

CROSSINGS

*for
percussion quartet*

David McMullin

*Crossings was originally composed in 2001
during a residency at the Aaron Copland House in Cortlandt, NY,
as a recipient of the Aaron Copland Award,
then revised in 2010.*

*duration 8 minutes
or open*

Instruments

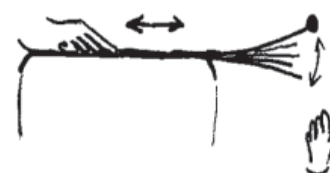
- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>Player 1: bongos
high hat
cowbell (low pitch)
ride cymbal
crash cymbal</p> | <p>Player 2: 2 congas (medium and low)
small Chinese opera gong, with ascending pitch.</p> |
| <p>Player 3: djembe (tuned higher than the congas, but with a lower bass sound if possible)
medium Chinese opera gong, with descending pitch.</p> | |
| <p>Player 4: surdo*
crash cymbal
cowbell
güiro
triangle
very low pitched gong</p> | <p>* A surdo is Brazilian bass drum used in samba. If no surdo is available, use a very large tom-tom tuned unusually low. The desired sound should boom like a concert bass drum, but with a more focused pitch.</p> |

Notation

bongos:	
high hat:	
cowbell:	<p>(two pitches on same bell)</p>
ride cymbal:	
congas & djembe:	

The tap is a light stroke with the fingers, either in the center of the drum head, in combination with bass tones in the same hand, or near the edge, in combination with open tones or slaps. You should use whichever hand pattern you find most convenient in a given context; the sound is about the same in both locations. These are unaccented place-keepers – they stay in the background, but help to drive the rhythm and lock everything else together. The same note-head with an accent indicates a dampened tone (“damp” above). This is an important foreground articulation, sharing some of the pitch of the open tone and some of the emphasis of the slap. It can only be played in the position of the open tone, near the edge of the drum head. Be careful not to confuse this stroke with the unaccented tap.

The “twang” sound on the conga is produced by drawing a vibrating mallet across the head of the drum, as shown at right. Curved lines above a note indicate rising or falling pitch.



surdo:

The surdo is normally played with one bass-drum beater and one free hand. Hand strokes on the drum head are notated on the line; beater strokes are notated above and below it. Ledger lines indicate strokes on the rim (above the line) or on the side of the drum (below). Hand strokes on the surdo should be played with the palm, and are generally expected to carry less weight than beater strokes. The unaccented “muff” has the same function as the conga’s “tap.” For the “dampened” strokes, press the free hand into the drum head while striking with the beater. These should have a higher tone than the open (bass) strokes, and will be somewhat less focused in pitch. The “side” strokes are played on the wooden side of the drum, with a slap of the hand, or with the stick end of the beater, as notated above. For the “rim” stroke, strike the rim of the drum with the beater, making contact with the middle of the stick, between the soft end and the hand.

güiro: Curved lines above a note indicate a rising or falling pitch, created by scraping at different points on the stick. Even where no pitch inflection is indicated, allow the pitch to fluctuate naturally; do not attempt to get an even “classical” tone from the güiro.

Durations

All instruments should be allowed to ring for the full duration of their sound, unless a dampening action is specifically called for (with a “+” symbol), regardless of a note’s written value.

Instructions for performance

There are two ways to play this piece. In the “tight” version, the durations of each section are fixed according to the indicated number of repeats, to take advantage of various built-in proportional structures and symmetries. In the “open” version, you may improvise more freely in each groove section, repeating *ad libitum* until you decide to move on. The duration of the “tight” version is about eight minutes.

The groove sections consist of basic rhythmic patterns designed to provide a framework for collective improvisation. In each groove, the players are assigned varying degrees of improvisational freedom, with one performer designated as the leader. In each case, however, listen closely and respond to each other; these should be conversations with a principal voice, rather than solos with accompaniment, at least in the “tight” version. In the “open” version, there is room for solos if the performers are so inclined.

Groove I: a six-bar pattern in changing meter, played four times, at ♩ = 144 (mm.43-66).

Player 2 (congas) leads, and may improvise freely, using one drum stick and one free hand. Use the rims and sides of the drums well as the heads, and try to find as much timbral variety as you can. (A *tremolo* of the stick between the two drums’ sides is a good effect here.) Leave lots of space at first, but gradually become more active. This groove should not become too aggressive, though – there will be plenty of that later.

Players 1 (high hat) and 3 (djembe) provide an eighth-note pulse with a unison rhythm at first. In the 4/4 measures, “fill” to set up the next downbeat, then converge again for at least the first two or three beats of the odd-metered bars. This oscillating pattern of separating and coming back together gives this section its character. As the groove goes on, you can get farther and farther away from the written patterns, but still come together for beat one of each 11/8 and 7/8 bar. The greatest tension should be in the last bar or two of the phrase, to set up the repeat.

