VARIATIONS ON

GEORGE LAM
BENJAMIN ROGERS
VARIATIONS ON

chamber concerto for seven players

words by Benjamin Rogers
music by George Lam

created for the 2006 Aspen Contemporary Ensemble and the 2006 Aspen Music Festival and School

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INSTRUMENTATION*

Flute
Clarinet in B-flat
Piano
Percussion
Vibraphone (motor is not used)
5 Wood Blocks (or Temple Blocks)
2 pairs of Castanets (different pitches, mounted)
Small Suspended Cymbal
Large Suspended Cymbal‡
Crotales (only the lower octave: \(\text{\textcolor{red}{\text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet}}\))
Dinner Bell
Finger Cymbal
Slapstick
Violin
Viola
‘Cello

* all players both speak and play throughout this piece.
‡ a difference in color between the two cymbals is what’s needed; the smaller cymbal should be brighter than the larger cymbal.

This score is written in C, with the exception of the crotales, which sound two octaves above.

DURATION

Approximately six and a half minutes.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION

*Variations On* makes use of three microphones to amplify a spoken libretto. Microphones are placed between the flute and the clarinet, between the violin and the viola, and directly in front of the cellist’s mouth. Since the microphones will be shared in the earlier two cases between different players, it is preferred that all players (except the cellist and the pianist) stand for the duration of the performance. The cellist should be seated on a platform.

**NOTE:** The Percussionist uses the microphone stationed between the flutist and the clarinetist, and the Pianist similarly uses the microphone between the violinist and the violist. Ample room should be provided at these microphones to facilitate this.

When the part calls for spoken text to be amplified (notated with an “A” in the part), the player should step forward to the microphone to speak their part. The level of amplification should be just enough so that it can be heard over the concurrent instrumental music. When text is not amplified (no “A”), the speaker should use care to project his or her sound, at times speaking over the instrumental music.

A suggested setup:

Other possible variations on the setup could switch the positions of the piano and the percussion, or bring both stations downstage, placed on either sides of the ensemble.

Since *Variations On* uses both amplified and unamplified voices throughout, the choice of microphone needs to minimize amplification of sounds picked up from areas not directly in front of the microphone.

Speaker and monitor placements should enable the players (and especially the conductor) to hear the amplified spoken text over the instrumental music.
The libretto combines five different, unique strains of thought. These pieces of text are sometimes presented separately and clearly, and other times overlapped and muddied. The resulting effect is akin to concurrent overhearing in (very) different corners of a party.

It is strongly suggested that the entire ensemble thoroughly read these five strains, and more importantly to create unique characters for the text, and to convey these characters during the performance. The ensemble should also experiment with different possibilities of interpretations of the texts during the rehearsal process.

What follows are the full texts of the five voices, in no particular order.

**Drop Dead**  
*(This is one side of a phone conversation.)*

“I swear to god she's going to live forever.”

“Sure it's a good thing, but it would be better if I didn't have to waste my weekends taking care of her. It's not like I don't have my own problems to deal with.”

“Well who else would do it? She has no friends, she is too selfish for friends.”

“No I won't. If I ever get like that I need to drop dead.”

“Of course I'm upset. Didn't I tell you about the cat?”

“It had a tumor the size of a soccer ball on its belly. But in order to operate the doctor said it needed to gain some weight. So I had to go over to her house 5 times a day and feed it this special formula.”

“No, she said it was going to drop dead anyway so why should she bother feeding it.”

“Well, I fed it all day Saturday and 4 times on Sunday. But when I went over last night for the final dose...it was dead.”

“The opposite. She actually broke down and began to wail about her poor cat and how could god take him from her. I'll tell you who god needs to take...”
Prescription

Acetaminophen for headaches, both natural and unnatural.

Prevacid for stomach, acid reflux related pain, eating too much or too little.

Lexapro for anxiety, fictional or nonfictional.

Antibiotics for sinus-related infections, severe or insignificant.

Vitamins and decongestants taken as needed.

Alcohol for everything else.

Gone

Puppy love. I named him Chip. He had a predominantly black coat of hair on top which was complimented by the white hair on his undersides. His face had little tan spots under his eye and his tail was a gorgeous, shaggy spiral of black with a white stripe down the middle.

