

Nicholas R. Vasallo (b. 1979)

Born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, Nick Vasallo began performing music in high school where he picked up the electric guitar and eventually formed Antagony, an influential extreme metal band in the underground. At the age of 23, Vasallo decided to begin formal music training at Cal State East Bay where he studied composition and obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree in 2007. As a Chancellor's Fellow at University of California Santa Cruz, Vasallo completed his Masters in 2009 and subsequently went on to finish his Doctorate in 2011 as a President's Fellow.

His music reveals an eclectic array of influences (metal, algorithmic, taiko, and spectral music) and his compositions have been internationally performed by world renowned groups such as Contemporary Music Ensemble Korea, Del Sol String Quartet, Music Now, San Francisco Choral Artists, Bridge Chamber Virtuosi, Atlanta Schola Cantorum, Borromeo String Quartet, and Watsonville Taiko.

In 2010, Vasallo was the recipient of the President's Dissertation-Year Fellowship Award - the first arts student to ever receive that honor. Other honors and awards include: International Music Prize for Excellence in Composition 2011, 2011 MACRO Composition award, 2009 San Francisco Choral Artists New Voices Award, The Seattle Pianist Collective 2008 selection, 2008 UCSC Student Orchestral Composition winner, 60x60 project - Pacific Rim Mix 2008-2009 selection, The 2008 David Cope Award for Music Composition Excellence, 2005 New Jersey International Film Festival Selection "Sinful" musical score, and 2007 CSUEB Student Composers Competition winner.

Vasallo teaches college-level courses in music theory, music history, music literature, songwriting and electronic music in addition to his work as a composer and performing artist.

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VASALLO

MONUMENTS EMERGE



ANTARES RISING (2010)

"Asoyake" translates to "morning glow" or "sunrise colors." The synesthetic implications of the piece instantly spoke to me. I began imagining the landscape of the piece, the image of the sun rising soon became something much larger. I began picturing a Red Giant star rising...then a Red Supergiant star! Imagine witnessing the grandeur and frightening power...I chose as the subject for this star to be Antares, known as the heart of the Scorpio constellation. Antares glows bright red and has been often mistaken for Mars, the planet of war, hence, Antares' ancient Greek name which means, "against Mars." Antares glows 10,000 times brighter than our Sun and is 500 times its size. Many of the old Egyptian temples are oriented so that the light of Antares plays a role in the ceremonies performed there. Antares is so massive that someday it will develop an iron core and eventually explode as a brilliant supernova, which musically occurs near the end of "Antares Rising."

World Premiere performance by the UCSC Wind Ensemble directed by Rob Klevan with Watsonville Taiko directed by Ikuyo Conant. UC Santa Cruz, May 15, 2010

EVANESCENT REVOLUTIONS (2008)

I. Implosion

I came across a composition competition that caught my eye; it called for exactly 60 seconds of music. I was intrigued and decided to write a set of three one-minute etudes. Each of these etudes is inspired by a different idea and reflect my intellectual environment at the time; this one is an implosion of a fractal process.

II. Bhaskara

Bhaskara II was a 12th century mathematician who, in addition to several contributions to mathematics, astronomy, and engineering, was the first person to describe perpetual motion: in 1150 he described a machine that would make a wheel run forever. Listen for the explicit use of a famous hymn rotating throughout the piece.

III. Happiness Only Real When Shared

After seeing the movie "Into the Wild," I was moved and felt such a strong musical connection to the message of the movie. In response to the movie, I composed a very strict mensural canon based on a single melodic line.

EXPLOSIONS IN THE SKY (2009)

This piece takes as its title the name of an instrumental post-rock band from Texas. The instrumentation of the band is standard (2 guitars, bass, and drums) yet their sound is captivating. Their heavy use of delay, loop, and reverb pedals create layers of overlapping patterns; resulting in a hypnotic wall of sound. It's this effect that I wanted to achieve in my piece: bringing post-rock into a chamber music setting. Although the actual music I wrote sounds nothing like what the band would have written, I did inherit the basic aesthetics of what they create within their music. There are sections in this piece where the music is very hypnotic and will make you feel like you are floating; if you focus you can latch onto several different pulses simultaneously. I also wanted to pay tribute to Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No.5 in which the harpsichordist breaks free from the ensemble and performs a flamboyantly deviant display of virtuosity in the cadenza.

