

Composers+ Summer Academy 2017

By Dr. HueyChing Chong

In August 2017, I was selected to participate in Composers+ Summer Academy at Kaunas, Lithuania. This course was initiated by Lithuanian young accordionist Martynas Levickis with the purpose to encourage new repertoires for accordion, in both solo and chamber set up. The guest tutor for accordion was renowned Spanish accordionist, Iñaki Alberdi who often worked closely with living composers, including José María Sánchez-Verdú, Ramon Lazkano, Gabriel Erkoreka, Sofia Gubaidulina, Jesús Torres and many more, to create many new repertoires for accordion. Composition related tutors were Dr. Rūta Vitkauskaitė (Lithuania/UK) and Ben Lunn (UK). Dr. Vitkauskaitė is a composer, performer, new music event organiser, and a teacher who has developed deep interest in music education (Learning Trainee at BCMG, Fellow at Open Academy at RAM, since 2013 working creatively with people living with dementia) and research on personal music performance. While Lunn is an award-winning composer who is also a keen advocate and promoter of accordion music. He has written pieces for accordion ranging from solo to orchestral works.



This Academy started in 2014 and the 2017 academy was the fourth season. The academy took place from 18th to 26th August 2017. In this course, each composer is paired with one selected student accordionist to create two new pieces, solo accordion, and accordion(s) with string(s). Lectures, activities, open masterclasses, concerts were all part of the academy.

What makes this academy very unique was that it provided a platform for young composers and young accordionists to interact and receive direct feedback to create two new pieces together. At the same time, both composition and accordion tutors were present to guide the young



participants during the process. In my opinion, this unique arrangement provides both the performers and composers to view things from each other's perspectives because the response was instant and the communication was continuous throughout the nine days period. Besides that, lectures by Alberdi on composing for accordion; Dr. Vitkauskaitė on collaboration; and Lunn on Sound Plasma, were all very mind opening for both participating composers and accordionists.

Besides intense composing and trials sessions, we were also provided with many activities with the intentions to connect our inner self with creative ideas including yoga, outdoor games etc. This academy was incredibly well-organised. This being said, the stress to finish two new pieces in nine days and present them on a world premiere concert was inevitable. I felt the organising team was very considerate as they noticed the stress of participants and acknowledge the need for a short break half way through the program. Instead of the usual bus ride, all of us went for a boat ride from the castle where our activities were held, to the town where we were staying. This further showed that this academy was putting much focus on the process of creativity instead of solely on final results, which we all appreciate very much.

It proved to be challenging for me to complete two new pieces within nine days, however, I managed to compose introductions of two pieces. One of which I later developed into a full piece after the academy with the practical knowledge I gained during the academy. As a results, sixteen new accordion pieces by eight composers were composed, recorded, and published within this academy in 2017.



The list of pieces composed is as below:
(in alphabetical order based on composers' surnames)

1. Joshua BROWN (United Kingdom)
 - a) *Mosaico* for accordion solo
 - b) *Double Duo* for two accordions and two cellos

2. HueyChing CHONG (Malaysia)
 - a) *introspection-intro* for accordion solo
 - b) *ask, and then... / ? intro* for accordion and string quartet
3. Dominykas DIGIMAS (Lithuania)
 - a) *Suspense* for accordion solo
 - b) *A Little Off the Ground* for accordion and string quartet
4. Rylan GLEAVE (United Kingdom)
 - a) *Paper Birch* for accordion solo
 - b) *Of the People* for accordion and viola
5. David MASTIKOSA (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
 - a) *Escape* for accordion solo
 - b) *Dimensio* for accordion and string quartet
6. Michele SARTI (Italy)
 - a) *Il Ponte Degli Aceri* for accordion solo
 - b) *Lighthouses - Solitude of Space* for accordion and cello
7. Fabian SVENSSON (Sweden)
 - a) *Hushed Tones* for accordion solo
 - b) *Nothing Happens* for accordion and string trio
8. Cong WEI (China/Germany)
 - a) *Duality* for accordion solo
 - b) *The Illusion* for accordion and string quartet

All the pieces above were created through close collaboration with the participating accordionists and guest string players:

ACCORDIONISTS:

Kamila Olas (POLAND)
 Pietro Roffi (ITALY)
 Maria Mogas Gensana (SPAIN)
 Māris Rozenfelds (LATVIA)
 Valerijus Kračius (LITHUANIA)
 Vytenis Danielius (LITHUANIA)