That bushy tail was his trademark--his calling card.

Chip pranced like a deer. He played frisbee, tag, and slept in my tent whenever I decided to camp out in the backyard.

But just like me, Chip eventually grew restless on our farm. He began to take weeklong trips, but he would always come back. I would see his beautiful tail moving through the field, and then he'd pounce up into my arms and lick my face for hours.

Then one day he didn't return. His food bowl left untouched.

Four years later Chip showed up, pouncing and licking. But he had no tail. Just a stub, flapping in excitement. I spent the night sleeping next to him on the grass, searching his face for a clue as to what happened. The only thing he could tell me was that the world was too big to stay in one place. And that it isn't good to be too attached to anything. In the morning he left, never to return.

Found Objects

Yellow radio sits on the bicycle’s handlebars. A quaint system playing that song I somehow associate with you although we are hardly connected. The man riding is making no statement at all, just spinning wheels to facilitate his travel. Portability means different things to different people.

Birds align on rooftops until one decides to take off. A flying circus. I have no place to go and
my ears are getting cold.

Split in two, left behind, something like a fork and spoon lies perfectly framed between the cracks. White against the concrete. I'm not sure which exists. To pick it up would be responsible; I chose to make a photograph. Evidence makes meaning. The street smells like garbage.

At home again, or not at all, dust scatters in the light. The neighbor lets his dog bark. I am at a loss.

**Neurotics Anonymous**

...and then showering and going to the allergist and doing taxes and rushing home to clean up and do some work to allow time to eat and exercise and find a job and settle down and get a 401K plan or Roth IRA or whatever the financial planner thinks you should get so you can make joint decisions and be smart with money and no dairy or carbs or smoking or drinking or anything else that might potentially cause later harm because the future is all you have or most of what you should worry about because who knows where social security might be and the government these days can't seem to manage anything so look both ways and get saved or donate something to charity and save receipts for tax write-offs and good karma and nuclear families not nuclear bombs 'cause what is war really good for and in the end the love...
NOTES ON THE SCORE

• Throughout this piece, the spoken text functions as a part of the ensemble’s sound. Sometimes the voices are more prominent, at other times they are part of the texture or in the background. Hence, differences in the dynamics and amplification of the spoken parts need to be brought out. The ensemble is also encouraged to experiment with balance and interpretation of both the spoken texts and the instrumental music.

• When a rhythm is given for a spoken text, “x” noteheads give a contour of the text, where higher notes should be spoken at a higher pitch, lower ones with a lower pitch, etc.

• Where the exact rhythm is not indicated, an arrow is provided to show the approximate duration for a given text. Speak with a natural rhythm and contour, unless otherwise indicated. In this notation, the words are arranged spatially as a guide for where the words can fall during each measure.

In pages 44 through 46, dotted lines show that there should be absolutely no break between the different strains of “Prescription”. Where in other cases these arrows give an approximate duration of a spoken text, here the durations should be strictly followed: no more, no less.

• An “A” indicates that the text enclosed in the bracket needs to be amplified. In these cases, the player should step forward to his or her assigned microphone to speak the text. These amplified passages should be heard over the ensemble (but not overpoweringly), and should result in a different sound from the unamplified passages.

In certain cases, a player is instructed to gradually move towards or away from the microphone, in effect creating a crescendo or decrescendo through changing the distance between the player and the microphone. These cases are indicated by an
“A” and a dotted arrow, as well as written instructions.

(gradually speak into mic.)

Write against the concrete.

- There are three main types of speaking used in this piece:

  Whisper (breath only)
  Breathy (breath and pitch/tone)
  Full Voice (no breath)

Whispering should be performed in the style of an audible stage whisper. Here, dynamics are given in parentheses, where fortissimo is a louder, more breathy whisper than forte. When a text is marked as “breathy”, it should be spoken like a stage whisper, but with a hint of the pitch and tone of normal speech, like someone who is out of breath.

- Here are the sounding pitches of the string natural harmonics that are used in this piece:

```
Violin, m. 81

Cellos, m. 85

Viola, m. 86
```

- Where spoken text is given, dynamics and other instructions are placed above the staff, while the words of the text are placed below.

