Sacred Temporal Model, Archaic Roots, and the Musical Strategies of Erik Bergman

by Julia Shpinitskaya

There is a well-known postulate by Claude Lévi-Strauss about the similarity between music and myth. One of his arguments points out their relation to time: "This relation [...] is of a rather special nature: it is as if music and mythology needed time only in order to deny it. Both, indeed, are instruments for the *obliteration of time*. [...] Music transmutes the segment devoted to listening to it into a synchronic totality, enclosed within itself. Because of the internal organization of the musical work, the act of listening to it immobilizes passing time. [...] It follows that by listening to music, and while we are listening to it, we enter into a kind of immortality."[1] After studying Erik Bergman's music, I have come to the hypothesis that the temporal schemata of myth might indeed be transmuted into musical structures. Above all, the proto-model can already be seen at work in that world music, which shares the ritual background of myth.

As a model of the world, myth produced a concept of time that functioned for ages. Speaking of the psycho-physiological reception of myth, Lévi-Strauss described its temporal process as "nonlinear." The basic contribution to the temporal phenomenology of myth was made by Mircea Eliade. He considered the model of time to be a reflection of a particular temporal experience common to mythological cultures and gave it the definition "sacred time" as opposed to "profane time."[2] The latter refers to the flow of chronological time, as perceived by modern consciousness. In contrast, sacred time lies in the realm of myth and refers to the time of the world's creation, the most relevant moment for archaic cultures. Sacred time takes the form of an immobile expanded fragment of time and thus differs markedly from profane time in its structure.

As a form of time that awaits recovery, the sacred temporal model allows for such a paradigm as reversibility, or cyclic recurrence. This means that sacred time can be re-actualized at any moment of historical time by means of recurrence, that is, by the reproduction of myth. Myth serves as an entrance to sacred time since it has a creative impetus and conveys part of the original cosmogonical energy. Accordingly, ritual puts us in contact with sacred time. That is why the ontological basis of

ritual has no room for the temporal and spatial properties of profane time.

Erik Bergman, the key figure of contemporary Finnish culture (b. 1911), is a composer with an intercultural identity. He has acquired multicultural competence by mastering a wide variety of cultural practices. He appears in music as an inveterate traveler, collector, connoisseur, and researcher of archaic world cultures. His activities, to mention only a few, have included attendance at a Koran school in Morocco, the Institute of Islamic Music in Cairo (to study the phenomenon of *macomb*), Jewish synagogues (to study the forms and functions of Hebrew music), Buddhist Tibetan monasteries in Nepal, and temples in Sri Lanka (to study cultic music).

One finds Bergman situated within the cultural spaces he has studied and experienced, as a mediator between European and non-European cultures. His music is a combination of European and non-European compositional techniques. He has written about fifty compositions reflecting archaic cultures and their mixtures: his works are based on Egyptian, Tibetan, Turkish, Arabic, Jewish, Latin, Arctic, American, Australian, African, and other sources that share their mytho-religious and ritualistic context.

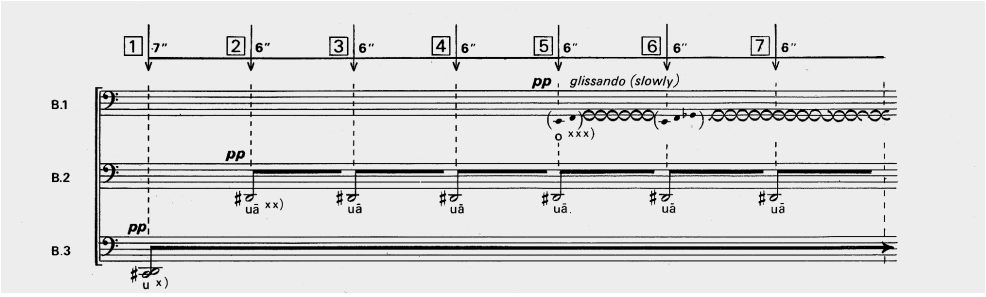
I have identified a number of Bergman's musical strategies that regulate the structure of a composition. These strategies include:

– Different kinds of *static states and open forms*, which represent time as *an immobile extended structure*.
– Moments of *entering and leaving mythological time*, noteworthy for a strategy which I call *retardation*.
– The *reversible structural proto-model*, which may have originated in archaic ritual music as a reflection of the proper experience of time.

