

# temporary remedies for recurring evils

for talking pianist

by

James Whittle

2015



## temporary remedies for recurring evils (2015)

Commissioned and written for Jin Hyung Lim.

**Premiere** Jin Hyung Lim, 'Politics and Music' concert, Late Music Lunchtime Concert, Unitarian Chapel, York, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

**Duration** variable (c. 9 minutes)

**Music** James Whittle

**Words** adapted by James Whittle

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## Preparing a Performance

The two parts are structured improvisations. In between there should be a silent, reflective pause, but not a 'rest' and no break in the tension of the performance.

The voice may be amplified, depending on the performance venue, to make sure the text is clearly audible.

Ideally, the piece should be performed from memory without music, to allow the focus to be on the relationship between the pianist and the piano.

Shape 'recurring evils' as your response to the challenge of repeating the texts as many times as possible. Two suggestions for developing spontaneity in this part are: practise shifting from dyads to different Hammer fragments; experiment with free improvisation, varying combinations of fragments with the text.

In 'temporary remedies', give space and time between words and especially between lines of the poem, shaping the piece through your interpretation of the poem. Unlike in 'recurring evils,' each line should be spoken freely around the various chords – not one word regimented after/with each note. Practising reading this poem separately is recommended to help find space in the brevity of each line and find how you would like to say each one.

### *Ending the piece*

The last line of the poem and the last EH chord should coincide, one shortly before the other (either one first). Either let the resonance die completely, or stop it abruptly.

## Hammer Musical Quotations

Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata, Op. 106*

1st movement, bars 1–4, 7–9, 14–16, 21, and 25.

Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 6*

4th movement, 2 bars before Figure 129, and 4 bars before Figure 140.

Pierre Boulez, *Le marteau sans maître*

I – avant *l'Artisanat furieux* (bars 1-2)

III – *l'Artisanat furieux* (bar 1)

VII – après *l'Artisanat furieux* (bars 1-2)

IX – *Bel édifice et les pressentiments* — double (bar 164)

## Programme Note

1. recurring evils
2. temporary remedies

*“Politics is the art of devising temporary remedies for recurring evils — a series of expedients, not a project of salvation.”* (John Gray)

This piece for talking pianist developed from two texts:

- a Facebook status by Björn Heile, June 2015
- a tweet by @ace\_national crediting a photo to @josefoconnor, 16th July 2015. ‘Toilet truism. #culturematters’

The piece was written for a concert titled ‘Politics and Music’ by Jin Hyung Lim. Given this theme, I found there was no shortage of events or issues that incited a strong response. Jin also gave some musical clues about how a piece might feel when describing elements of Eastern philosophy: Yin, which is associated with cold, passivity, disintegration; and Yang, associated with warmth and activity. I decided against focusing on a specific issue or event and – since I am always concerned with the physicality of music-making and the performer-instrument relationship – settled on a two-part piece showing contrary, complementary traits of human behaviour. When finishing the piece, discovering Jacques Rancière’s comparison of ‘right wing frenzy’ to ‘left wing melancholy’ in *The Emancipated Spectator* seemed apt.

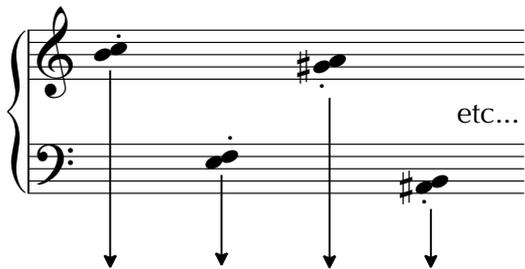
In ‘recurring evils’, the pianist repeats a catchphrase while gradually introducing excerpts of Beethoven, Mahler and Boulez on a theme of hammers (Sonata Op. 106; Symphony No. 6; *Le marteau sans maître*). The catchphrase was derived from philosopher Abraham Kaplan’s ‘law of the instrument’, which can be defined as an over-reliance on a familiar tool or perspective. Kaplan continues, ‘the more we know how to do something, the harder it is to do it differently’. The catchphrase is also known as ‘Maslow’s Hammer’ after psychologist Abraham Maslow, who expressed concerns about reductionism and suggested scientific methods ‘would reduce our minds to something quantifiable’. This part is influenced by Bruce Nauman’s text pieces, in which the speaker of a repeated phrase expresses multiple meanings consciously and unconsciously. The tension here is between hearing quantitatively and qualitatively – how many times the phrase repeats...

‘temporary remedies’ features a poem I devised from an internet meme that offers a consolatory message. I discovered the text through a tweet of a photo of some graffiti found on the tiles of a public toilet (location unknown). The pianist reads the text slowly. Simultaneously, three musical materials unfold in a sequence (EARTH phrases, ART chords, EH echoes). Wordplay in the poem reveals contradictions.

# temporary remedies for recurring evils

## 1. recurring evils

- Speak each text: the first sentence as many times as possible, then likewise the second, then the third.
- After each word you must play a semitone dyad.
- Get louder and faster throughout. Be noisy, bold, forceful.
- Sometimes leave short gaps, e.g. if you exhaust yourself. Rest briefly. Then continue.
- Gradually, at any point, insert 1, 2, 3, then more and more Hammers (overleaf: memorise these). You may play fragments of any Hammer too.
- The unfolding improvisation should feel spontaneous, unpredictable, warped, conflicted, going somewhere, going nowhere.
- Live the text. Vent your frustration!



IF YOUR ONLY TOOL IS A HAMMER EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE A NAIL.

