

J. P. A. FALZONE (b.1986)

A CURVING ABACUS

1. **Zipf's Law IV** (2017) 11:05
Ostrava New Orchestra, Owen Underhill, conductor
2. **Punctuated Equilibrium** (2019) * 21:41
Ostravská Banda: Malgorzata Hlawsa, flute; Irvin Venyš, clarinet; Katie Porter, clarinet; Juraj Zelko, oboe; Eduardo Olloqui, English horn; Gorbuleac Naum, trumpet; Conrad Harris, violin; Gergana Haralampieva, violin; Miroslav Beinbauer, piano; Chris Nappi, vibraphone; Petr Kotík, conductor
3. **Metamerism** (2021) 12:11
ELISION Ensemble: Ryan Williams, recorder; Samantha Ramirez, harp; Peter Neville, percussion
4. **A Curving Abacus** (2021) 13:46
Arditti Quartet: Irvine Arditti, violin; Ashot Sarkissjan, violin; Ralf Ehlers, viola; Lucas Fels, cello
5. **A Tension Span** (2022) 12:48
Switch~ Ensemble: Laura Cocks, flute; Madison Greenstone, clarinet; Matt Evans, saxophone; Megan Arns, vibraphone; Wei-Han Wu, piano; Clara Kim, violin; T.J. Borden, cello; Jason Thorpe Buchanan, conductor

TT: 71:30



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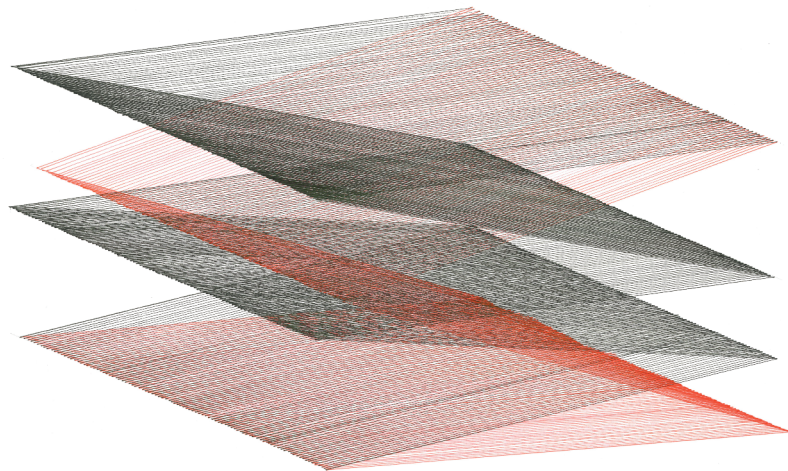
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J. P. A. Falzone *A Curving Abacus*



In 1968, Steve Reich coined the term Process Music to describe compositional designs that resemble “pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it gradually come to rest,”¹ explaining that “once the musical process is set up and loaded it runs by itself.”² In the mid-1970s, Brian Eno began using the expression Ambient Music to refer to atmospheric compositions that “must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular,”³ music that “must be as ignorable as it is interesting.”⁴

A half century later, the music of **James Peter Alfonse Falzone** (b. 1986) might initially be viewed through a Process/Ambient stereoscopic lens, but the five works collected here certainly do not run by themselves, and they are anything but ignorable. Composed between 2017 and 2023, these compositions — each possessing its own bespoke generative system — provide a listener with immersive sonic environments that are beautiful and engaging upon first hearing, but also offer significant intellectual reward to those who choose to listen closer and dig deeper. Attentive engagement with these works reveals complex worlds filled with beautiful contradictions: The music is discernably mechanized, but never obvious or predictable; the overall aesthetic is highly experimental, but the resulting sounds feel organic and natural; these pieces are distinctly cerebral, but often feel instinctual. One hears little if any of the jazzy diatonic bounce common to many compositions of Reich, and there is only occasional and far-removed resemblance to Eno’s characteristic pandiatonic

1 Steve Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process, 1968” *Writings About Music, 1965–2000*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.34.