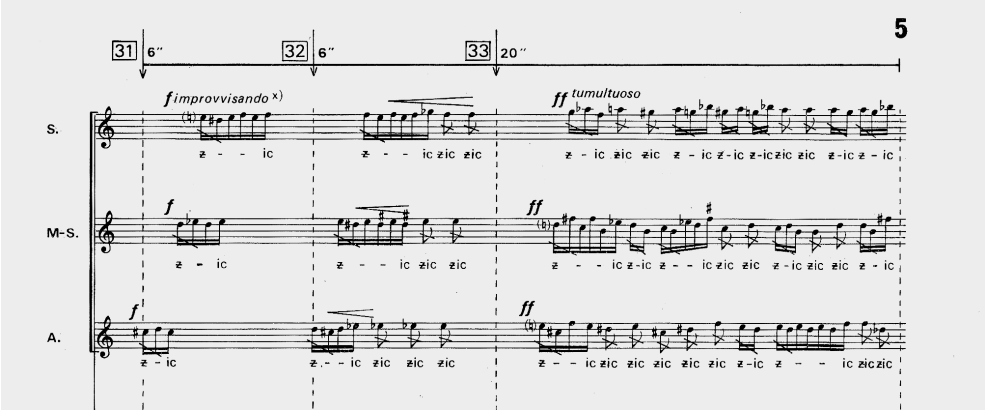
Retardation strategies are the icons of the sacred temporal process. They are slowing down musical events, what may appear at key junctures of a form, especially the beginning, the end, and the golden section (the climax). This strategy often takes the form of bars in a different measuring of time from the rest of the score.

Thus, retardation is the basic strategy in Part I of *Lapponia*.[3] This piece is constructed with one of Bergman's original devices: chronometric notation, in which time is measured off in seconds. Adjoining bars may differ greatly in duration. The least duration is three to five seconds, but at points of culmination or at moments of particular states, where time is retarded or reaches a standstill, a bar may be stretched up to thirty seconds or more.

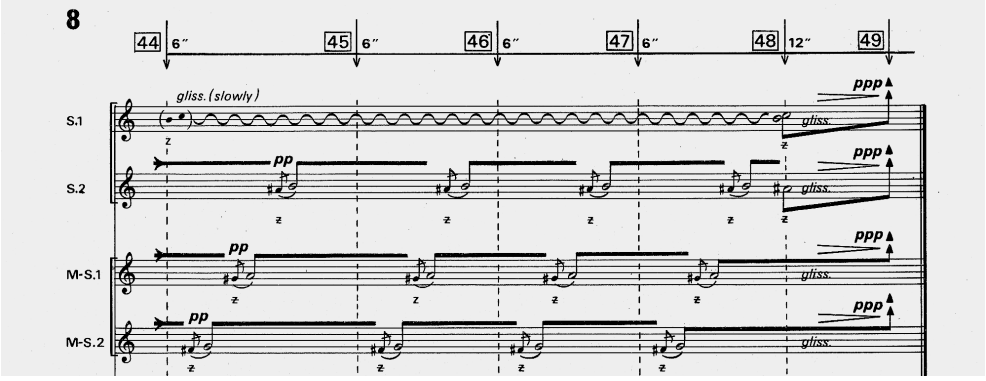
In Part I of *Lapponia*, all bars have the same six-second duration except for three: the first bar (seven seconds), the last bar (twelve seconds), and the bar at the golden section, which at twenty seconds is the longest of all *(Example 1)*. The first and the last bars serve to enter and leave mythological time, the moment of world creation. The same may be said of the golden section: it points to the presence of sacred time.



1a) Beginning.

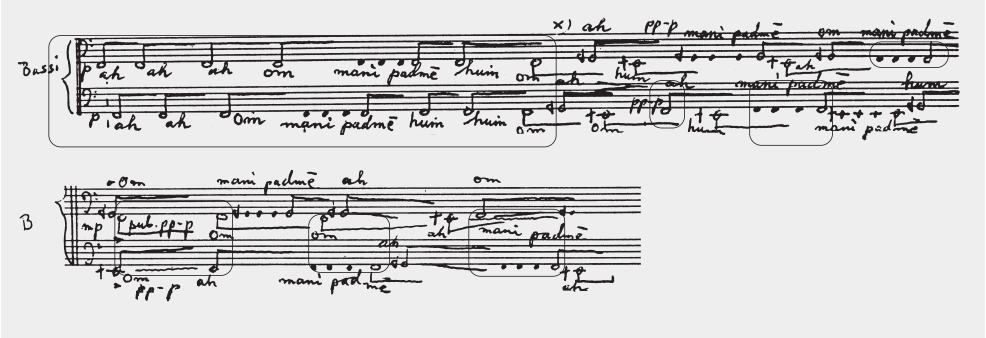


1b) Golden section.



