

# QOSQO: SPIRITUALITY, PROCESS AND STRUCTURE

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## ABSTRACT

Spiritual ideas and practices from the Andes have had a strong influence on the composition of *Qosqo*. The title, the Quechua word for navel, also refers to an energy vortex like the one that exists at the modern city of Cusco, Peru. This composition attempts to manifest the energetic properties of the vortex, the “qosqo,” in sound. The audience members are encouraged to engage this experience by combining a meditation with their listening. The meditation assists the listener in bringing their mental focus into alignment with the goal of spiritual healing. The process of composing *Qosqo* was conducted using divination techniques that were also employed with the goal of spiritual healing. Among the sound materials that were utilized in the composition are the songs of a Peruvian shaman-healer that shape pitch and dynamic material but which are never actually heard. The formal structure, which is a product of the divination process, appears to mirror and reinforce the content of the meditation even though no conscious attempt at coordination was attempted.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the language of the Quechua people of the Andes, “qosqo” is the word for navel. This same word was the original name for the modern city of Cusco, Peru, which once served as the center of the Inca civilization. The name of the city makes sense when one learns that it lies in the center of a spinning energetic vortex. The Inca honored this place and called it the “navel of the earth,” because spiritual energies came in and out there and fed the earth like an umbilical cord.

Establishing a city in such a location reflects a commitment to engage the spiritual world, its challenges as well as the nourishment provided by these energies. An energetic vortex does not necessarily make for a place of peace and calm. Rather, higher dimensional forms are constantly being brought into the physical, three-dimensional world and new potentials for how to live as a human being are taking shape. In order to stay in alignment with the higher dimensional realms, one learns to be ready and to let go of past habits. In order to live in the flow of the divine energies, one learns to release those aspects of ourselves that resist the flow. The challenge of achieving balance in the midst of flow is the focus of *Qosqo*.

## 2. THE QOSQO MEDITATION

The program notes accompanying *Qosqo* include a suggested meditation for the audience members to engage in while listening to the piece.

*“Visualize the center of yourself as the central axis of a vortex of energy simultaneously spinning clockwise and counterclockwise. Relax into the moving energy and release anything that resists the flow. Allow yourself to expand into the space of the sound and acknowledge your greater self.”*

The idea of combining meditation with composition first became known to me through the work of Tom Kenyon<sup>1</sup>, a psychologist and sound healer. His CD, *White Gold Alchemy* [4], combines a specific meditation with a composition designed to assist the meditation. The two are conjoined: listening and meditation have a single focus.

Generally when a composer today creates a new piece of music, he/she has limited influence on how a listener will focus their mind during the act of listening to the composition. Of course, there are certain musical settings in which one can have specific expectations about the mental focus; some have very clear expectations such as churches and techno dance clubs. In concert performance, especially in performance of recent music, one can anticipate that listeners are probably listening more analytically than in most other situations, but in all of these settings, there is a wide range of individual variation. Individual listeners have their own listening habits, habits that often have been practiced so deeply that alternative ways of listening are not likely to arise without conscious intent.

When the setting and composer’s goals are in a workable alignment, meditation provides a practical bridge between the composer’s intent and the listener’s act of alternative listening. Meditation carries with it a set of cultural associations and beliefs related to mental focus, and these associations are very powerful even for the listener who has no direct experience with meditation. For the listener who does have direct experience, a richer set of associations can be invoked. Among the associations that are likely to arise for both the experienced and inexperienced listener is the association of meditation with personal wellbeing. For many this in itself will provide a natural motivation to engage in the meditation and bring conscious intent for listening in an alternative way. For others, just contemplating the relationship of the meditation to the music will open that possibility.

But what kind of alternative listening might arise? At this first level, the meditation provides the opportunity for the release of listening habits that are out of alignment with the intent of the music, and for the reinforcement of the connection between listening and wellbeing. The *Qosqo* meditation also provides a more

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tomkenyon.com/>.

specific focus, one that is expressed in its text. The goal of the combined meditation and music is to promote the listener's process of letting go of "*anything that resists the flow.*" The piece adapts itself to the individual listener as each engages his/her own areas of resistance during the listening/meditating process. The release might be experienced as completely ineffable or find concrete focus in specific emotional or mental patterns. Whatever the focus, at this second level, the meditation combined with the listener's intent helps release patterns of resistance.

There are as many ways to compose music from a spiritual perspective as there are composers. My interest in composition as a vehicle for spiritual healing developed during my studies with Peruvian spiritual teachers and healers from within the traditional culture. My particular training is as an energetic healer and that is the experience that I bring to the compositional act. In the perception of an energetic healer, sound has a direct impact on the non-physical body (and attending to sound's influence to the non-physical body is a truly alternative way of listening). My goal is to learn to heal of the non-physical body with sound. Many healing practitioners use sound in this way and have written about it from their own experiences [1-3, 5-9].