2 Reich, *Ibid.*, p.34.

3 Brian Eno. Liner notes from the initial American release of *Music for Airports/Ambient 1* (PVC7908, 1979).

4 Eno, *Ibid.*

harmonic clouds. A listener is in fact far more likely to be reminded of the highly-patterned rhythmic and harmonic designs of Olivier Messiaen, or — going back a few centuries — the intricate clockwork constructions of Johannes Ockeghem. It is perhaps not insignificant that both Messiaen and Ockeghem frequently performed in churches, where stone surfaces and cavernous spaces allow sounds to ring and intermingle in a warm glow. Falzone, whose instrumental training includes pipe organ, often favors similarly reverberant sonic environments, where atmospheres of echo and reflection are created through the use of bell-like percussion instruments, resonant timbres, and long note-values.

And, of course, any music that unfolds gently and features insistent gestures, persistent elongated tones, ringing percussion instruments, and pedal-sustained piano will inevitably invoke comparison to the music of Morton Feldman. This is perhaps especially predictable in the case of Falzone, who is currently engaged in studies at the University at Buffalo, where Feldman led the composition department from 1972 to 1987. But though the surface textures of Falzone’s work are at times similar to those of Feldman’s, the highly organized deep structures that generate these inviting exteriors might actually have far more in common with the statistically generated edifices of a composer such as Milton Babbitt, whose highly rigorous and notoriously labyrinthine music sounds, at times, surprisingly (and very attractively) atmospheric and — in the most Eno sense of the word — ambient.⁵

As the first quarter of the 21st century draws to a close, boundaries between musical genres are rapidly fading (if they remain at all). Distinctions between styles

5 Recordings of Babbitt’s music that the author of this essay finds to be particularly ambient/immersive include two New World Records releases: *Milton Babbitt: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (NWR 80346) and *Milton Babbitt: Piano Music since 1983* (NWCR 746).

are blurring: The above paragraph, for example, concludes with a suggestion that certain music by Milton Babbitt might be accurately described by the same label one uses for the music of Brian Eno. The current trend toward stylistic pluralism allows today's composers the freedom to merge multiple influences and inspirations—from any point or points on the timeline of musical evolution—while feeling no need to adhere to a single aesthetic camp or historical through-line. And since it is more or less impossible for a composer to surprise or shock an audience anymore (Charles Wuorinen asked: “How can you make a revolution when the revolution before last has already said that anything goes?”⁶), it seems that the primary challenge for today's composer is to assemble, organize, classify, and stitch together a wide array of relevant principles and methods—to invent an individualized “common practice”—in hopes of creating a unique, engaging, logical musical universe. James Falzone has succeeded admirably at this task, providing us with the fresh, elegant, rewarding music contained herein.

Zipf's Law IV is scored for an orchestra comprising two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, bassoon, three percussionists (glockenspiel, vibraphone, and chimes), piano, and section strings. The 11-minute work, composed in 2017 and recorded here by the Ostrava New Orchestra under the direction of Owen Underhill, is influenced by the probability-distribution power law for which the piece is named. Zipf's law has applications in both the physical and social sciences, and here—according to the composer—the principle is “applied to a set of intervals ranging from major and minor seconds to major and minor ninths and exclusive of thirds and sixths. The pitch-class relationships are determined through a stochastic process

6 From “An Interview with Barney Childs, 1962.” Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs, *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, (New York: Da Capo Press, expanded edition 1998), p.371.

resembling a random walk with similarities to a Markov chain of probabilities.” The fundamental characteristic of a Markov chain is the sense that what will happen Next is dependent only upon what is happening Now—that what happened in the past has little or no bearing on what will happen in the future. This feeling of moment-to-moment impulsiveness propels Falzone's composition down a gently meandering pathway of chiming resonance. The chosen intervallic distribution of seconds and ninths favored over thirds and sixths results in a harmonically stable environment that is never entirely static but feels instead like an endless swirl of narrowed possibilities. Consistent textural density throughout—especially within the cycling dyads of the percussion and piano parts (in seconds, fourths, sevenths, and ninths)—creates the impression that a listener might be experiencing the piece through a window, witnessing only a small segment of something larger and more infinite.