1c) End.

Example 1: Erik Bergman, *Lapponia* for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and mixed a cappella chorus, op. 76 (1975). Examples for retardation strategy in movement I (Study score, Helsinki: Suomalaisen musiikin julkistamisseura ry, 1976; EB 1).

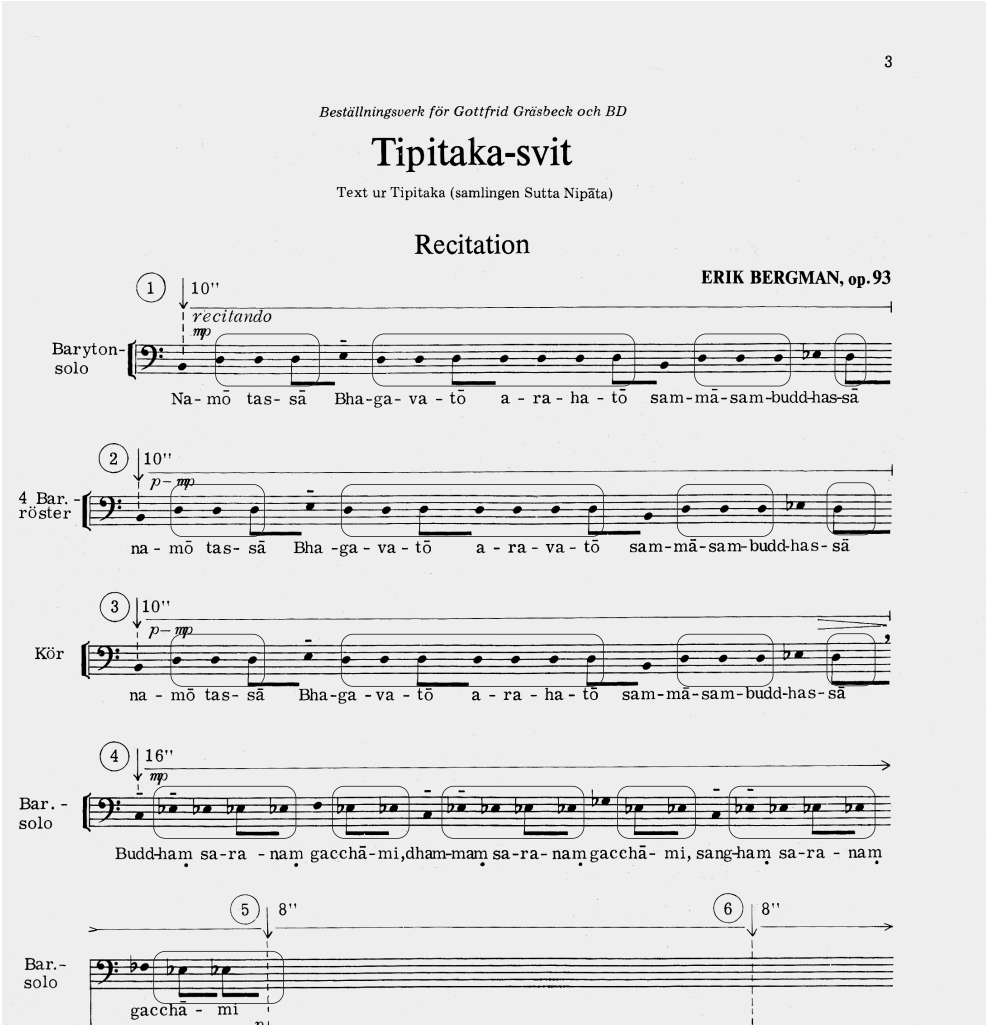


Example 2: Erik Bergman, *Bardo Thödol* for speaker, mezzo-soprano, baritone, mixed chorus, and orchestra, op. 74 (1974). The proto-model appears as recurrence to the fundmental tone (marked in the excerpt) (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Musiikin Tiedotuskeskus, [s.d.]).