IF YOUR ONLY TOOL IS A HAMMER ALL PROBLEMS LOOK LIKE NAILS.

IF ALL YOU HAVE IS A HAMMER EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE A NAIL.

Think about what you have done for a moment.

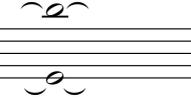
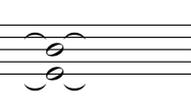
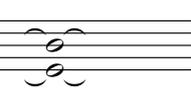
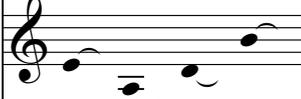
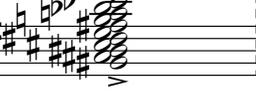
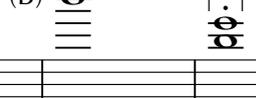
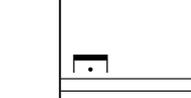
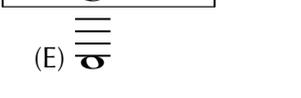
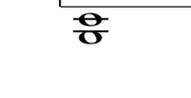
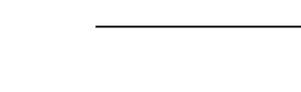
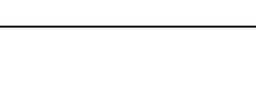
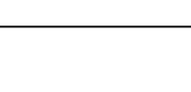
Then begin Part 2.

## 2. temporary remedies

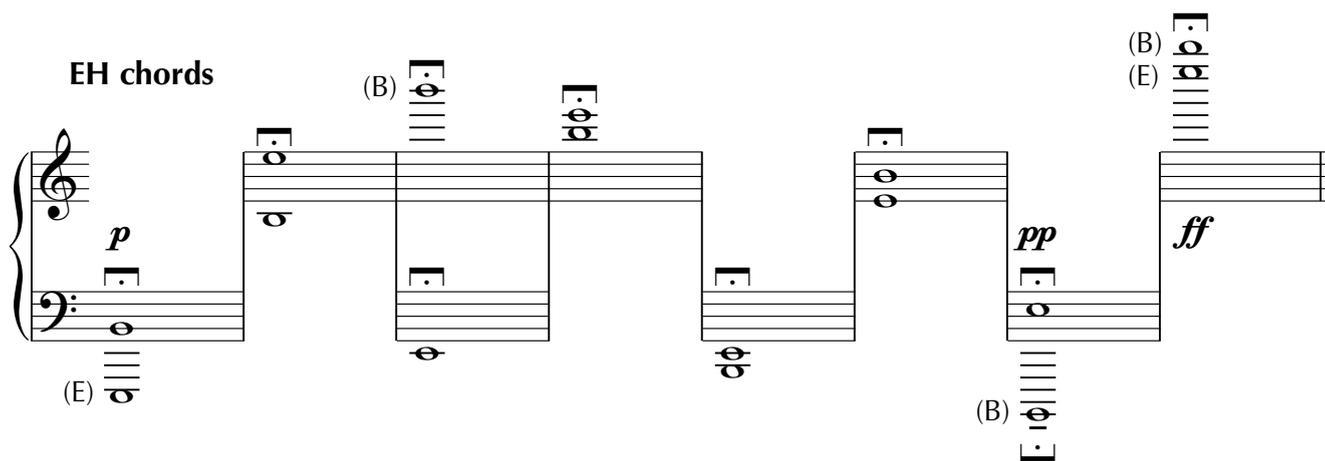
Recite the poem softly, calmly, spatioously, uncertainly, certainly. Around the words, play:

- Lines 1-4: 1 **EARTH phrase** (in any octave)
- Lines 8-11: 1 **EARTH phrase** + 1 **ART cluster** (fill in the gaps between EARTH pitches)
- Lines 9-12: 1 **EARTH phrase** + 1 **ART cluster** + 1 **EH echo** (release all pitches but E and B)
- Lines 13-17: **EH chords** (play once through as written)

Always aim to keep as many keys held down as you can.

| EARTH phrases<br><i>sempre p</i>  | ART clusters<br><i>sempre f</i>   | EH echoes<br><i>(pp)</i>  |                              |
|---|---|---|------------------------------|
| ◡ ◡ ◡ ◡   |   | ◡   | EARTH                        |
|    |    |    | EARTH without                |
|    |    |    | EARTH without ART            |
|   |   |   | EARTH without ART is         |
|  |  |  | EARTH without ART is just    |
|  |  |  | EARTH without ART is just    |
|  |  |  | EARTH without ART is just    |
|  |  |  | EARTH without ART is just EH |
|  |  |  | EARTH without ART is just EH |
|  |  |  | EARTH without                |
|  |  |  | EARTH without                |
|  |  |  | ART is just                  |
|  |  |  | ART is just                  |
|  |  |  | ART is just                  |
|  |  |  | ART is just                  |
|  |  |  | ART is just EH               |

**EH chords**



(E)  *p*

(B)  *p*

*pp*

(B)  *ff*

(B)  *ff*

(E) 

# Hammers (1): allegro (sempre c. $\text{♩} = 132$ )

*ff*  
Ped.

*ff*

*p*

*p*

*p*  
*f*

26  
*f sf sf*

*f sf sf*

28  
*p*

senza pedale

*mf*

senza pedale

### Hammers (2): gehalten

c. ♩ = 112 senza rit.

c. ♩ = 132

### Hammers (3): rapide... furieux!

(up to ♩ = 168)

(up to ♩ = 168)

(♩ = 84 or faster)

(♩ = 84 or faster)