

# THE FRAME PROBLEM

James Romig

**INSTRUMENTS:** Specific instrument choice is left to the ensemble. Each player should select a graduated trio of instruments chosen to balance—in dynamic and decay—the instrumental choices made by the other performers. Because of the non-specific instrumentation, the chosen instruments may be as large or as small as desired. For large concert performances, an ensemble of brake drums, large wood blocks, toms, and concert bass drums might be used. For smaller venues, ensembles might prefer a more portable set-up of lead pipes, small wood blocks, bongos or rototoms, and—for the bass drums—floor toms or drumset-sized bass drums. Be sure that the three high drums (in Part 3) are considerably higher in pitch than the three drums divided among the players. The composer also asks that pentatonic temple blocks and drumset-style cowbells be avoided. Take care to choose an ensemble of interesting, attractive sounds, and do not hesitate to use exotic or found instruments.

**TEMPO:** Tempo will vary depending on the volume and decay of instruments, and the resonance of the performance space. Note the slight *accelerando* from measure 181 (letter P) to the end.

**CONDUCTOR:** A conductor might be useful at first rehearsals, and may be used in performance if desired.

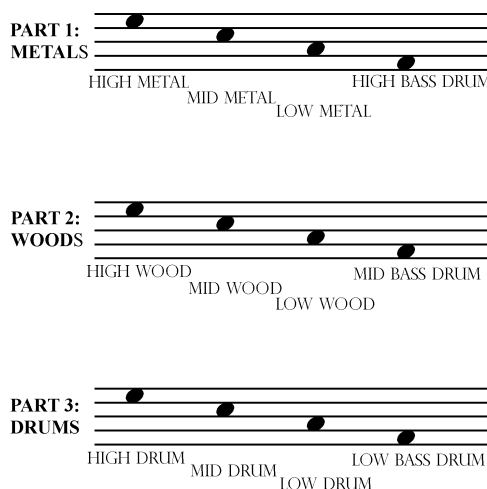
**ACCENTS:** Accented notes are to be significantly louder than surrounding notes. Note that motivic patterns are gradually “built up” during preceding measures: there should be a smooth transition between non-accented passages and accented passages (that is, the accent notation is employed only once the “inner beats” are added to the patterns). Many accented passages might be best performed utilizing “right-hand accent” sticking patterns.

**DYNAMICS:** Most dynamic indications are followed by a “crescendo” or “diminuendo” notation. Because dynamics are always in flux (motivic patterns get louder as they aggregate and get quieter as they disintegrate), it is important that a player carefully control, and emphasize, the long-range crescendos and decrescendos of motivic patterns.

**STRUCTURE:** The work is a strict circular canon, with each part starting at a different point in the cycle. Because of this, a player who has learned one part will have, in effect, learned all parts.

**PERFORMANCE VARIATION:** The work is notated entirely in four-four time, but this meter is seldom reinforced. If desired, an additional player may serve as a quarter-note “metronome,” giving four beats to start the work, continuing throughout and stopping after playing the third beat of the final measure. This “metronome” part may also be performed by a member of the trio (perhaps using a foot pedal), by the conductor, or by some sort of electronic device. The metronome part may be of any sound source or timbre. If an ensemble decides to perform the work with this variation, it should make a note of doing so in the program notes or pre-concert discussion. It might be interesting to perform the work twice: once in the standard version and once with the metronome variation.

**PROGRAM NOTE:** *The Frame Problem*, composed in 2003, was commissioned by a consortium of percussion ensembles from Iowa State University, Susquehanna University, Truman State University, University of Akron, University of Illinois, University of Northern Iowa, University of North Florida, University of Southern Mississippi, Western Illinois University, and William Patterson University. The work's instrumentation comprises multiple “trios”: each player performs on a trio of woods, metals, or small drums, while a fourth trio—of larger drums—is distributed between the three parts. The work, a strict circular canon (each part is identical, merely starting from a different point on a looped continuum), also incorporates a paradigmatic “trio of trios” into its large-scale structure: a particularly explosive and distinct section of the work occurs three times in each part (nine times, therefore, in total), functioning as a kind of “keystone.” Over the span of the work, this short section is heard twice as a solo (once in the metals; once in the small drums), twice as a duet between players (woods and small drums; woods and metals), and finally as a trio that concludes the work. The title refers to a primary difficulty in designing robots and computer programs with “artificial intelligence.” Human brains have a remarkable ability to “frame” information: in an instant, we are able to observe and organize an enormous amount of data, sorting and categorizing what is relevant and what is not. When listening to music, one of the primary hierarchical “frames” we create is that of meter. In this percussion trio, multiple distinct meters occur concurrently—in different lines, at constantly shifting dynamic levels, and in different timbral aggregations—providing human listeners with the opportunity to resolve multiple overlapping “frames” simultaneously. Robots in the audience will probably just be confused.



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