Punctuated Equilibrium (2019) is the longest work in this collection, clocking in at over 21 minutes. Performed by the Ostravská Banda conducted by Peter Kotik, it is scored for a ten-piece chamber ensemble of flute, two clarinets, oboe, English horn, trumpet, two violins, vibraphone, and piano. The title refers to a term used in the field of evolutionary biology to posit the notion that once a species appears, it shows very little evolutionary change for most of its history, and any change that does occur tends to happen rapidly and significantly. Falzone explains that the composition is informed by a relatively straightforward formal plan⁷ that contains a number of disruptions that distort “by way of rhythmic variations, diminutions, registral shifts,

7 “The pitch-content... is derived from a random sequence of numbers, which conform to a normal curve, or Gaussian distribution. The number series unfolds through a process which I term rotation canon. By this I mean that the items in the series, at a given durational value, proceed in order, but at each new segmented iteration of the line, the first item is omitted and a new, subsequent item is

enharmonic spellings, etc., which cause this striated structure to shift, slip, compress, and then... revert to stasis.” Contributing to the mechanical nature of the music’s aesthetic is the fact that the score contains no dynamic indications after initial markings of *mezzo-piano* in the piano and vibraphone lines that begin the work, and markings of *piano* at the start of each instrumental entrance thereafter. The lack of notated dynamic change, the narrow tessituras of each individual part, and the generally thick texture (most of the ensemble is sounding most of the time), allows a listener to focus entirely on recurring patterns (equilibriums) and the occasional interruptions (punctuations) to those patterns.

Metamerism (2021) is performed here by the ELISION Ensemble (Ryan Williams, recorder; Samantha Ramirez, harp; and Peter Neville, percussion). As is the case with *Punctuated Equilibrium*, Falzone has turned once again to the field of biology for inspiration and a title. “Metamerism refers to the segmentation of the body into similar discrete units... this piece uses overlapping polymetric patterns of rhythmic groupings consisting of small sets of pitch material to create a varied though consistent texture—a texture repetitious, though never exactly so.” Falzone goes on to discuss the use of the same term, in the field of optics, to describe a situation in which “two stimuli are perceived to be identical, although they are in fact quite different—for instance, when two colors appear the same under certain lighting conditions but different when otherwise illuminated.” Musical segments within the 12-minute

included at the end. This may be represented as proceeding thus: 01234567, 12345678, 23456789, etc. This line, unfolding, as it were, as if staggering, frame by frame, is then treated in canon at the unison across the ten contrapuntal voices, with the exception of the higher line in the piano at the octave. In this way, randomness, albeit subject to a statistically determined, literally normalized, distribution, is transformed by a highly regulated, coherent, and relatively simple system.”

piece—some as short as a single measure—are marked in the score by double bar-lines. Upon first hearing, a listener might not realize that these segments are sometimes restated literally, but repeat signs begin to occur in the score starting in measure 127 (7:00 on the recording) and continue to appear intermittently thereafter. Boundaries between sections are frequently elided smoothly, but some are quite noticeable, especially on the few occasions when the percussion part switches from notes struck with mallets to notes articulated by the brush of a bass bow. The first such timbral change happens in m.77 (4:10). Also notable, again in the percussion part, is a single bowed A-natural (on the second space of the treble staff) first instantiated in m.176 (10:20) and heard insistently singing in the registral middle of additional struck percussive notes until the work’s conclusion.

A Curving Abacus (2021), performed here by the venerable Arditti String Quartet, employs microtones—intervals smaller than a half step, which is the narrowest intervallic distance available on an instrument that employs standard equal-tempered tuning. In Falzone’s work, quarter-tones (both sharp and flat) abound, and there are occasional sixth-tones (in the flat direction). Over the course of the work’s 14 minutes, the musical palette moves from a 24-pitch collection to a 16-pitch collection, and finally to a 10-pitch collection. The work’s title is drawn from a John Ashbery poem, *Boundary Issues*⁸, which concludes:

Each new investigation rebuilds the urgency,
like a sand rampart. And further reflection undermines it,
causing its eventual collapse. We could see all that
from a distance, as on a curving abacus, in urgency mode

8 In *Poetry* magazine, Vol.193, No.6, March 2009 (Chicago: Poetry Foundation), pp.510–511.

A Curving Abacus, mm. 350-360 (end)

from day one, but by then dispatches hardly mattered. It was camaraderie, or something like it, that did. poring over us like we were papyri, hoping to find one correct attitude sketched on the gaslit air, night's friendly takeover.