- \( \longrightarrow \) means decrescendo al niente.
PROGRAM NOTES

Variations On (2006) is a chamber concerto for seven players, and was written for the 2006 Aspen Music Festival and the Aspen Contemporary Ensemble. The short movement makes use of five very different strains of text, which are all spoken by the members of the ensemble. Sometimes fragments of these texts overlap. Sometimes the text is incomprehensible. Sometimes the voices are heard over the accompanying music, and at other times the music takes over and becomes the focus. The result could be described as concurrently overhearing different corners of a decidedly very different type of party.

The creative process for Variations On began with my approaching Benjamin Rogers, a writer friend of mine living in Chicago, in March of 2006. We brainstormed ideas for the piece, the texts, the music, the title. Benjamin sends me various sketches of text, and I send him piano renditions of musical fragments for each text. In the end, we decided on five different voices for the piece, and I set out to integrate all of these voices into the work.

Finally, what exactly happens when you hear words and music together? How does one change the meaning of the other?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Benjamin Rogers, who eventually realized that this piece wasn’t as “free” as I had initially led him to believe.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

George Lam (b. 1981) is an active composer based in Durham, North Carolina, where he is currently a PhD student in music composition at Duke University, studying with Stephen Jaffe and Scott Lindroth. George is especially interested in writing music for the theater and film. Recent dramatic works include The Fair Youth of the Sonnets (2005), presented by the Peabody Conservatory of Music Opera Workshop, and A State of Affairs (2003), a one-act opera presented by the Boston University School of Music. Upcoming projects include collaborations with the Red Clay Saxophone Quartet, the Boston University Concert Band, and the Duke University Department of Theater Studies. For more information, and to listen to recent works, please visit http://www.gtlam.com.
nothing more restful than chamber music.

- Luciano Berio, *Sinfonia*
for the 2006 aspen contemporary ensemble

variations on

chamber concerto for seven players

benjamin rogers

george lam (2006)

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\[ \text{* denotes passages where the text is amplified by speaking into a microphone.} \]
**But it would be better if...**

Who else would do it? She has no friends. She's too reflux related?

She's also taken as needed?

(f-exhale)

(Gradually speak into mic.)

Well?

Who else would do it? A-ce-to-

P-ncial planner thinks you should get...

Of course I'm upset!

(whisper*) *clearly upset*

and find a job and

* All whispering in this piece should be spoken in an audible stage whisper.
I’m not sure which exists. To pick it up would be responsible; I chose to make a photo...

Who else would do it? Well? Fictio-nal or non -

settle down and get a 401(K) plan or Roth IRA or whatever the
Two...

Because who knows where social security might be...

(move upstage to the percussion station.)

too selfish!

Split in two, left behind.

As needed...

Split in two.

financial planner thinks you should get so you can make
and the government these days can't seem to manage anything so look both ways and get saved

something like a fork and spoon lies perfectly framed...

Perfectly framed...

Two... Four...
... but now giving it another chance

Well... perfectly framed between the cracks, the...

or donate something to charity and save receipts for tax write-offs and good karma and...

I named him Chip! Chip!

But just like me, Chip eventually grew

No?

Be - tween the
An fti-biotics! (whispered) (ff) Pup-py love!

(whispered) (f)*

An-ti-biotics! An-ti-biotics!

An (ff) via-mins...

An-ti-biotics!

An-ti-biotics!

An-(whispered) (f)*

desperate ff

(two) Wood Blocks

Chip!

f

f declaratory

A-ce-to...

becoming more deliberate

restless on our farm. He began to take weeklong trips, but he
cracks

...donate something to charity and save receipts for

* dynamics in parentheses denote dynamics within a stage whisper, where (ff) is a louder, more breathy whisper than (f).
fl.

...or non-fictional!

cl.

I swear to God she's going to live forever.

Wood Blocks

perc.

Castanets

pno.

Ace-tominophen for headaches...

more and more deliberate!

vl.

would always come back.

vla.

Vi-ta...

vc.

tax write-offs and...

23 (tutti off on 1)

23 (in the background)

22

23

24
Sure

skeptical

Sure

(mime speaking*)

(with flutist)

Wood Blocks

(start to move upstage towards the piano.)

