



# A Heretic's Prayer

Michael R. Dudley Jr.

Youth Orchestra Performance Module  
with a [Teacher Resource Guide](#)

# WHAT IS A **CONTEMPORARY** **COMPOSER?**

Let's begin by defining our terms:

What comes to mind when you hear the word “contemporary?”

Can our knowledge of music help us to figure out its meaning?

*con-tempo-rary*      we know that **tempo** means “time.”

Webster's Dictionary says it can be an **adjective** meaning “happening, existing, living, or coming into being during the same period of time,” or a **noun** meaning “a person of the same or nearly the same age as another.”

# DISCUSSION



**What is YOUR definition of a contemporary composer?**

Use this space to write your ensemble's definition  
of a contemporary composer:

# WHAT IS A **CONTEMPORARY** **COMPOSER?**

A contemporary composer is someone *living* who is *writing music today*.



Can you name any contemporary composers?

# WHAT IS A **CONTEMPORARY** **COMPOSER?**



One great example is **Michael R. Dudley Jr.**, our featured composer. We'll be learning a piece of their music titled, *A Heretic's Prayer*.

# WHAT IS A **CONTEMPORARY** **COMPOSER?**

Where are some of the places you're likely to encounter the music of a living composer? Let's hear your ideas, then click to see examples!





# THE COMPOSER of A HERETIC'S PRAYER is

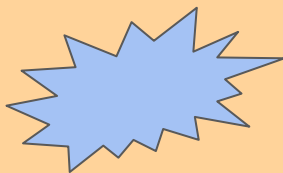
Michael R. Dudley Jr



Michael R. Dudley Jr.'s music is about community and a connection with something greater than ourselves. They grew up experiencing moments of community by playing sports, participating in clubs, and going to church.

*"We need to understand/remember how important it is to be connected to something greater than ourselves. Whenever you get chills playing or listening to music, I believe that means you're accessing a deeper place of emotional connection with yourself and others."*

# ACTIVITY



What connects us?

Michael R. Dudley Jr. is interested in small moments of connection. When we feel strongly about an activity, idea, or cause, it reveals that we're creating a deeper connection with ourselves and others.

Though these moments may be small, they can lead to big, emotional growth.

Take a moment to think about activities, ideas and causes that excite you.

What connects you to your classmates?

If you feel confident, share with the class one of the things that you are passionate about, and ask if other people feel that way too.

If you *also* feel passionate about that particular thing, raise your hand.

See how many connections you can make with the other members of your class or ensemble. **We are all more connected than we think!**



# **THE IDEA** behind the composition of **A HERETIC'S PRAYER**

Michael R. Dudley Jr. takes inspiration from the idea that two things can be seemingly at odds with one another, yet elicit very similar feelings. In their program notes, you can read about places that are important to them- bustling cities like Miami and New York City, and quiet rural places like Potsdam, New York – and how different they are, yet all feel like home.

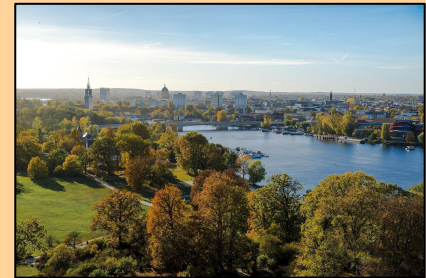
**Miami**



**New York City**



**Potsdam**



**Do you have any places in your life that are vastly different, but all feel like home?**

# THE IDEA

## behind the composition of A HERETIC'S PRAYER

In *A Heretic's Prayer*, Michael R. Dudley Jr. creates **sonic worlds that are at odds with one another** and presents them within the same piece, moving fluidly between them.

One way Michael achieves this is by creating moments of **security and stability through the use of long, sustained, prayer-like tones**. Michael Dudley is creating a sonic **home** in these moments. Then Michael will contrast these moments of **stability** with elements of **instability**.