In performance notes included with the score, the composer instructs that both the tempo and rhythm of the work should be “quite methodical, even mechanical,” and goes on to explain that the infrequent dynamic notations are intended to indicate only a small number of locations in the piece where one voice should be more or less prominent than the others, but that more often “the composite sound of the quartet is to be evenly balanced across the four instruments.”

A Tension Span (2022), performed here by the Switch~ Ensemble, is scored for a septet of flute, clarinet, alto saxophone, violin, cello, vibraphone, and piano. About the work the composer writes: “This piece was motivated by an effort to rehabilitate the formal structure of the isorhythmic motet in the context of a present-day, nonfunctionally tonal harmonic idiom.” Simply described, isorhythm—associated primarily with Medieval music of the 14th and 15th centuries but not without examples from the 20th⁹—is a compositional technique in which a repeating series of rhythmic durations (referred to as the “*tales*”) is matched up with a repeating series of pitches (the “*color*”). When the numbers of events in each series are unequal, the com-

9 The first movement of Olivier Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, for example, features two simultaneously occurring isorhythms: The cello part cycles a series of 15 rhythmic values against a sequence of 5 pitches, while the piano part cycles 17 rhythmic values against 29 chords. Additional examples of isorhythm can be found in many examples of pulsed minimalism from the 1960s and 1970s.

Musical score for measures 15-20 of 'A Tension Span'. The score includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Alto Saxophone (A. Sax.), Trumpet (Tr.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vcl.). Dynamics include *p*, *pp*, *mp*, and *mf*. A rehearsal mark [15] is at the beginning, and a first ending bracket (1.) is at the end of measure 20.

Musical score for measures 21-29 of 'A Tension Span'. The score includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Alto Saxophone (A. Sax.), Trumpet (Tr.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vcl.). Dynamics include *mp* and *mf*. Performance instructions include *estremamente sul ponticello* and *primarily overtones, with little to no fundamental*. Rehearsal marks [21] and [29] are present. Performance markings include *Sva*, *loco*, and *ord.*

A Tension Span, mm 15-29

combination of *talea* and *color* produces a varied interactivity as the two strings of musical information cycle against one another. A simple example would be a *talea* of four rhythmic values (1-2-3-4) against a *color* of five pitches (a-b-c-d-e). Mapping one onto the other would yield an isorhythmic result of 1a-2b-3c-4d-1e-2a-3b-4c-1d-2e-3a-4b... and so on. After 20 events (five times through the *talea* against four times through the *color*) the cycle would return to the beginning (1a). Falzone's work is "panisorhythmic," with seven different isorhythmic lines—one for each instrument—occurring simultaneously.

— James Romig

James Romig is an American composer currently on faculty at Western Illinois University. His Still, for solo piano, was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize.

James Peter Alfonse Falzone (b. 1986) is a composer-performer trained as a pianist, organist, and percussionist. His work seeks to cohere a systems- and process-oriented approach towards composition together with a harmonic sensibility that explores pitch-structures outside the domain of conventional functionality.

In 2014, he founded the Providence Research Ensemble, which has served as a primary vehicle for realizing his compositions. Falzone is also a founding member of Ordinary Affects, a composer-performers' collective, which has commissioned, premiered, and recorded works by Jürg Frey, Eva-Maria Houben, Christian Wolff, Alvin Lucier, and others. In 2016, Falzone was an inaugural artist-fellow of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum.