Player 4 plays güiro the first two times through and cowbell the last two times. These are “timeline” parts that should be played pretty straight, without much alteration.

Groove II: a four-bar (2x2) phrase in 11/8, played four times at $\text{♩} = 136 / \text{♩} = 204$ (mm.103-118); four more times, after a tempo-modulating bridge, at $\text{♩} = 165 / \text{♩} = 247$ (mm.126-141).

Player 4 (surdo) leads, and has the most freedom to improvise, but has a given pattern to fall back on. You are free to vary the pattern, to get away from it for as long as you like, and come back into it according to your instincts. When playing close to the groove pattern, the circled notes are the ones that are most essential and should be varied the least.

Player 3 (djembe) plays in dialogue with the surdo and congas, and is free to jump in and out of the given pattern, but must hit the open slap on the downbeat of every other bar, and should try to hit the accented bass tone of the pattern more often than not.

Player 2 (congas) should generally stay closer to the given pattern, but may break from it from time to time, in response to the other players or in anticipation of the start of a new phrase. Again the circled notes are structurally the most important.

Player 1 has the timeline part, and should stay close to the written rhythms. In the “tight” version, the part should be played strictly, on the sides of the bongos only. Start with an even, undifferentiated pattern of accentuation, then, by introducing accents to the pattern, you can change the feel of the whole groove. In the “open” version, you can play a bit more freely once the groove is established, and you can shift the written rhythms from one instrument to another. You can also separate the upper and lower lines of the pattern onto different instruments, or play the upper or lower pattern by itself.

The last time through the four-bar phrase (m.115), Player 1 prepares the tempo change by accenting the five-stroke upper timeline pattern, then transforming it into an even five against the bar, played on the cowbell in the last two bars to cue the tempo change for the rest of the ensemble.

Each player’s pattern is notated according to the subdivisions of the bar that seem most natural to that part. But each part, and the resulting composite, can be subdivided any number of ways. The ambiguity and contrast between these possible patterns of subdivision is what should make this section interesting. Try hearing it different ways and see what works best. As long as each player can find beat one, and everything else hangs together, it doesn’t really matter which notes are upbeats, which are downbeats, or to whom.

Groove III: a four-bar (2x2) phrase unit in 4/4, played for 64 bars at $\text{♩} = 144$, from mm.213-276: 4 x [(4+4) + (4+4)], including 4 bars before and 8 bars after the bracketed repeat.

This is the last section of the piece, which, having come through all the asymmetrical meters and tricky tempo modulations, should have the feeling of breaking free, flying home in a comfortable 4/4.

Player 3 (djembe) leads. Hit the open slap on the downbeat of every other bar when in the groove pattern, and do anything you like when creating tension outside the pattern.

Player 1 (bongos) is also quite free, but is responsible for keeping the eighth-note pulse present in the texture whenever the congas and surdo are playing the triplet variants of their patterns. Hit the circled downbeat accent more often than not, but listen to what the djembe is doing – it is not necessary for both players to hit all the downbeats all the time, so when one is out on a limb, the other can anchor the groove pattern, and vice versa.

Players 2 (congas) and 4 (surdo) should keep their circled structural notes in the texture most of the time, but may alter everything around them. Use the triplet variants of these patterns to create polymetric tension. Both players may switch back and forth between the two alternative patterns at will, either together or separately. I do not recommend trying to count all the tiny subdivisions of the beat when playing the triplet-variant groove patterns. Instead, learn the quasi-6/8 pattern of strokes until your hands can play it automatically, then mentally step back and listen to place the open tone on beat four of the groove.

Tempos

If necessary, the written tempos may be modified within reason. However, although the exact metronome markings are not sacred, the tempo proportions are essential to the structure of the piece – if you choose to adjust the tempo of one section, you should adjust all the other tempos by the same proportion. Groove III should be twice as fast as Groove I, and four times as fast as the introduction, with all the intermediate proportions preserved. Groove III, at whatever speed, must at least seem to be very fast or it will not have the desired liberating effect. If you slow it down too much, it may sound alright by itself, but it won't fulfill its formal function – it has to be ecstatic in order to be credible as the destination of the whole piece.

Program Note

Crossings, for percussion quartet, attempts to balance the freedom of collective improvisation within a strictly controlled compositional structure. It consists of three groove sections and a series of transitional episodes, in which the tempo increases incrementally by various metric modulations. There are two ways to play the piece. In the “tight” version, the durations of each section are specified, to take advantage of various built-in proportional structures and symmetries. In the “open” version, the players improvise in each groove until they decide to move on.