STRING PLAYERS:

Simas Tankevičius (violin) (LITHUANIA)
 Raketė Chijenaitė (violin) (LITHUANIA)
 Ulijona Pugačiukaitė (violin) (LITHUANIA)
 Konrad Levicki (violin) (LITHUANIA)
 Kristina Anusevičiūtė (viola) (LITHUANIA)
 Dalia Sakavičiūtė (viola) (LITHUANIA)
 Ignė Pikalavičiūtė (cello) (LITHUANIA)
 Arnas Kmieliauskas (cello) (LITHUANIA)

Each piece displayed each composer's original perspective on accordion. It is important to note that, this was the first experience composing for accordion for most of the composers participated. In my case, it was the second time.

In Brown's solo piece, *Mosaico*, four distinctive characters could be found under four tempo indications, *Agitato*, *Lento*, *Presto ritmico*, and *Tranquillo*. This piece showed clear structure through contrasting materials. According to the composer, "Mosaico delves into the various elements of the accordion's sound world that the composer and performer explored together in

numerous sessions, and can be heard either as a fragmented concert extemporisation, or as a conceptual recording of the collaborative process”.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/joshua-brown-mosaico-for-accordion-solo>

In his ensemble piece, *Double duo*, according to the composer, “it was composed as a vehicle for performers to have the freedom to explore their own instincts, amid the physical sensation of performing in a resonant space”. Brown detailed intended soundscape elements in his notation and created space that allows performers a certain amount of freedom in time to realise these elements resulted in a highly acoustically effective performance.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/joshua-brown-double-duo-for-two-accordions-and-two-cellos>

My solo piece, *introspection-intro*, is a trial piece in preparation for my first large scale accordion solo piece. I made an elaboration of the idea of musical breathing, which I explored within my accordion duo *Bare-bones I* (2015). Here, I explore the possibilities between the accordion’s physical breathing when performing, including the control of the bellow and my ideas of musical breathing. The sonority in this piece relates closely to one’s inner energy while performing. This piece was awarded a diploma from the academy as the best solo piece written during the academy edition year 2017.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/huey-ching-chong-introspection-intro-for-accordion-solo>

My ensemble piece, *ask, and then... / ? intro*, is the introductory section of a larger scale piece. The texture is very thin and directly expressed. Subtleness and the direct character of sonority are intended simultaneously. The being, or life force, of the ensemble is the result of experimentation with the use of fluid independence and fluid interdependence. Therefore, the reaction to each other’s energy is crucial within this section.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/huey-ching-chong-ask-and-then-intro-for-accordion-and-string-quartet>

Digimas’s solo piece, *Suspense*, opens with the piccolo range of accordion and stay mainly from mid to high range of the accordion with the bass note enters shortly to give a support to the suspense atmosphere as the title indicated. Variation of vibrato and bellow shakes are observed in this piece. During the second half of the piece where the accordionist’s voice begins to integrate with the instrument through whistling and vocalizing sounded very effectively.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/dominykas-digimas-suspense-for-accordion-solo>

In his ensemble piece, *a little off the ground*, was inspired by a quotation from John Cage’s “A Year from Monday” :

In the course of a lecture last winter on Zen Buddhism, Dr. Suzuki said: “Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. While studying Zen things become confused: one doesn’t know exactly what is what and which is which. After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.” After the lecture the question was asked: “Dr. Suzuki, what is the difference between men are men and mountains are mountains before studying Zen and men are men and mountains are mountains after studying Zen?” Suzuki answered, “Just the same, only somewhat as though you had your feet a little off the ground”.

This piece embraced an overall zen-like atmosphere yet embedding with much restless energy. Two contrasting characters intertwined beautifully without “rejecting” each other.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/dominykas-digimas-a-little-off-the-ground-for-accordion-and-string-quartet>

Gleave's solo piece, *Paper Birch*, beautifully integrated speech with musical elements that derived from various natural theme such as stars, birds, wind, trees and etc. A piece of music that triggers the imagination of the audience.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/rylan-gleave-paper-birch-for-accordion-solo>

In his ensemble piece, *of the people*, Gleave took up the challenge as requested by the director of the academy to encompass Lithuania's independence. Thus, he took his inspiration from the 1918 Vilnius Conference, where the council discussed and declared the country's dominion.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/rylan-gleave-of-the-people-for-accordion-and-viol>