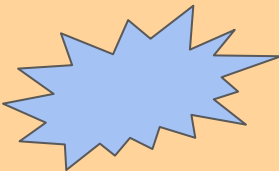


See if you can find a prayer-like tone in your part.  
Share your findings with the class.

What feelings or sensations do these long prayer-like tones bring up for you?

# ACTIVITY

part 1



## Finding Prayer in Long-Tones

**Let's start with the breath!**

Together we will breathe in through our noses for 4 counts and breathe out through our mouths for 8, beat= 60). This pattern never changes, but each time we will change how we exhale for 8. Do them in a, b, c, d order, making sure to inhale for 4 each time!

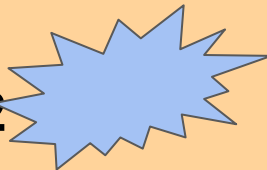
Exhale variations:

- Like you are warming up your hands on a cold day
- Like you are blowing out a candle
- With an “sss” sound
- With a “zzz” sound



# ACTIVITY

part 2



## Finding Prayer in Long-Tones

Now let's do the same breathing pattern, but this time, with our instruments. Play from the selection you chose for your **prayer-like tone on slide 12**. Don't worry if you're all playing from different places in the piece. This is part of the fun! Choose an intention for each exhale (gratitude for someone/thing, or a self-affirmation). You do not have to share these intentions, but do let them influence your playing! Listen out into the room and make your "prayerful sounds" a part of the blended whole.

Exhale variations:

- a. Exhale and softly blow air through your horn, or bow-no weight, no pitch production (strings- tip bow way over toward fingerboard to make this easier)
- b. Exhale and play a tone with a little more focus
- c. Exhale and play a tone **pp**
- d. Exhale and play a tone **p**

# REFLECT

## The World of the Long-Tone

Dudley is intentional about using long-tones to evoke a sense of stability and deep focus, which means you need to **be intentional about how and why** you play them.

Far more than just long, sustained pitches, long-tones are made of a **world of sound** containing overtones, timbre, friction, flow, frequency, movement, and, most importantly, emotion.

Whenever you play long tones in Dudley's piece, be aware of the style markings and dynamics they come from, and also how they might evolve. Listen out to every part of the ensemble and **let your ears guide how you subtly shape** the timbre, flow, and emotion of your long tones. Long tones are dynamic, living, undercurrents, so give them love!



Go back to the selection that you chose for your **long-tone** and try playing through it again. Make your own choices for your **exhale patterns** or make up your own! Try to find the music in this **intentionality** and enjoy the process!

# THE IDEA

## behind the composition of A HERETIC'S PRAYER

In the words of our composer:

*"In some ways, this piece has come to represent the sometimes-lonely path that exists between many worlds, hence the title A Heretic's Prayer."*



# WHAT does A HERETIC'S PRAYER MEAN?

## HERETIC

- A heretic is someone who goes against established beliefs or challenges traditional ideas, especially in religion.
- Heretics often ask bold questions and search for their own truths, even if it means standing apart from others.

## PRAYER

- A prayer is an act of reaching out—often to a higher power—for guidance, connection, or understanding.
- Prayer is traditionally seen as an expression of faith and devotion.

This tension—the questioning and the seeking—lies at the heart of *A Heretic's Prayer*. It's about navigating contradictions and finding meaning in the in-between.

**Why do you think Michael R. Dudley Jr. chose to title this piece "A Heretic's Prayer"?**



# ACTIVITY

## Exploring the complexity of our identities

Set a timer for 1 minute and write a list of all of the aspects of yourself that are important to your identity. Keep writing, or just keep your pen moving, even when you feel like you've run out of ideas.

When you're done, look at all of the ways in which you are a unique person!

Take note of two or three things that seemingly *don't* go together. Think about Dudley's quote on the previous page and reflect on how you navigate the pathways between the different aspects of your identity.

