

The Music of *Archicembalo*
Ben Taylor

G.C. Waldrep describes his latest poetry collection, *Archicembalo*, as “poetry to be read as music.” When readers find neither frequent descriptions of sound nor exceptionally musical language, many may wonder in what capacity it is musical. But there is much music there, specifically in Waldrep's method of “composing” as though his words and thoughts are subject to the same laws that govern notes in music: rules of derivation, mathematical relation, and form. The result is a book that is not music in the way we perceive it, but in the way we process it.

The most consistent grammar of *Archicembalo* is the antecedent-consequent relationship that has defined musical form for centuries. Gregorian chants, Minuets, Indian Ragas, and modern pop music are all built from layered “if... then...” structures of harmony: the first half of a melody leaves you tense and wanting, the second half of the melody resolves that want, as if the answer to a question. To accommodate this grammar, Waldrep's images take form in time, the way music is perceived in time, so that their contents may be subject to similar progressions and alterations. Instead of conveying one timeless emotion or situation, he uses logical structures in which definitions and decisions change rapidly. Take, for instance, “What is a Hexachord”:

"How will the children move and the wind as it brushes up past
Boothbay into Booth Bay and into the river, when or how does a bay
become a river or a river a bay, when I step into it, when I or anyone
steps, when and what then is a child, did I carry or was I carried or
is childhood really this daily island life.

If not why not."

Waldrep is stepping into Heraclitus' river and changing it, articulating cause and effect while pushing the reader's imagination to its boundaries by altering the objects that he has just asked him to imagine. This is a musical push, akin to a symphony or improvisation that reaches into its most distant keys and rhythms before returning to the familiar. The lack of question marks in the book is wise; the middle movement of a symphony does not sound like a question, instead it is a series of statements characterized by the lack of a final, comprehensive answer. (See: "What is the Real Answer").

Just as music is mathematical at its core, Waldrep's logical ramblings use his own brand of surreal math to derive emotions and visions. In "What is Cadence," we are given the equation, "If I subtract sacrifice from appetite from what fierce attention do I then compromise a strict union, have I faltered, have I made an argument for grace." Here, and frequently in *Archicembalo*, the hypothetical resolves into a question, one that keeps propelling the logic of the puzzle forward in the same way that deceptive and imperfect cadences propel music forward by their lack of total resolution. Like a lengthy mathematical proof that consists of many small formulas of multiplication and division, Waldrep's poems are filled with microcosms that must constantly prove their veracity so that they can take part in his larger equations, as in, "I sing as I walk when I have breath which is not always" (“What is a Hexachord”). This math provides method for distillation and conclusion, using musical ideas of modulation, texture, and constellation to reveal Waldrep's core themes: mainly that we can all be reduced to the innocence of the imaginary, to some quality of childhood.

Archicembalo is not always so calculated. In form it greatly resembles Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, a complex serial structure that is punctuated by Stockhausen's own “inserts,” moments of music not abiding to any system, instead derived solely from Stockhausen's ear and imagination. While total serialism accesses the boundaries of sound through its use of logic, Stockhausen's inserts are moments of transcendence, visions from other, logic-less worlds. Waldrep's method of illusory mathematics forms the bulk of *Archicembalo*, but it is his rare visions – not the fleeting images that are abandoned or disproved, but the infrequent landscapes that Waldrep inhabits as though he is dreaming them – that give his music its weight. Like Stockhausen's inserts, these intuitive visions are transcendental and are, so to speak, the real answer: truth, but a truth that is not logical, trustworthy, or proven, instead a fluid truth that stems from an unknown source and which has no system of verification, nor means of recreating itself.