

Still (After) Lives (1997)

Nicolas Collins

Text by Vladimir Nabokov

Preferred Instrumentation:

Four or more bowed string instruments across range

Four or more woodwind and/or brass instruments

Vibraphone

Voice

Still (After) Lives is a reworking of the first nine measures of Giuseppe Guami's *Canzon La Accorta a Quattro* (from *Canzoni da Sonore*, 1601.) The musicians elaborate and extend the notated counterpoint from its original duration of 24 seconds to eight minutes. This piece is derived from an earlier composition of mine, *Still Lives* (1993), in which a modified CD player suspends, re-articulates and draws out short "skipping loops" of a recording of the same Guami music. In *Still (After) Lives* the ensemble emulates acoustically electronic transformations and artifacts that characterized the previous work. Recordings of both compositions can be heard on *Sound Without Picture* (Periplum CD 1999), accessible here: <http://www.nicolascollins.com/soundwithoutpicturetracks.htm>.

Performance Instructions

The first nine measures of the Guami score have been re-barred against a timeline. Each measure contains the pitch material to be played in the interval that elapses between the start of the measure and the beginning of the subsequent one. For example, in measure 2: G is available to instruments in the soprano or bass range, D in the alto, and Bb in the tenor. The specified pitch material is subject to performance variations as indicated in the instrument-specific paragraphs below.

Strings

Each player improvises rhythmic patterns on the pitch material in each measure. Detaché and louré/piqué bowing are suggested, along with other techniques appropriate to baroque string practice. Choice of tempo is free, and should be different for each player – do not try to coordinate a common pulse within the group. Insert rests into the patterns, and occasionally remain tacit for a measure. In measures where more than one pitch is available in a staff (i.e., the eight note pattern in measure 13) the note group can be played forward, backward or in excerpts, at any tempo, independently by any number of players. The string section should strive for a dense, rhythmically complex ever-changing hocketting of the minimal pitch set available in each measure.

Winds

The winds generally play non-rhythmically, sustaining long tones from the pitch set of each measure. Each note should have an extended smooth crescendo attack and decrescendo release, and should be held for 5-15 seconds. Do not synchronize articulation within the group. Alternate playing a note with a rest of approximately equal duration, and occasionally remain tacit for a measure. Occasionally detune a note slightly to beat with the same note played by another player. Brass players should use various mutes – the inclusion or emulation of baroque

cornet is encouraged. In measures containing eight-note patterns (13, 14, 17, 18, 20, 21) you may play the pattern repeatedly – forward, backward or in excerpts, at any tempo, independently of other players (in lieu of long tones). In measures containing half-notes or quarter-notes play them as legato sequences of long tones, forward or backward. The wind section should produce a shifting mass of overlapping tones of different instrumental timbres, drawn from the minimal pitch set available in each measure, with occasional bursts of contrapuntal activity.

Vibraphone

The primary role of the vibraphone is highlighting the “downbeat” of a new measure, by playing – at the exact start of each measure – a sustained chord or single pitch drawn from any staves. During the remainder of the measure you are free to play a single note, a sequence of notes, a trill, an arpeggio or another chord, from any staves, sustained or staccato. But play very sparingly, a maximum of two events per measure. Do not play the downbeat for every new measure, and occasionally remain tacit for a measure. In two of the measures containing eight-note patterns (13, 14, 17, 18, 20, 21) you may play the pattern repeatedly – forward, backward or in excerpts, at any tempo, independently of other players.

Voice

The text is spoken at a moderate level, at a languid tempo, with pauses between sentences. Enter at the start of measure 15 and end by the start of measure 22. The ensemble should drop its level somewhat when the voice enters, and crescendo back up to its original level when the voice exits. The words should be intelligible but not dominate the instrumental part (some modest amplification may be necessary).

General Notes

A minimum of four bowed string instruments and four wind instruments, covering the SATB range, are preferred.

Any pitch can be transposed by octaves, except in the first and last measures, where all notes must be played as written.

Dynamics: generally mf, with occasional group crescendos and decrescendos to be determined in rehearsal. Lower the playing volume when the voice is speaking. The density of playing activity can vary during the performance, but the beginning and end should be rather “simple” in texture.

Musicians may use individual stopwatches or follow a central time display (for example, a computer monitor.)

The performance ends with a sharp cut at 7'45”.

Nicolas Collins
Berlin 1997, Revised Chicago 2015

Still (After) Lives

0'00" 0'30" 1'00" 1'30" 1'45" 2'00" 2'15" 2'30" 2'45" 3'00" 3'15" 3'30" 3'45"

The first system of the musical score consists of four staves. The top three staves are for vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, and Tenor) and the bottom staff is for the piano accompaniment. The music is in a common time signature (C) and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score shows a series of whole notes and half notes, with some melodic lines in the vocal parts. The piano accompaniment features a steady bass line and chords.

4'00" 4'15" 4'30" 4'45" 5'00" 5'15" 5'30" 6'00" 6'15" 6'30" 6'45" 7'00" 7'15" 7'45"

The second system of the musical score continues from the first system. It features four staves. The top two staves are for vocal parts, with the label "VOICE IN" on the left and "VOICE OUT" on the right. The bottom two staves are for the piano accompaniment. The score includes a variety of musical notations, including sixteenth notes and eighth notes in the vocal parts, and a more complex piano accompaniment with sixteenth notes and eighth notes. The system concludes with a double bar line.

Still (After) Lives

Spoken Text

(From *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov)

I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window.

Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book.

A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory.

That robust reality makes a ghost of the present.

The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling.

Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.