Mastikosa's solo piece, *Escape*, displayed many theatrical-like fun and humoresque elements. Expression marks found in his notation include "insane", "look around and say", "whispering" etc. Voice is integrated in this piece as well. In contrary to Gleave's and Digimas' pieces, Mastikosa's piece uses voice for the role of monologue. In Gleave's piece, is more of a narration, and in Digimas' piece, the voice blended in with the musical instrument as if they are one.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/david-mastikosa-escape-for-accordion-solo>

In his ensemble's piece, *Dimensio*, Mastikosa worked with the idea of moving object in music. Spatial imagination could be heard in this piece, This work was composed based on the suggested theme by the director (Lithuania independence) and is dedicated to that ideal and the manifestation of modern national identity within the state.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/david-mastikosa-dimensio-for-accordion-and-string-quartet>

In Sarti's solo piece, *Il Ponte Degli Aceri*, he adopted a structure from Chopin's Mazurka Op. 67 no.4 where ending does not exist. Thus, the soloist can repeat the piece as many time as he wants and stop whenever they feel it is the right moment. This piece was inspired by an ancient Chinese poem Maple Bridge Night Mooring.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/michele-sarti-il-ponte-degli-aceri-for-accordion-solo>

About his ensemble piece, *Lighthouses - Solitude of Space*, Sarti wrote:

This piece is divided into three parts and each one is intended to be performed in very different ways. It begins with a state of melancholy and loneliness, in which I have imagined myself being put into a lighthouse and left there for a while, hearing the wind and the waves crashing against the surrounding rocks. The music clearly evokes a specific psychological state of mind alongside the natural sounds. In the second section we are ferried into an emotional storm where the accordion plays very high, quiet material while the muted cello's movement is louder and more ferocious. It is only in the third part that the piece may achieve an apparent sense of stillness and perhaps, in the very last moments, peace.

This piece was awarded a diploma from the academy as the best ensemble piece written during the academy edition year 2017.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/michele-sarti-lighthouses-solitude-of-space-for-accordion-and-cello>

In Svensson's solo piece, the beauty of vertical texture which is considered as one of the nature of the accordion is explored. According to Svensson, "Some years ago, I was in Cortana, Italy for a couple of weeks, where I stayed at an apartment owned by the Swedish Composers Society. My intention was to write lots of music during my visit, but I ended up not getting much done (too many culinary distractions). However, I did write down a few chords that I liked, but didn't know

what to do with. Now, several years later, I wanted to finally use these chords for something, so I decided to let them serve as the basis for a solo accordion piece. The sound of the accordion turned out to be an excellent fit for my chords”.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/fabian-svensson-hushed-tones-for-accordion-solo>

About his ensemble piece, *Nothing Happens*, like his solo piece, he created beautiful atmosphere with vertical relation between the accordion and the string trio.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/fabian-svensson-nothing-happens-for-accordion-and-string-trio>

In Wei's solo piece, *Duality*, she stated that, “the idea of this composition has derived from a form of performance in traditional Chinese opera, that the man plays the woman's role and vice versa. The way this form of music is performed is through dramatic contrast and becoming abandoned, like many high quality artistic works. I think every human being has a dual gender inside their body, like Yin and Yang, so in my composition I am trying to express this energy through two mainly materials. This piece was planned to be performed without bars to give the performer more free space to feel and express their delicate feelings”.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/cong-wei-duality-for-accordion-solo>

In her ensemble piece, *The Illusion*, she wrote, "I got the inspiration for this piece from an experience in Switzerland, where I was listening to Olivier Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time' outside of a church with a view of the mountains, forest, clouds and the moon. In a moment I felt myself literally involved in nature and did not exist anymore, I became indivisible part of nature. Therefore, in my music I want to try to express my perception of nature in a very innocent way". The sensitivity of sound is beautifully reflected in this piece.

Audio : <https://soundcloud.com/accoakademija/cong-wei-the-illusion-for-accordion-and-string-quartet>

As a final thought after attending the academy, besides acquired the practical knowledge on composing for accordion and working with accordionists, I learnt also humanity. Throughout the process, I learnt that as much as we want to strive for the highest possible quality in music creation, we have to acknowledge that we are indeed working and creating along with living humans with different thoughts and experiences. During this intense process, the question that struck me was, how can we strive for the highest quality in creation at the same time keeping the positive spirit among humans when only a short period of time is available.