As a healer I am taught that the client often needs to be brought to a "vibrational level" that is higher than the thing that limits them before any release can take place. ("Vibrational level" is part of a healer's metaphorical language for describing aspects of non-physical perception.) Much new age music brings the listener into a place of relaxation and wellbeing (that has the possibility of raising the vibrational level) and from which healing could be initiated. But it takes an act of intent on the listener's part to move to that next stage of healing. (Tom Kenyon's *White Gold Alchemy* with its meditation provides guidance for that next step.) At this third level, the *Qosqo* meditation/listening process offers listeners the opportunity to raise their vibrational level. This happens through direct influence of the non-physical body and through the opportunity to release attachment to outcomes. These both encourage a deeper alignment with divine flow.

### 3. DIVINATION AS A COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

There is no conventional compositional system for *Qosqo*. Every aspect of the piece was determined using divination techniques. The easiest of these techniques to describe is the use of a crystal pendulum held suspended in the air. As the pendulum wobbles and spins, the direction of the spin provides an answer, "yes" or "no," to the question held in the mind of the person holding the pendulum---clockwise for "yes" and counterclockwise for "no." In my case, I suspend the pendulum above a collection of sacred objects, a "mesa" in the tradition of Andean shamanism.

Divination is traditionally used to make decisions in alignment with the highest good of an individual. I have

used it to make decisions in alignment with the spiritual potential of the composition. The divination technique can easily be used to answer compositional questions that be can determined with a "yes" or a "no." Determining control parameters or timing information is a bit more complicated. In that case, one has to ask a sequence of yes-no questions like the following:

Does the parameter have two or more digits? *Yes.*  
Does the parameter have three or more digits? *No.*  
Does the parameter have two digits? *Yes.*

Is the first digit greater than one? *Yes.*  
Greater than two? *Yes.*  
Greater than three? *Yes.*  
Greater than four? *No.*  
Is the first digit four? *Yes.*  
Is the second digit greater than zero? *Yes.*  
Greater than one? *Yes.*  
Greater than two? *No.*  
Is the parameter value 42? *Yes.*

I structure the questions in this way in order to produce mostly "yes" answers. The reason is that "no" answers feel resistant and uncomfortable and it is much easier to be experiencing "yes," especially when one is asking lots of questions. Practitioners of divination might explain this by saying that the state of making true statements is in alignment with divine truth and one can feel the harmony. The no-statements are out of alignment and one can feel the disharmony. There is every reason to believe that all human beings can experience these subtle shifts of being in or out of alignment with divine truth in everyday life. These shifts are gently guiding us toward living in alignment.

Of course, one can imagine that determining every parameter of a composition by a process like that described above can be very time consuming. After a while it becomes much easier to think the question and to feel the answer. At least for me, in order to receive the yes-no information accurately I have to be in a trance-like state in which I release other kinds of thoughts and I focus entirely on the feel of the answers. I have to release any judgments about the results, any judgments about what are good answers or bad answers, any judgments about where the results are leading, and any judgments about which answers are more or less acceptable to other people. I have to be dedicated to accepting what comes through no matter what it is. Eventually through practice, entire parameter values or strings of numbers simply come to mind.

This approach to compositional decision might seem similar to the chance systems used by John Cage. One of the ways those systems are typically understood is as a method that defeats conventional judgment. In that way my practice is similar to Cage. Another typical way of understanding Cage is that conventional judgment is defeated by randomness. The way I understand my practice is that it is convergent: I am attempting to

uncover the right value for each instance, not a random one.

In the case of *Qosqo*, every parameter value was set by divination. During the final assembly of the piece, there were a number of instances when I questioned the information that had been previously given to me. In some cases the divination held firm with the original answers and in other cases it provided alternative possibilities. It appears that not every parameter had to converge on a specific value, but that there were some alternative paths for the realization.

## 4. REALIZED SOUND STRUCTURE

### 4.1 Sound Sources

The sound sources heard in *Qosqo* include 1) pure synthesis, 2) synthesis that appropriates data from prerecorded sounds, and 3) prerecorded sounds. The last category is made up only of select tones from a Native American flute and the sound of a Condor feather. The Condor feather is a common tool of Andean healers and can be used to remove foreign energies from a person seeking healing.

Except for the flute and the feather, all sounds share the common thread of exploring the particle nature of sound in one way or another. The particle-based sound sources are generally either rhythmic or grouped into sustained clusters. All of the rhythmic sources derive their pitch material from prerecorded sound. Throughout the entire length of *Qosqo*, three song excerpts from a Peruvian shaman-healer are being looped. These songs are never directly heard during the piece, but rather their pitch and amplitude data are sampled and utilized by the rhythmic instruments. These instruments read the streams of data, latch the instantaneous values and sustain them. A dense sequence of note events might provide a recognizable approximation of one of the original melodies, but this never quite emerges during the piece, especially because there are always at least two simultaneous instruments each accessing the pitch material from a different melody. The rhythmic sense of these sound sources also derives from tracks of sound that are never directly heard. Throughout *Qosqo*, two tracks of rapid downward-glissando chirp particles are slowly speeding up or slowing down averaging around 16 per second. These chirps are accessed by the rhythmic sound sources and act as excitation functions for various kinds of filtering. Just as one never entirely hears the melodies, one never entirely hears the chirp particles.