In my piece the pianist attempts to break free at the outset but is overtaken by the incessant patterns in the strings. Eventually the pianist detaches from the ensemble and performs a cadenza that starts off as a Bachian/Ligeti invention but evolves into a post-Romantic technical display of passion. Bach's revolutionary idea of musicians being independent artistic individuals is emblematic of the fundamental ethos behind rock n' roll: rebellion. Overall in this piece I used two complementary pitch collections (each with its own theme) that have contrasting colors. Musical explosions and sectional pitch collections create the form but eventually collide at climactic moments. There are golden sections within golden sections throughout and the material is very momentous: you are constantly propelled forward (I wanted the piece to "rock").

World Premiere performance by Monika Warchol – horn, Alisa Rose – violin, Alexa Beattie – viola, Adaiha Macadam-Somer – cello, Hillary Nordwell – piano, Camille Chitwood – percussion. April in Santa Cruz Festival 2009, UC Santa Cruz, April 19, 2009

TRANSIENT REFLECTIONS (2007)

I. Intertwine...unwind

With this piece I explored my interests in chaos theory and polymeter. The piece is all based upon a single idea: one

voice is the leader and in canonic fashion (simultaneous inversion) the second follows asymmetrically. Two layers turn into six distinct layers but with this multi-dimensional interaction you start hearing a seventh layer (with the cross-layer accentuations). These finely threaded lines intertwine and as they purge I introduce a small change which creates a butterfly effect upon all the other inter-dependent members and eventually the piece — like a tightly rolled ball of twine —unwinds itself; hence, the title for the piece.

II. The Abyss

Remove any one of our traditional five human senses, and consequently another sense is amplified. This is the sound of infinite darkness...

III. Stained Glass Window

I discovered in my undergraduate studies that I have color synesthesia with music. People ask if I "see" a color every time I hear a pitch. However, it's more complex than that. I "feel" colors that move within the music, and they are subjective, based upon the phenomenological musical moment at hand. With this piece, I wrote a tala (rhythmic cycle), color (melodic cycle), and then simply transposed the same image onto different color palettes; like looking at the same picture through a rotating stained glass window.

ELEMENTS OF METAL: I. Collapsing Obsidian Sun (2009)

Coming from a Metal background I tend to gravitate towards aural effects that evoke the same sensations I feel when listening to it. I knew that the three string players that were going to perform this piece are virtuosos and this is what inspired me to write something that "shreds." At the same time, I wanted to pay tribute to the three Metal bands that I am closest to: Antagony, All Shall Perish and Hacksaw to the Throat. I found three distinct musical trademarks from each band and used recombinant techniques to form the piece. The title comes from the opening lines to Hacksaw to the Throat's "Cascading Down." I listened to the song repeatedly when I composed "Collapsing Obsidian Sun," and my friend (fellow UCSC graduate student [in Math] who composed it) even showed me how to play it on guitar. It's a musical setting to lyrics about what would happen to the Earth if the Sun became a supernova.

World Premiere performance by Contemporary Music Ensemble Korea with Del Sol String Quartet: Soo-Neon

Chung – haegeum, Kate Stenberg – violin, Hannah Addario-Berry – cello. Pacific Rim Festival 2010, UC Santa Cruz, April 22, 2010

SHADES OF DECEMBER (2010)

This piece is a study of both overtones and complementary whole-tones scales. Influenced by Ligeti's idea of "quasi-equidistant" scalar illusions which, in his mind, created the illusion of non-temperament in an equal tempered setting. The piece oscillates between these two main ideas and in some instances converge momentarily. The title reflects the time in which the piece was composed.

ELEMENTS OF METAL: II. Omnes Perituri (2011)

I have never written a purely string ensemble or string quartet piece. Though after requests from the resident ensembles at SUNY and UCSC I began to hear the same requests: "Make it fun to play and Metal." Knowing that I was in Death Metal band since a teenager and all of my music in some sense has strong Metal aesthetics, they weren't asking me to go out on a limb. My goal with this piece was to satisfy their requests but also create a work that was challenging to listen to (despite it not being technically demanding). "Omnes Perituri" translates to "All Shall Perish" - a prominent band in the extreme metal scene for whom this work was originally written.

