Caprices for Mandolin Solo

Benjamin R. Fuhrman

No. 1 – 'The Flies'

I love to run. Every morning, after coffee and before I go to work, I typically put on my shoes, and go for a quick 5k on the river trail and around a local park. It's a beautiful trail and great exercise.

Or it was until June of this year, when the sheer number of deer flies transformed my daily runs into an obstacle course of dodging and swatting. And while I was frequently able to kill the pests after they had landed (and had occasionally drawn blood), there was always at least one that got away, buzzing around my head, and taunting me.

This is what I'm depicting in this Caprice.

The opening *Vivace* is a depiction of running along the trail, leading to the duo-style *Sostenuto* with its tremolo indicating the flies' buzzing, and the descending chromatic notes indicating my growing annoyance. This culminates in the *Presto*, with dissonant chords swatting the single notes in irregular patterns, leading to the final tremolo buzz away from the swarm and back into the opening run of the *Vivace*.

No. 2 – 'Mantra'

The idea for this piece actually predates the first Caprice, but as often happens, I didn't really have a good idea how to develop it, so it sat in a drawer for over a year, until I decided to make it into a solo mandolin piece. Like many other people in the US, I was taken aback by the egregious use of lethal force by police against unarmed Black men and women, beginning with the murder of Michael Brown, and sadly continuing to this day. While my views towards police prior to this can best be described as antipathy, watching so many people reflexively support them when credibly accused of outright murder (typically corroborated by body cams and cell phone videos) has only served to reinforce my views that police reform is desperately needed in this country.

So how does that relate to the title *Mantra*?

While this may seem to be an exercise in harmonics and sweep picking, in effect, it's a set of variations on an implied theme: ACAB. Shorthand for "All Cops Are Bastards," this slogan has been around since at least the 1920s in the UK, and was quickly exported to the US. It seemed an appropriate theme to use to match my feelings on the issue.

No. 3 – 'Saz'

For six years, I played I the Mediterranean Fusion band, Wisaal. Near the end of the group's time, in addition to playing mandolin, I also started to play the saz to incorporate some of the microtonal notes that form traditional Arabic and Turkish maqams into my playing. This Caprice is an unabashed love-letter to the saz, using the tuning (G-D-A) of the longneck version that I play, and incorporating a lot of the same drone and shifting work that makes the saz such a fun and instrument to play.

Appropriately, I sketched out the majority of the Caprice on a saz while watching the documentary *Saz – The Key of Trust*. What can I say, it's a truly infectious instrument!

No. 4 – '*Tombeau*'
The fourth Caprice was written as a response and memorial to a former teacher when I learned of his passing. The *Berceuse* section is pretty obviously a sentimental memorial, but the *Presto* is not. It's less a direct memorial and more a memorial of our discussion on voice leading and register shifts in the Bach *Sonatas and Partitas* and Paganini's *Caprices*, and how to interpret melodic lines that don't necessarily stay in a single octave. In essence, this is a remembrance of both the teacher, and his teachings. Appropriately, it also requires a good deal of technical fluency and practice. I suppose he'd appreciate that.

No. 5 – '*Lyre*'
This is another Caprice that began long before I actually wrote it. When I first started playing mandolin after years of violin, I had to relearn all of my right-hand technique to use a pick. One question I had, was, "why not use the fingers, like on a guitar?" Obviously, it's because you can't really get the volume that a pick affords, but this question always stayed in the back of my mind.

Then in late December 2022, I started to play with this idea of fingerstyle mandolin again. And promptly put it on the back burner as I went back to teaching. But after the semester, and some interesting conversations with students on the use of the Whole Tone scale in Ysaÿe's third Sonata, I returned to the early sketches. This revised version makes use of the Whole Tone scale, and the augmented triads that can be created from that scale.

A quick note on the notation. P, I, M, and A come from classical guitar notation and indicate which right-hand finger is used to play a note. From the Spanish, P = Pulgar (thumb), I = Indice (index finger), M = Medio (middle finger), and A = Anular (ring finger).

No. 6 – '*Bill's Waltz*'
An homage to one of my favorite Bluegrass tunes, Bill Monroe's *Lonesome Moonlight Waltz*, this Caprice adapts Monroe's melody to make use of accords, or split string fretting. Described in Tyler and Sparks' *The Early Mandolin*, the technique requires fretting across both strings in a course with one finger, and then pulling the higher course away from the lower one with another finger so that you're playing two notes on the same course. It's quite difficult at first, but can be perfected with practice. The only exception seems to be the E course, due to its position at the edge of the fretboard, which as a result is not used in this Caprice.

A flowing tremolo should be used throughout while paying close attention to the indicated courses used for each section.

No. 7 – '*CA_RS_27182*'
A final entry in the Caprices that again, was begun much earlier than the number would indicate. In February 2022, I was teaching a class in MaxMSP programming and was busy helping students learn to manipulate MIDI data in Max. This led to a discussion on displaying MIDI in Max with the Bach library, and on exporting MIDI or MusicXML data and using it in a notation editor or DAW. Over the winter

break that month, I had the time to experiment with some ideas, and quickly implemented a version of the algorithm that generates images for NFTs using a small database of component parts. As implemented, the algorithm uses a collection of musical gestures that it pairs together to form a single measure of music. Some basic pitch tracking and last-note recursion are also used to prevent sudden jumps at intervals not commonly used. And the results are interesting to say the least.

But not entirely musical.

While the algorithm is capable of creating approximately 10000 unique measures of music, it's not always interesting. So, the second step is to edit the output. Adjusting notes to fit a pitch collection, rewriting rhythms, removing rests, changing the register used, and repetition of – all were used to edit the computer's output and form it into a more coherent piece.

Rehearsal marks are used to indicate the return of the theme. I placed these where it seemed that the computer had become too focused on rests – generally a fully empty bar or a bar with only a single note in it. I only noticed afterwards that this roughly corresponds to the Golden Ratio. A nice, if unexpected touch from my binary collaborator!

The subtitle *CA_RS_27182* indicates that the piece is Computer Assisted, using Random Seed 27182 to generate the initial material.

Approximate Lengths of Each Caprice
Caprice 1 – 4:15
Caprice 2 – 3:20
Caprice 3 – 3:05
Caprice 4 – 3:30
Caprice 5 – 3:53
Caprice 6 – 4:00
Caprice 7 – 2:58