P scared

Chip?

Piano

come back. I would see his beautiful tail moving through the field...

(vibrato)

Antibiotics for sinus relief

Sure... it's a good thing.

*Move mouth as if speaking, complete with dynamics and articulations, but do not actually produce sound.
...and trying to convince yourself.

it's a good thing...

it's a good thing...

(continue moving upstage)

But it would be better if I didn't have to spend my time taking care of her.
It's not like I don't have my own problems to deal with.

Well who else would do it?

She has
Well?

She has no friends, she's too selfish for...

too sel - fish...

Wood Blocks

perc.

Castanets

pno.

No!

p

To pick it up would be responsible...

f

mf

reminiscent

I chose to

no friends, she is too selfish for friends.

If I e-ver get like that L...

I...
fl.

(hysterical laughter)

cl.

too..._____

A ha ha...

perc.

Slapstick

pno.

(applaud) with great enthusiasm

vln.

Drop dead!

vla.

make a photograph.

vc.

if I e- ver get like that I need to drop dead!

(applaud)

Hand Clap

(applaud) with great enthusiasm

Hand Clap

(away from mic.)
with great enthusiasm

Più mosso
\[ \dot{=} = 76 \]

fl.

cl.

perc.

pno.

vln.

vla.

vc.

Hand Clap
(applaud)

NO ACCENTS! Unless indicated otherwise.

emerge from the applause

Più mosso
\[ \dot{=} = 76 \]

Of course I'm upset! Did I tell you about the cat?

I'm upset!

Did I tell you about the cat?

Lex-a-pro, for an-

(applaud) with great enthusiasm
It had a tumor the size of a

It was a bit calmer.
soccer ball on its belly. But in order to operate the doctor said it needed to gain

(pay) Vibraphone
(motor off)

mf l.v.
some weight. So I had to go over to her house 5 times a day and feed it this special formula.
Severe or insignificant...

Vibes

half-pedal

Both natural and unnatural.
No, she said it was going to drop dead anyway so why should she bother feeding it.
Well I fed it all

Vibes

Unnatural.
But when I went over last night and on Saturday and 4 times on Sunday.
for the final dose... it was dead.

ff forcefully

Natural and unnatural.

Antibiotics, for sinus-related infections,
The opposite. She actually broke down and began to wail.

(f) like bells, l.v.

Vibes

(f) like bells, l.v.

Eating too much or too little...
about her poor cat and how could god take him from her.

Crotales
(softer mallets?)
I'll tell you who god needs to...

Then one day, he didn't return...
* Both tremolo (or flutter tongue) and trill at the same time.
Four years later Chip showed up, pouncing and licking. But he had no tail.
Just a stub, flapping in excitement. I spent the night sleeping next to him on the grass, searching his face for...
Meno mosso
rall.  \( \text{\textbullet} \) = 69

**fl.**
- \( P \) gently

**cl.**
- [Note: Part of the notation is obscured or not visible.]

**perc.**
- Sm. Sus. Cym.
  (soft mallets, on dome)
- Sm. Sus. Cym.
  (soft mallets, on dome)
- [Note: Part of the notation is obscured or not visible.]

**pno.**
- \( P \) very calm and even

**Meno mosso**

- rall.  \( \text{\textbullet} \) = 69

**vla.**
- [Note: Part of the notation is obscured or not visible.]

**vc.**
- [Note: Part of the notation is obscured or not visible.]

- a clue as to what happened.
  \( P \) very warmly

- [Note: Part of the notation is obscured or not visible.]
The world was too big to stay...

And that it isn’t

like a beam of light

* OSSIA: If it is absolutely not possible for the violinist to both speak and play here, the violist could speak instead.
Four years later Chip showed up, pouncing and licking.

The document contains musical notation with instructions for different instruments:
- **fl.** (flute) with a breathy marking.
- **cl.** (clarinet) with a text saying "bicycle's handlebars...".
- **perc.** (percussion) with a vibraphone symbol.
- **pno.** (piano) with a (loco) marking.
- **vln.** (violin) with a text saying "good to be too attached to anything."
- **vla.** (viola) with a (speak) marking.
- **vc.** (violoncello) with a text saying "(speak) A p nostalgic recitative."
In the morning he left,
never to return.
Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.

