

## Notes from composer Steven Mackey on

# Slide



Steven Mackey

I've spent most of my life immersed in two performance practices that evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One is the mixed chamber ensemble, like eighth blackbird (aka Pierrot Ensemble) and the other is the rock band. In the former case the performers sit in front of music stands and play complicated scores. To be sure we appreciate their virtuosity and much of the excitement comes from the jaw-dropping difficulty of what they do, but they are interpreting a score. They mediate between the audience and composer. In the latter case, much simpler music is played by heart. In this case there is less implied or actual separation between composer and performer and therefore between composer and audience.

The music is *about* the persona of the performer as much if not more than it is about the notes and rhythms, even if that persona is fabricated. All rock music is to some degree music theater.

*Slide* began in 2003 when I was visited with a vision of a kaleidoscopic marriage of movement, image, text, and music that moves freely within a wide range of performance paradigms. It was to be performed by musical omnivores. Musicians that can cypher a complicated polyrhythm as well as groove on a steady beat. A context where persona and performance merge. I had no idea what the piece would be about; I just had a vision for the texture of the performance.



Rinde Eckert

I left it up to my long-time friend and collaborator, Rinde Eckert, to contextualize the performance, to imagine a scenario and personae from whom this music emanates. He writes the following:

*Slide* was inspired by a psychology experiment I read about years ago:

*Show subjects out of focus slides, snap them into focus, and note the time it takes the subject to adjust his/her gaze and identify the object pictured. Next ask the subject to guess what this unreadable slide might actually depict when in focus, and note the time of the delay in*

recognition. Finally, place a confederate in the room, a shill pretending to be a second subject; repeat the process, asking the subject to guess at the out of focus image. Have the shill disagree, offering an alternative guess.

The results are as one might expect:

The slight delay in recognition in the first phase becomes exaggerated in the second and greatly exaggerated in the third - when the subject feels called to defend his/her guesses.

We have turned this experiment over and over, finding in it a cogent illustration of our all too human nature. As Renard, our principle character, states:

"So, a lifelong conservative will tend to see only the evidence that confirms his or her beliefs; a lifelong liberal will tend to see only the evidence that confirms his or her beliefs."



Renard is supposedly the psychologist who ran this experiment. We join him years later as he is reviewing the data, trying to decide what to keep or throw out. As he dives into the box of slides, reports and photographs, his own life comes into stark focus. He is faced with possible disillusionment, or disenchantment. Aye, there's the rub. For, bereft of enchantment, what is the outlook; stripped of romantic illusions what must we admit, and what is to become of us?

Renard, as a psychologist, knows to what lengths we will go to preserve our illusions, our guesses about the world and our experience. He warns us of the traps of prejudice, the comfort of the unfocused slide, the half-truth, the inchoate shape that may be imagined as a fulfillment of whatever is desired. As long as the image is nebulous, amorphous, the picture is, arguably, what we say it is."

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Renard knows these things. He has spent his life constructing and studying a measurable space between fact and fiction, real and imagined, truth and faith. Yet his own life has slid away from the objective clarity he pursued as a scientist, toward fantasy and self-delusion.

We know a few things about Renard in addition to being a psychologist: He lives in a motel room. He plays the baritone horn. He is in love with the pianist of his chamber group, but she has no idea. He was engaged a long time ago but on the day of his wedding his fiancé broke it off. Since that trauma his relationship to the world has changed.

*Slide* is a character study of Renard played by Rinde Eckert, as told by a narrator/composer/guitarist played by Steven Mackey. The musicians in Orchestra 2001 are a chamber group that Renard looks forward to rehearsing with every Thursday evening. They also serve variously as Renard's imagined subjects or other phantoms within the protagonist's curious world and psyche.

The work is more of a song cycle than a play with music or an opera. The text, images and movement all contribute to a *musical* logic, which by its nature opens more windows of possibility than it closes with answers. Rather than link events into a story, the eleven tableaux trace a poetic arc and sketch a suggestive portrait of Renard.