# Our **UNIQUENESS** makes us special

Even though these aspects of ourselves may seem in conflict, they all work together to make us a unique and beautiful person.

Like a sea salt and chocolate bar, sweet and sour sauce, or a pineapple pizza. sometimes the things that are at odds with each other might combine to make something beautiful.

Let's explore how Michael R. Dudley Jr. uses this concept in his piece *A Heretic's Prayer*



**Can you think of other examples of things that are different, but go well together?  
How do these combinations make life more interesting?**

# Turning the **THE IDEA** into **SOUND**

Being in conflict and harmony at the same time

This piece focuses on holding two conflicting worlds simultaneously and the beauty and tension that can come out of it. Take for example this violin passage at mm 30



Notice that the passage leaps in minor and major sixths, seemingly dissonant and in conflict with the meditative quality of the piece. But if we reorganize the pitches in ascending order, you'll see that it's an A major scale or an F# natural minor scale:



**REFLECTION:** Take a moment to look through your part from mm 30 - 36 - notice the ways that it may seem dissonant, but actually *feel* meditative.

# THE IDEA

## behind the composition of A HERETIC'S PRAYER

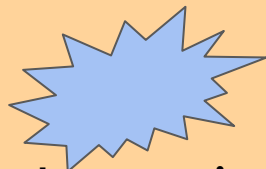
To create tension with the sustained, secure, and stable **long-tones**, our composer adds in **glissandi** to subtly disrupt the stable notes. This is a musical way of representing the beauty within conflicting parts of our identities.

### GLISSANDO

When one pitch slides into the next one, moving fluidly between the two notes. Glissandi can be between a small interval - like the whole step here, or a large interval, like this famous example from Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.



# ACTIVIT



**Y**ou use music to explore the tension between questioning (heretic) and seeking (prayer). Split the class into two groups.

1. **Group A: The Prayers**

Decide on an easy-to-play pitch, and play long-tones on your instrument in whichever octave is most comfortable for you. Focus on **steady, calm, and unwavering** sounds, like a meditative prayer. Use your breath and slow, deliberate movements to stay grounded.

2. **Group B: The Heretics**

Your goal is to **disrupt** or challenge the long tones by pulling them off-pitch or breaking their flow by playing sliding glissandi figures. Use energy and unpredictability to “question” the prayer-like tones.

3. **Set a Timer for 1 Minute:**

**Group A-** try to maintain your steady long-tones no matter what Group B does.

**Group B-** experiment with dynamics, movement, and timing to knock the other half of the class off their note!

# DISCUSSION



**Which sounds worked the best in knocking the prayers off of their long-tone?**

**Is there a musical idea that you *didn't* play that you think would be successful in disrupting the prayers?**

**Come up with one of your own – either describe it or play it.**

# LET'S PLAY

At the measure numbers below, Dudley lists these style, or expression markings. Composers choose these markings (like *furioso* or *dolce*) to convey how they would like you to play their piece. But that doesn't mean they don't need your musical input to **interpret how these styles/expressions will take shape within your ensemble's performance. Your collective voice is important in shaping your unique performance!**

Take a minute to become familiar with your part at these locations. Decide what "Longingly" means for you and how you would use your technique to create this feeling at measure 62. Do this for every marking listed below. Discuss your ideas together, see what you decide upon, and put your ideas into action!

**Longingly m.62**  
**Dramatically m. 74**  
**As if crying out m. 84**  
**Angrily, strident m.102**  
**Slower, fragile m. 110**



# LET'S PLAY

Visual art and music are closely aligned when using technique to convey meaning and feeling. Match the style marking to one of the photographs. You all might have different ideas, but that's the fun of it! Share and discuss how you came to your conclusions.