 Didn't I tell you I'm not complaining.
Of course I'm upset!

A 401(k) plan or a Roth IRA or whatever

Didn't I tell you about the cat?
A quaint system

Yellow radio sits on the bicycle’s handlebars.

the financial planner thinks you sh...

PP calmly

A

Hand Clap
(with the pianist)
playing that song I somehow associate with you although we are hardly connected.

* dampen string from inside of the piano, if possible.
The man riding is making no statement at all, just spinning wheels to facilitate his travel.
Portability means different things to different people.
Birds align on rooftops until one decides to take off. A flying circus.

I have
no place to go and my ears are getting cold. Split in two, left behind...

Acetaminophen for headaches, both
(whisper) (ff) Prevacid for Acid reflux related pain... (walk back to percussion station)

Vitamins and decongestants Taken as

(whisper) (ff) Lexapro for anxiety

(whisper) (ff) Antibiotics for sinus related infections

natural and unnatural. Prevacid for...
No!

Vi-ta-mins! Vi-ta-mins! Taken

need - ed.

Pre-va-cid for sto-mach, a cid re-la-ted?

and

my ears are get-ting...

se-vere or in sig-ni-fi-cant.

Pre-va-cid for my

(breathy, not amplified)

(breathy)

(f)

(child-like)

(f)

(f)

No place to go and... And...

(ful-ly)

(breathy)
(full voice)

as needed?

(breathy)

My ears...

(mimed, with flutist)

(p)

My ears...

(play)

Castanets

(mp)

(f)

Hand Clap

(speak)

f very pronounced

Acetaminophen for headaches, both

(breathy)

for headaches both natural and unnatural...

(breathy)

ears?

(f)

Le -

(full voice)

P 'What was it for again?'

(vc.)

Pre-validated for?
Prevacid for stomach, acid-reflux related pain, eating too much or too little.

for headaches both natural, unnatural and unnatural.

natural for anxiety.

Alcohol...
Lexapro for anxiety, fictional or nonfictional.

Antibiotics for sinus-related infections, severe

* See note on p. 45.
as... taken as antibiotics for sinus-related related?

mach acid reflux related pain, Eating too much or too little... too...

growing more and more intense

as... taken as antibiotics for sinus-related related?

take over!

Vitamins and decongestants, Taken as needed, Alcohol... Taken

or insignificant.

As needed?
molto rall.

... and then showering and going to the

continue to repeat pattern at original tempo; gradually replace different beats of the rhythm with rests.

molto rall.

as...

145

146
allergist and doing taxes and rushing home to clean up and do some work to allow time to eat and exercise and find a job and

like the "pops" in radio static.

Alcohol for everything else.

pizz. (play out, but not accented.)
settle down and get a 401(K) plan or Roth IRA or whatever the financial planner thinks you should get so you can make joint
decisions and be smart with money and no dairy or carbs or smoking or drinking or anything else that might potentially cause later
harm because the future is all you have or most of what you should worry about because who knows where social security might be
and the government these days can't seem to manage anything
so look both ways and get saved or donate something to
(with vla.)

ff passionate

more intense; struggling to be heard

poco rall.

ff

A Tempo

\( \frac{\text{\(d\)}}{=} 84 \)

fl.

cl.

perc.

pno.

vln.

vla.

vc.

Castanets

(flat)

(sul D)

disappearing

A Tempo

\( \frac{\text{\(d\)}}{=} 84 \)

ff

\( p \)

\( ff \)

\( f \)

\( ff \)

\( f \)

\( \text{arco} \)

pizz.
fl.:

charity and save receipts for tax write-offs and good karma and nuclear families not nuclear bombs 'cause what is war really

cl.:

Castanets

perc.:

Woodblocks

Vibes

(with cello)

pno.:

(with clr.)

vln.

vla.

vc.
(yell over the instruments!)

To pick it up would be responsible; I chose to make a photograph. Evidence makes meaning. The

(play) Sm. Sus. Cym.

(speak)
street smells like garbage. At home again, or not at all, dust scatters in the light. The neighbor lets his dog bark.
I am at a loss.