The title, “Crossings,” has several connotations. At a technical level, it suggests cross-rhythms and the tempo modulations where the music crosses from one tempo-stream to another. It also implies a journey, such as an ocean crossing, or an encounter, as in “crossing paths.” In the sacred music of the Regla de Ocha (“Santería”) religion of Cuba, which inspired my original conception of the piece, an ensemble of drummers opens each ceremony by playing “the paths” of the spirits. Each deity is addressed in succession, invited with his or her individual “path” or groove. The first invoked is always Eleguá, the spirit of the crossroads – the intersection of the divine and the physical, which is mediated by music. I am not a Regla de Ocha practitioner, however, but a Christian, and the sign of Christ is of course the cross.

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Crossings

David McMullin

$\text{♩} = 144$

bongos with sticks

Percussion 1 ff

congas

Percussion 2 ff

djembe

Percussion 3 ff

surdo

Percussion 4 ff

5

high hat

crash cym.

cowbell

gong

gong

cymbal

$\text{♩} = 72$

9

brushes scraped on bongos

cym. with stick

twang (draw vibrating mallet across drum head, creating rising/falling pitch)

gong

güiro

(rising/falling pitch)

(cym.)

pp *crescendo poco a poco...* *p* **sff*

* Unison cymbal crashes such as these should be shockingly loud, and should sound completely out of place at this point. (A context for them will gradually emerge as they occur with increasing frequency, converging toward m.213.)

16 brushes (↔) 3 *Improvise skittery gestures with brushes; leave plenty of space.*

pp *crescendo poco a poco...*

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

sticks on rim* of djembe *pp* *Improvise sim., irregular rhythms...* *crescendo poco a poco...* (gong)

p *crescendo poco a poco...* (gong) *p*

* Strike rim of drum with sides of sticks (do not play on the drum head).

22 *fill* bongos with hands *mp*

p *mp* sticks on rim* of conga

mp *fill* (sticks on rim of djembe)

mp *fill* triangle (gong)

27 *mp*

mp

mp

mp

♩. = ♩ = 96

irregular sputtering rhythms, starting with notated accents

31

with sticks

(cowbell)

mf *mp* *p* *p*

mf *p* *pp* *p* *mp*

(winding down from peak...)

stick on side of drum

stick on side of drum

mf *mp* *p* *pp*

cowbell (tr.)

mf *mp* *p* *p*

* "Whip" accent: strike drum head with side of stick completely flat against skin. The desired sound, especially at a louder dynamic, is like the crack of a whip.

36

(cym.)

(fingertips)

mp *mf* *f* *mf* *f*

stick on side of bongo

(gong)

mp *mf* *mf* *f*

stick on side of drum

(sticks on rim)

mf *mf* *mf*

40

mp *p* *p*

(hand)

high hat with brushes

ff *f* *mf* *mp* *p* *p*

(gong)

mp *mp* *p* *p*

mf *mp* *mp* *p*

GROOVE I - 6-bar phrase, played 4 times (24 bars)

43 $\text{♩} = 144$

43 $\text{♩} = 144$

pp
Improvise, lead...
(congas, one stick & one hand)

pp
(djembe with hands)

pp
(güiro)

mp
(gong)

crescendo poco a poco...

crescendo poco a poco...

crescendo poco a poco...

pp *crescendo poco a poco...*

47

(2nd time)

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

51

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

p *crescendo poco a poco...*

55

(3rd time)

mp *crescendo poco a poco...*

mp *crescendo poco a poco...*

cowbell

mp *crescendo poco a poco...*

59

(4th time)

mf *crescendo poco a poco...*

mf *crescendo poco a poco...*

mf *crescendo poco a poco...*

mf *crescendo poco a poco...*

63

mf *crescendo poco a poco...*

mf *crescendo poco a poco...*

mf *crescendo poco a poco...*

mf *crescendo poco a poco...*

fill

fill

ride cymbal

67 $\text{♩} = 52$

f *mf* *mp* *p* *dim. . . .*

winding down in free rhythm

f *n* *p* *dim. . . .*

winding down in free rhythm

f *n* *p*

f *p*

Improvise sparsely, in free rhythm. Use sustaining sounds, e.g. triangle, cymbal (struck or scraped), scraped gong, etc. Do not strike gong or surdo.

72

pp *sff*

(crash cym.)

pp

(djembe)

pp *p*

p *sff*

(gong) *p*

76

mp *cresc. . . .* *mf* *pp*

(ride cym.)

(hands on congas)

mp *cresc. . . .* *mf*

mp *cresc. . . .* *mf* *pp*

pp

7:6

Improvise counterpoint, using any sounds except the open surdo tone or the gong.

pp

81 $\text{♩} = 122$ (h.h.)