With the exception of the *Overture*, all the numbers have singing, but I hesitate to call them songs since they are interspersed with narration, movement, projected images, one-sided cell phone conversations, and enigmatic instrumental solos all serving to inflect the perception of the embedded song and lyric.

For example, in *She Walks As If the Moon...* Renard set out to write a love song for his pianist. His gentlemanly affectations and slightly aloof demeanor cultivated by years of science left him with a particular affinity for the poetic metaphor and stylized romance of ancient courtly love. He could never sing it to her and perhaps, subconsciously, to ensure that would never happen, he has not finished any of the consequent phrases for his lyric. It is not clear whether he doesn't know or just won't say what the moon has to do with the way she walks. In any case, those consequents either evaporate or are gently blown away by wafting strains of the inscrutable chords from *Stare*. There is a simple lute song embedded within a darker and more emotionally complex meta song.

The overture is singular in that it is not really about Renard, it just happens to be the music Renard's group is rehearsing. Although he likes that it bears a haunting similarity to Mozart's *Overture to The Marriage of Figaro*, an opera that he always identified with, due to the shenanigans that ensues from mistaken identity and faulty presumption. He admires the nimble virtuosity of their performance but can't seem to find a way in for himself and his horn and it all just seems to be happening on a different plane. He really has no business in the same room with these first-rate musicians and perhaps it is, in fact, too good to be true.

Throughout all the numbers there are musical correspondences suggested by the experiment, such as persistent juxtapositions of clarity and blurriness in a variety of guises: There are details like dispersed, murky harmonies that are brought to focus on a single pitch. There are clear, even crystalline, bell-like attacks against a hazy background texture, or gossamer gestures draped, like a scrim, over sharper music objects.

There are larger scale manifestations as well. For example, *Lonely Motel* has a polyvalent rhythmic structure. It is a complicated 5/4 when heard from one perspective a serene 4/4 from another. Once a particular interpretation takes root it takes a while for a contradictory interpretation to be convincing. Like one of those 3D posters, once you successfully blur your vision to see the 3 dimensions it is hard to imagine how you missed it, but if you blink and lose it you are lost. Heard from a distance however, without focusing on detail, it is serene and peaceful, a place where Renard can rest.

The centerpiece of *Slide*, literally and symbolically, is *Stare*. It begins with a piano part that, like an out of focus slide, is moody and inscrutable until clarified by a beat and voice leading. At first the piano chords defy comprehension as having any linear sense as a progression but as a larger metric structure is progressively put in place by accompanying instruments, it becomes comprehensible, even beautiful. In various guises this music haunts the first half of *Slide*.

By the way, I should mention that Rinde also cuts a wide swath along the continuum of performance practice I described at the beginning of this note. In addition to our collaborations in opera, oratorio and experimental music theater we recently founded a prog-rock band together called Big Farm. That shared experience has certainly had an impact on *Slide*. For example, in *On Making Ghosts Real*, the notes and rhythms of the vocal line are merely a suggestion for an attitude. There is no notational convention to convey how it is supposed to *feel* and if he were to sing it "as written" it would be wrong. Like much rock music, inhabiting the character trumps singing and in rehearsals I said, think "Big Farm." On the other hand, many of the other songs, *She Walks As If the Moon...* for example, is very precisely notated and requires a sophisticated harmonic ear. I don't want to give the impression that *Slide* is rock, but rather describe the influence of that mode of performance.

*Slide* covers a lot of ground: art song, straight up rock song, ritualistic music, and renaissance flashbacks to name a few of the occupied territories. I'm tempted to make a case for how that is another instance of a musical analogy drawn from the experiment. The experiment deals with the perception of reality obscured by our assumptions and contextual factors. So, what do we make of a tango when we have reason to expect a madrigal. While I do think such forces are at work in *Slide* I can't honestly claim that Rinde and I had to stray far from our natural tendencies in order to construct such continuities. I suspect we established the premises of *Slide* to accommodate our artistic predilections rather than the other way around.

– Steven Mackey