The retardation strategy is often encountered in Bergman's music. It can be found in his largest work and only opera, *Det Sjungande Trädet*,[4] one of the most significant manifestations of his artistic creed. Prologue, Epilogue, and the culminating fourth scene of Act 2 are the longest scenes of the opera (ten to sixteen minutes as opposed to three to five minutes for the other scenes). Here the strategy reflects entering and leaving mythological time in *Lapponia*. And the golden section is stretched in much the same way. The frame structure also gives the opera a cyclic effect akin to reversibility.

The concept of *cyclic reversibility* can assume a wide range of forms, including frame structure, the principle of concentricity, symmetry, circularity, and many others. The obvious mark of recurrence or reversibility is repetition. When a situation, musical idea, or compositional element is repeated once, it tends to suggest that the cycle has been passed and completed. However, the most exciting idea of reversibility is the cycle as eternal return, represented in the models with multiple repetitions, which preserve a sense of a never-ending process. This may occur as a principle to form melodic linear patterns. Let us observe how the proto-model functions.

The most obvious form of the proto-model is reflected in diagrammatic notation, since its geometrical patterns combine repetition and regularity. This form of notation makes it possible both to create a sacred temporal model and to control the entire temporal process, as we have already seen in connection with the retardation strategy. Diagrammatic notation indicates changes of articulation and measure of temporal processes, the regular return of identical elements. In *Lapponia*, these elements take the form of a straight line and many possible patterns of a wave. Being regular, they represent a continuously reiterated formula and introduce the quintessence of ornamental art: regular repetition, which can theoretically proceed ad infinitum.



Example 3: Erik Bergman, *Tipitaka-Svit* for baritone and male chorus, op. 93 (1980). Proto-model in movement I, referring to the sacral temporal structure of the archaic source (Study Score, Helsinki: Fazer, 1980; F. M. 06445-1).

The Tibetan scores, *Bardo Thödol* and *Tipitaka-Suite*[5] *(Examples 2* and *3)*, introduce the proto-model and can easily be traced back to an archaic origin. The choral parts of *Bardo* refer to the representation of genuine cultic singing. It reflects a specific manner of Tibetan recitation: a low vocal register, freely improvised rhythm, and a very narrow ambitus that encompasses the fundamental tone and its neighboring microtonal inflections. This kind of recitation, which sounds more like muttering than singing, lies at the outer limit of the human ability to perceive acoustical phenomena.

The fragments from the scores show deviations of the tone from its norm within the limits of the neighboring microtonal space. For the choral fragment of *Bardo*, it organically implies a lack of pitch convergence among the voices within the same vocal line. The rhythm is not firmly notated and may be improvised in performance. The basic structure of the music is the inevitable recurrence to the fundamental: its repetitions alternate with passages of micro-deviations and stratifications. Thus, all the motion is concentrated on the single sound or, to be more exact, *around* the single sound; the pattern reflects the structure of sacred time.

This sacred temporal model, derived from archaic origins, can be viewed as paradigmatic of Bergman's music. Recognition of temporal data is essential in the study of this music, since it helps to separate the changes of temporal articulation and the modelling of other temporal constructions which acts on different levels of the composition. The model coordinates the archetypes of the Collective Unconscious and induces a certain psychological feedback in the sense that it enables personal temporal experience other than that of chronological time. Ultimately, the model can be viewed as a factor that relates Bergman's music to its ritual background. Descended from the context of myth, ritual music introduces myth's temporal codes. They argue in favor of the resemblance between the narrative structures of music and myth. If ritual is a strategy for the return of sacred time, which recreates the context of the world's creation, music is a tool for overcoming time.

[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology,* vol. 1 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 15–16.
[2] Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).
[3] *Lapponia* for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and mixed a cappella chorus, op. 76 (1975). This choral but wordless four-movement cycle was inspired by the traditions of the Lapps, one of the ancient Arctic ethnic groups.
[4] *Det Sjungande Trädet* (The Singing Tree), op. 110 (1986–88).
[5] *Bardo Thödol* for speaker, mezzo-soprano, baritone, mixed chorus, and orchestra, op. 74 (1974), on a text from the Tibetan Book of the Dead; *Tipitaka Suite*, op. 93 (1980), for baritone and male chorus, on a text from the Buddhist canonical collection *Sutta Nipáta*.