy IX*, bars
65–94.

As is often the case in my music, certain pitch-centres have a magnetic quality, around which the music orbits freely towards the projection of the main climax. As in the marimba piece, the interlude constitutes a strategic juncture in the formal structure; in sharp contrast to the rest of the work (and to the interlude in the marimba piece), it explores the white noises emanating from various pitch-less and percussive effects of the instrument played into the resonance of the piano. The second part of the piece focuses on the music's spatial qualities; indeed, it could well be described as a 'resonating canvas' from which salient musical ideas of the first part resurface, to be reinterpreted and presented in a different context, subdued and invariably muted, as if reaching us from afar.

Con ampio spazio Trumpet in C
 ♩ = 37

72 *sempre ff* *ffp* *ff* Take 6 Harmon mute

*NB - Gradually move the bell inside the piano (until instructed otherwise)

(harmon mute - STEM IN)

77 *pp*

80 *pp* via sord.

senza sord. (always wth bell inside the piano)

85 *pp* *gliss.*

91 *f* *ff*

94 *fff* *** "frozen time"

* NB - wa-wa trill
 ** NB - quickly move the bell away at the end of the phrase in a straight position facing the audience
 *** NB - Stay still as if in a 'frozen' the position!

Example 6:
 Thomas Simaku, *Soliloquy IX*, bars
 65–94.

Conclusion

I compose because I believe that I have something individual to say with sounds. In my conversation with Ferneyhough at California State University I told him I believed that one should always try to speak with one’s voice, however small that might be, and his reply was, ‘I couldn’t agree more.’ I often say to my students that they

Example 7:
Thomas Simaku, *Concerto for
Orchestra*, bars 162–69.

should write the music that *they* want to hear, not the music that *I* want to hear, that I can write myself.

The creative experience of working with all these amazing players on the *Soliloquy* cycle has been very stimulating for me, and I have discovered much about the instruments for which I have written. A composer cannot play all the instruments but that does not mean that we cannot understand how they work, how far they can go, what can and cannot be done. My *Soliloquies* now cover all four sections of the orchestra, yet an irony of the composer's life is that the music I write for orchestra is far less often played. For example, my *Concerto for Orchestra* (see Example 7), awarded the First Prize in the Lutosławski 100th Birthday Competition and premiered by the Warsaw Philharmonic at the Warsaw Autumn in 2013, is yet to receive its UK premiere. Apparently, convincing an orchestra manager is much harder than convincing a virtuoso instrumentalist.

The image displays a page of a musical score, likely for a symphony or concert band. It features multiple staves for various instruments, including woodwinds (flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons), strings (violins, violas, cellos, double basses), and percussion (snare drum, cymbals, tom-toms, etc.). The score is written in 3/4 time and includes dynamic markings such as 'Poco allargando' and 'ppp'. The page number '36' is visible in the top right corner.

Example 7:
(Continued)

Will I compose more *Soliloquies*? One should never say never, but I have a lot more to say with a lot more than one instrument. My output is now approaching 100 compositions,⁷ and, as I put it in a recent interview, ‘there is a lot of music in me. In fact, if you reshuffle the letters of my surname, you end up with *Musika!*’⁸

⁷ www.uymp.co.uk/composers/thomas-simaku/ (accessed 27 April 2024).

⁸ *BBC Music Magazine*, October 2023, p. 17.