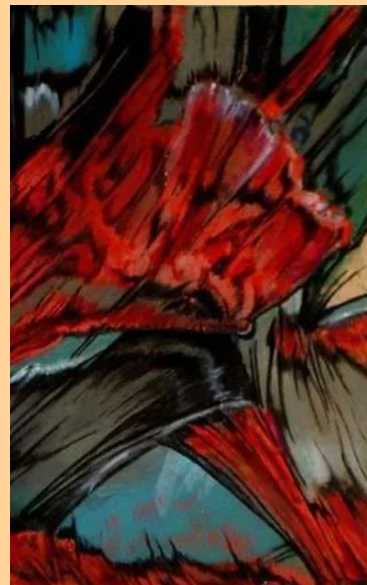
**Longingly** m.62

**Dramatically** m. 74

**As if crying out** m. 84

**Angrily, strident** m.102

**Slower, fragile** m. 110



# LET'S PLAY

Here are paintings we thought might represent Dudley's style markings.

Play the listed sections while letting the painting inspire your playing!

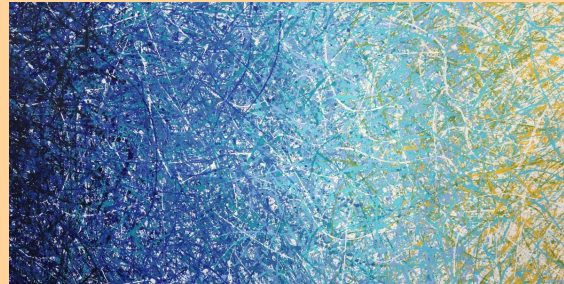
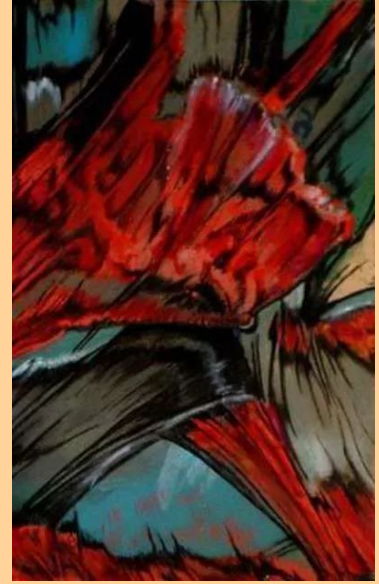




# ACTIVITY

Now take a moment to split into 5 small groups. As an ensemble, come up with a sound or musical idea that represents one of these paintings. Can the other groups guess which painting you chose?

**Reminder: use all of the instruments that are in your group!**



# LET'S PLAY

## Dynamic Gradations

*A Heretic's Prayer* explores a vast emotional landscape expressed in rhythm, tone color, and dynamics. Dudley uses tone gradations (gradual changes in dynamics, like crescendos and decrescendos) and a **huge range** of dynamic markings to help us map this landscape.



Take a few moments to identify your range of dynamics, noting in your part where the softest and loudest markings occur. With your teacher, make sure that everyone is aware of where these occur for each orchestra section.

# LET'S PLAY

## Starting with the Quietest

Sometimes we don't know the possibilities of the range of our dynamic landscape until we identify the quietest sections of our piece and calibrate from there. Let's take a look at the last 6 measures of our piece to explore this idea.

The image displays a musical score for measures 118 through 125. The score is written for four staves, likely representing different instrumental or vocal parts. The dynamics range from *mp* (mezzo-piano) to *ppp* (pianississimo). Key performance instructions include:

- Measure 118:** *mp* (mezzo-piano).
- Measure 119:** *mp* (mezzo-piano).
- Measure 120:** *pp* (pianissimo).
- Measure 121:** *pp* (pianissimo).
- Measure 122:** *pp* (pianissimo).
- Measure 123:** *pp* (pianissimo).
- Measure 124:** *ppp* (pianississimo).
- Measure 125:** *ppp* (pianississimo).

Additional performance instructions include:

- Measure 119:** *tutti* (3 + 2) *div.* (divisi).
- Measure 120:** *unis. soli* (unison soli).
- Measure 121:** *gradually fade away at discretion of conductor (minimum 2x)*.
- Measure 122:** *very soft here... (with violas)*.