Falzone received his master's degree in music composition from Wesleyan

University (Connecticut) in 2019. His thesis constituted an extended essay on aesthetic concerns, “(The Experience of) Music as Autonomous Partial Object.” In 2020, he began his doctoral studies at SUNY Buffalo, initially studying under David Felder.

In addition to the Ostrava New Orchestra and the Ostravská Banda, Falzone’s work has been performed by the S.E.M. Ensemble, Ghost Ensemble, and Red Desert Ensemble. In 2023, the Czech Institute for Microtonal Music presented his piece, *8 Choose 4: Prime Harmonics*, performed by EnsembleSpectrum.

Founded in London in 1974, the **Arditti Quartet** are world renowned for their expertise in the performance and interpretation of contemporary and 20th-century music. The enthusiasm of Irvine Arditti and his colleagues for new music is widely regarded as having made a profound impact on the revival of the string quartet in the latter part of the 20th century. Many hundreds of string quartets and other chamber works have been written for the ensemble; many of these works have left a permanent mark on the 20th-century repertoire and have given the Arditti Quartet a firm place in music history.

ELISION is Australia’s premier new music ensemble. ELISION is celebrated internationally for establishing long-term artistic relationships with composers such as Liza Lim, Richard Barrett, Aaron Cassidy, Turgut Erçetin and Mary Bellamy, high-level performance virtuosity, and the deep commitment and ability of its musicians fully displayed in the re-invention of performance practice and technique.

Formed in 2005 as the resident chamber orchestra for Ostrava Days, **Ostravská Banda** consists of instrumentalists from Europe and the United States highly experi-

enced in contemporary music. With Petr Kotík serving as artistic director, the repertoire of Ostravská Banda includes major compositions of the 20th century as well as works by contemporary composers. Apart from Ostrava Days festivals, Ostravská Banda tours and performs internationally, as well as serving as the orchestra for New Opera Days Ostrava. Ostravská banda is renowned for its commitment to artistic excellence and its ability to perform exactly the most complex of 20th- and 21st-century works.

The **Ostrava New Orchestra (ONO)** was created for the express needs of the Ostrava Days Festival in order to establish a symphony orchestra focused first and foremost on the performance of contemporary music. Since its founding, ONO has been driven by the ambition to advance the engagement of early career musicians passionate about the interpretation of 20th- and 21st-century orchestral repertoire. Now in its seventh year, ONO has continued to evolve as a highly professional symphony orchestra, whose energy, sound, working practice, and artistic commitment meet the difficult demands of contemporary music.

An ensemble for the 21st century, the **[Switch- Ensemble]** is dedicated to the creation of new works for chamber ensemble and technology, bringing bold new projects to life. Working directly with composers — in a medium where the score is a point of departure rather than a finish line — allows for new and thrilling musical possibilities. [Switch-] contributes to the future of new music by advocating for and commissioning a new generation of artists. We are passionate about helping to build a diverse canon of 21st-century works that leaves space for all voices, especially those that have historically been excluded from our field.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Chordoid. Another Timbre AT152.

Music of J. P. A. Falzone. Infrequent Seams CDIS1014.

Zipf's Law IV was recorded live September 2, 2017 in Triple Hall Karolina, Ostrava, Czech Republic, during Ostrava Days Institute and Festival 2017. Courtesy of Ostrava Center for New Music.

Sound engineer: Aleš Huber

Music director: František Mixa

Punctuated Equilibrium was recorded live August 30, 2019 in Triple Hall Karolina, Ostrava, Czech Republic, during Ostrava Days Institute and Festival 2019. Licensed from Czech Radio.

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Sound engineer: Lubomír Výrek

Music director: František Mixa

Metamerism was recorded April 1, 2021 at Studio 52, Melbourne, Australia.

Producer: Daryl Buckley

Final engineering: Alistair McLean

A Curving Abacus was recorded live May 28, 2021 in Dresden, Germany, during June in Buffalo 2021. Recording engineer: Martin Baumgärtel

A Tension Span was recorded March 28, 2022 in Lippes Concert Hall, Slee Hall, University at Buffalo North Campus. Recording engineer: Christopher P. Jacobs

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