World Premiere performance by the UC Santa Cruz Resident String Ensemble. April in Santa Cruz Festival 2011, UC Santa Cruz, April 29, 2011

FIVE (2011)

Five consists of 2 movements, each using only 5 rules: I. Overtones

The bass (fundamental) melody is A B^b A D D^b C. I build the overtone series (approx.) until the 16th overtone is reached (5 octaves above bass note) with each overtone rhythmically related (approx.) to the fundamental by its ratio (octave is 2:1, etc.). I then progress to the next melodic (bass) note and reflect that with a transposition in tempo and its related overtones.

II. I Vent In On

This movement is a distortion of a famous 17th century contrapuntal keyboard work.

THE VERTIGO SERIES: IV. The Battle Within (2008)

The piece involved fractal composition, Fibonacci tracings, Taiko, Gamelan, and Beethovenian elements. While composing this piece I was going through some life-changing events. The piece emanates from that darkness, then dives into intense primal activity, and ends with the feeling that YOU can overcome ANYTHING. This piece was originally entitled "Obsession" because of the slow, hypnotic and obsessive introduction (inspired by Javanese gamelan). The nuclear theme is everywhere, you just have to listen carefully...the piece was premiered June 9, 2008 at UCSC and following the concert I was honored with the 2008 David Cope Award for Music Composition Excellence at a faculty/grad student post-concert reception: a very overwhelming moment following such a dramatic period of my life.

World Premiere performance by John Bissett – bass trombone, Camille Chitwood, Navid Aberg, Lucas Helland – percussion, Kumi Uyeda – piano, Daniel Brown – cello, Adnan Ibrahim – bass, Sara L. Hancock - conductor. Composition Seminar, UC Santa Cruz, June 9, 2008

THE FIFTH WORLD (2009)

In 2012, the Maya calendar ends. The Sun will climb the axis mundi and open the door of Cynosure—and the Fourth World will end (sometime near the December solstice in 2012). The native traditions refer to a slow gradual rise of the human population to a period of widely-shared cultural and technological high civilization. It is told that everyone will have to choose between the two time frames-- one leading to the Fifth World with our Earth, and the other (which will be very alluring, deceiving many) which will remove us from our Earth, taking us to oblivion. The entire piece is structured and built from the 10 note melody explicitly stated near the beginning of the second movement "The Rise of Blue." I have lived my whole life in plain white rooms. In April I moved and now live in a sky blue bedroom; this definitely has an effect on my music; I composed the 10-note melody first after waking up with this new color and this melody (for me) evokes sky blue.

THE VERTIGO SERIES: V. The Aftermath (2009)

The word "aftermath" has many implications; the definition itself creates a series of images; "something that results or follows from an event, esp. one of a disastrous or unfortunate nature..." Seems rather fitting - knowing the nature of its predecessor "The Vertigo Series IV. The Battle Within (2008)."

I wanted this piece to both complement and contrast "The Battle Within." I used a similar instrumentation and form, and the same pitch cell. I contrasted these ideas by bringing out the Taiko and Javanese Gamelan aspects, mutating the primary (nuclear) theme from "The Battle Within," and, most importantly, composing from an Eastern way of thinking.

World Premiere performance by Anthony Calonic – trumpet, Adam Louie – trumpet, John Bissett - bass trombone, Lucas Helland, Navid Aberg, Leah Bowden – percussion, Kumi Uyeda – piano, Camille Chitwood – conductor. Master's Recital, UC Santa Cruz, April 26, 2009

OBLIVION (2012)

If there is one thing that I want to contribute to art music – it is the acknowledgement of Heavy Metal as a viable and meaningful art form. A substantial amount of my work within and outside academia encompasses the sound of a distorted electric guitar. There are several different worlds and ideas that come together in this piece. The most obvious being Choral music set against Metal music. A more subtle interplay is the rhythmic dissonance which occurs between the two worlds and within themselves. I created a long range harmonic polyrhythm that cycles every sixty bars within the metal ensemble and an independent polyphonic structure with the choir. The unifying feature between the two worlds is the scale – an ancient Byzantine mode (Tone 4 chromatic), each world uses the same scale a perfect fifth apart. To me, this creates a hypnotic and mesmerizing soundscape. It sounds endless. Limitless. Oblivion is also the name of the band I am in, for whom I intended this piece. Oblivion is a word most people misuse – it means "the condition or state of being forgotten or unknown."

World Premiere performance by Ariose Singers directed by Michael McGushin with Oblivion. Master's Recital, UC Santa Cruz, April 26, 2009