# LET'S PLAY

## Starting with the Quietest



The last 6 measures are not only the conclusion of *A Heretic's Prayer*, but the arrival of the emotional journey of the piece, the players, and the audience. As you consider the world of possibilities of **piano**, **pianissimo**, and **pianississimo**, take time with your ensemble to find where your quietest, softest dynamic can be, or where you'd like it to be at the end of the piece.

- Play the last 6 measures, incorporating "Slower, fragile,"
  - Explore *soft playing* throughout this passage
- How many types of quietness can you come up with?
- Which ones do you like? Which ones does the group like?



# PUTTING IT TOGETHER

We have dived into these **concepts**:

- Connection, contrast, conflict vs. harmony, identity, in-betweenness

And into these **techniques**:

- Broadening your dynamic palette
- Bringing vibrance, energy, and direction to long tones
- Exploring musical gradients in dynamics and in feeling

Now let's incorporate what you have learned into the very opening of the piece, and **arriving with a sense of your collective journey** through measure 40! It will take a lot of energy to play with consistent, creative intention, but you can do it! **Let's see what your ensemble brings to the possibilities** within *A Heretic's Prayer*!





Thank you for taking this musical  
journey with Michael R. Dudley Jr. and  
*A Heretic's Prayer!*



# RESOURCES

# RHYTHMIC RESOURCES

Need more work around some of the the rhythmic components in A *Heretic's Prayer*? The following slides explore strategies for learning:

- 2-beat triplets
- Tied and slurred triplets
- How to use subdivision to properly place notes within their rhythmic framework.

# LET'S PLAY

## Rhythmic Features

**Using our math brain helps!** Instead of approximating tricky rhythmic passages, break them down into smaller parts!

It all starts with understanding **where the beat occurs** and how the rhythms are ***subdivided within, concurrent with, or augmented over*** the beat.


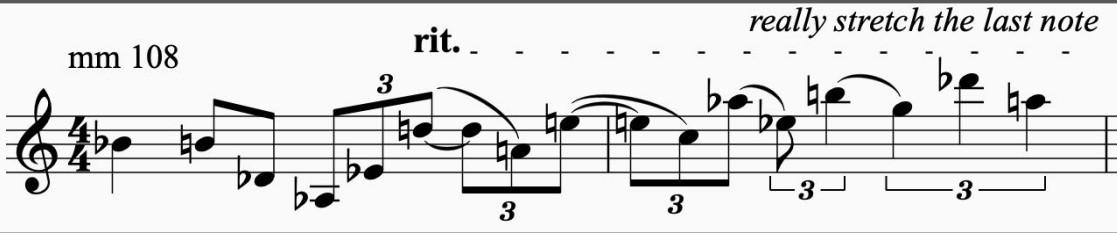
Let's take a look at **measures 108 & 109** on the following slides for an example!

# LET'S PLAY

Breaking the Rhythm Down, cont.

mm 108

rit. . . . . *really stretch the last note*



*Hint for string players:* when working out difficult rhythmic patterns, use more bow than you would actually use. Making your movements bigger helps train your brain to sense where the bow changes and finger placements occur.

# LET'S PLAY

## Breaking the Rhythm Down

Keep track of  
your beat!

### Starting with measure 108 and the first two beats of 109:

Step 1: Take out all slurs and ties, and play just the rhythm on an *open string*- like D.

- You can then play the rhythm on the open strings on which the notes occur, *without* the slurs and ties. So, it's like playing the passage, but with no fingers.
- Then, on the open strings on which the notes occur, play *with* the slurs and ties.

Step 2: Play the written rhythm and pitches still *without* the slurs and ties.