7:6 p mp *cresc. . . .*

7:6 p mp *cresc. . . .*

7:6 p mp *cresc. . . .*

p

87 (crash) (ride)

mf pp p mp

(gong) pp p mp

(gong) pp p mp

surdo
5:3 5:3
 mp (stick on side)

94 $\text{♩} = 204$

mp mp mp

(gong) mp

98

(h.h.) (ride cym.)

mp *mf* *mf* *mf* *mf*

GROOVE II - Play 3 times (12 bars)

(♩ = 136, ♩ = 204)

103 sticks on bongo sides

mf *mf* *mf* *mf*

crescendo poco a poco...

Lead

crescendo poco a poco...

115

(cowbell)

f *f* *f* *f*

5:11 5:11

119 $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 185$

5:11♭

5:11♭

5:11♭

5:11♭

3/4

3/4

3/4

3/4

123 $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 123$

4/4

4/4

4/4

4/4

GROOVE IIa - Play 4 times (16 bars)

(♩ = 165, ♩ = 247)

126

ff

ff

ff

Lead

ff

(cym. 2nd x only) *ff*

(cym. 2nd x only)

(gong 1st x only)

11/8

11/8

11/8

11/8

Dampen any sustaining sound.

142

ff

147

(steady rhythmic accelerando)

(crash cym.)

$\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 165$

(h.h.)

(gong)

(gong)

pp

pp

152

Place downbeats precisely, but alter the timing of other strokes, ad lib.

Change the pattern eventually into an even 7 against 6. →

crescendo poco a poco ...

p

crescendo poco a poco ...

crescendo poco a poco ...

p

crescendo poco a poco ...

158 $\overset{7:6}{\text{♩}} = 192$

bongos with hands *mf*

(gong) *mf*

mp *mf*

163

f *f* *f*

mf *f* *f*

167 $\overset{3}{\text{♩}} = 288$
(♩ = ♩)

ff *ff* *ff* *ff*

172

(h.h.)

(crash cym.)

(cowbell)

(gong)

(gong)

(cym.)

♩ = 72

176

ff *sff* *pp* *pp*

brushes

twang

one hand & one mallet

pp

pp

güiro

pp

Improvise counterpoint, very sparsely, in unmeasured rhythms.

♩ = 108 (♩ = ♩)

185

sff *pp* *p*

9/8 4/4 4/4 4/4

190 *Improvise counterpoint...* (crash cym.) $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 144$

p *mp* *sff* *mf* *mf*

mp *mp* *sff* *mf*

p *mp* *sff* *mf* **triangle** *mf*

p *mp* *sff* *mf* *mf*

195 (ride cym.) *sff*

mf *mf* *sff*

mf *mf* *sff*

mf *mf* *sff*

mf *mf* *sff* (cym.) *sff*

(h.h.)

201 $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 144$ *sff*

f *f* *sff* *f*

f *f* *sff* *f*

f *f* *sff* *f*

f *f* *sff* *f* **cowbell** *sff* *f*

(cym.)

207 (bongos)

f *ff* *f* *ff*

ff

212 $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 144$
bongos with hands

sub. pp *sub. pp* *sub. pp* *ff* *pp*

GROOVE III (basic pattern)

Play 13 times *cresc. poco a poco*: 1x **pp** < 1x **p** < 1x **mp** < 4x **mf** < 4x **f** < 2x **ff**

217

Musical score for GROOVE III (basic pattern) on page 217. The score consists of four staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a series of eighth notes and rests. The second staff is a bass clef with eighth notes and rests. The third staff is a treble clef with eighth notes and rests, labeled "Lead". The bottom staff is a bass clef with eighth notes and rests. The score is divided into four measures, each containing a sequence of notes and rests. The notes are primarily eighth notes and quarter notes, with some rests. The rests are marked with an 'x'.

GROOVE III (alternative pattern)

217

Musical score for GROOVE III (alternative pattern) on page 217. The score consists of four staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a series of eighth notes and rests. The second staff is a bass clef with eighth notes and rests, featuring triplets indicated by a '3' under the notes. The third staff is a treble clef with eighth notes and rests, labeled "Lead". The bottom staff is a bass clef with eighth notes and rests, also featuring triplets indicated by a '3' under the notes. The score is divided into four measures, each containing a sequence of notes and rests. The notes are primarily eighth notes and quarter notes, with some rests. The rests are marked with an 'x'.

269

ff

ff

ff

ff

273

(h.h.)

(crash cym.)

(cowbell)

(gong)

(gong)

(cym.)

277

Improvise in free rhythm, gradually disintegrating. . .

f ————— *ff* ————— *mf* *dim. as gong sound decays* ————— *n*

(gong)

Allow gong to resonate alone for several seconds.

(l.v. . . .)