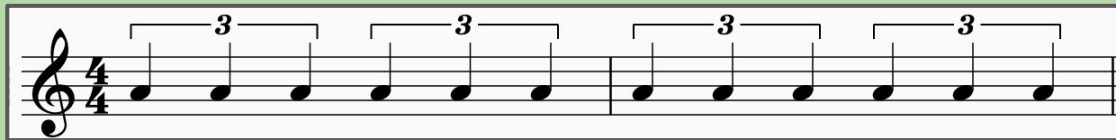
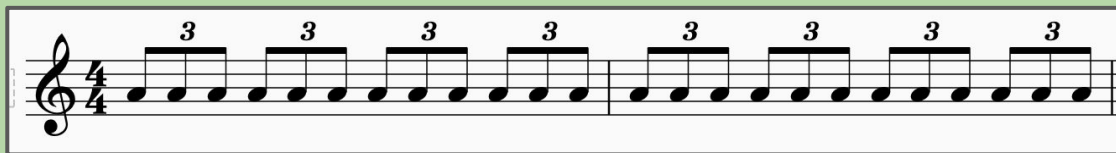
- Then play the passage as written, with the ties and slurs, once you have become comfortable with the steps above.
- Keep track of where the beat occurs, especially when tying!

# LET'S PLAY

## Rhythmic Features–triplet over two beats

A triplet over two beats is easier than it looks. Let's look at beats **3&4 of mm 109**:

- One way to think of it, in 4/4 time, is that each quarter note can be subdivided into its own triplet. Now, making sure we are using this subdivision to accurately place the larger 2-beat triplet, you'll see that it **occurs on the 1&3rd parts of the first triplet and the 2nd part of the second triplet.**



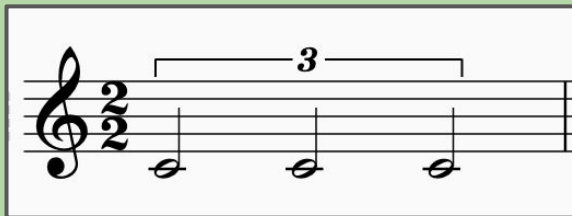


# LET'S PLAY

Again, looking at beats **3&4** of **mm 108**:

- Another way to think of it is that you are playing **one triplet evenly over the space of a half-note**. So, if your beat were a half-note, or 2/2, just play that triplet **evenly** over that length of time!

Practice this by tapping your foot on the half-note beat, then clapping it or tapping the triplet on your chest.



Listen and feel the **composite polyrhythm**, and notice exactly where your 2-beat triplet is placed within that polyrhythmic cell. This helps you embody rhythmic accuracy and helps you hear exactly where the triplet should be placed.

# LET'S PLAY pt. 3

## Rhythmic Features – triplet over two beats

**For an extra challenge**, with the other foot's heel, stomp the original 4 beats while your other foot is toe tapping on 1&3 (the half note beat). Now, chest tap or clap the triplet over two beats. Do you feel the **2 against 3 polyrhythm** happening?

- If needed, simplify this exercise by splitting your ensemble into groups to play the separate components, then trade off.



# LET'S PLAY

## The Importance of the Spaces in Between

A Heretic's Prayer also gives us the opportunity to bring **intentionality to transitions**, like the one that spans 4 measures before and 6 measures after 40. Transitions are important in-between places that tell us we are moving on in our sonic journey. But, **transitions are important in and of themselves!**

Look carefully at these measures in your part, and compare how it looks in the parts of your peers! See if you can find rhythmic, melodic, or stylistic **places in the transition that seem to come from the music before, and those that foreshadow what's to come next.** It may not be literal, but related in some way. Use your imagination! Is there anything in the transition that we are hearing for the first time in the piece?

Take some time to find all of the major transitions in *A Heretic's Prayer*. Study them separately and find all the connections! Transitions can feel like pieces unto themselves, and when you give them attention, they will **take your audience on a captivating sonic journey!**

# CREDITS

This educational module is produced by the American Composers Orchestra on behalf of and in coordination with EarShot Publishing.

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