Among the sustained sound sources are two that also utilize looping prerecorded sound. The sounds are recordings of flowing water that were recorded at Mt. Shasta, California, and which reminded me of the water running in the mountains of Peru. They are used as acoustic input to banks of resonant filters (single filters and formlets). The amplitude envelopes of the individual filters are exaggerated to create particle-like envelopes for the resultant sound that are driven by the water recordings themselves. The Q of the filters is

occasionally low enough for the sound of the water recordings to be heard directly. The other sustained sound sources are extended clusters made up of rapid particle-note sequences. These sequences are based on probabilistic frequency trajectories of varying length with 20 to 40 instances unfolding simultaneously. All of the sustained sounds, water resonances and note sequences, are created as acoustic analogs representing specific levels of higher dimensional reality. They range from the 4th dimension to the 9th, the higher dimensions that are generally thought to be accessible to human beings.

### 4.2 Pitch Structure

The pitch material for *Qosqo* is a rich microtonal mesh with many emergent levels of tonal relationships. The shaman's songs that provide pitch content for the rhythmic instruments are entirely pentatonic, so microtonality and pentatonicism are present concurrently.

There are three primary pitches that are embodied in the sustained note-sequences. These are:

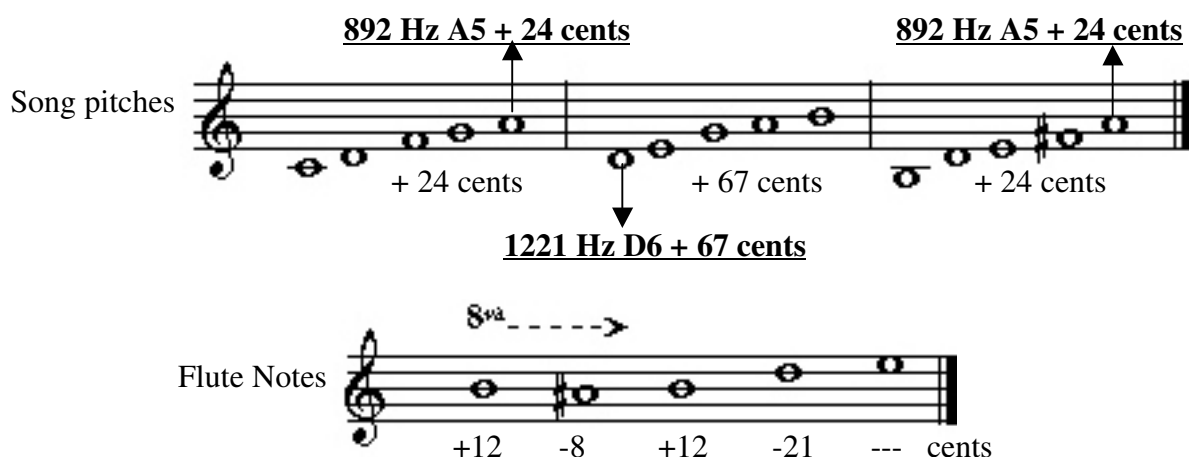
721 Hz: F#5 + 55 cents  
892 Hz: A5 + 24 cents  
1221 Hz: D6 + 67 cents

892 Hz and 1221 Hz are used as pivot frequencies for transpositions of the pentatonic scales (Figure 1). The first and third pentatonic scales have different pitches and are each shifted up 24 cents so that their As are in tune with 892 Hz. The second pentatonic is shifted up 64 cents so that its D is in tune with 1221 Hz. The end result is that the pentatonic scales provide contrasting pitch collections that are tuned approximately a quartertone apart.

There are many other microtonal frequencies that emerge spontaneously during the pitch tracking of the melodies. The pitch data is tracked with a short lag time such that the rhythmic instruments are regularly missing the song's pitches and picking up transitional frequencies. So while the pitch structure provides many opportunities for hearing relationships of similarity, the overall impression is much more of relationships that continue to be in an emerging state and shun stability.

### 4.3 Formal Design

Like every other aspect of *Qosqo*, the entire pitch structure and formal design were determined through divination. The formal structure unfolds in two overlays: 1) as overlapping periods during which the rhythmic instruments sample the songs and 2) as overlapping periods in which the sustained sounds representing the higher dimensions of reality occur. Within the structure that emerged during the divination process one can read a coherent plan. A huge wave of the sustained sounds representing all of the higher dimensions arrive together approximately at



**Figure 1.** Pitches relationships among the pentatonic songs and the pitches of the flute.

1' 26" into the piece. After that the rhythmic instruments and the subsequent sustained sounds appear to form smaller and smaller waves leading toward the end. The shape of the piece as a whole is similar to a damped sinusoid. During this unfolding, the rhythmic intensity lessens. The entire structure could be viewed as a reflection of the meditation's text: the encounter with the convergence of energy from the higher dimensions produces an initial stress that is gradually released as the components slowly release their resistance and move into greater alignment.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Despite the apparent clarity with which I can look back and examine the components and the structure of *Qosqo*, I am mostly left wondering how these elements were able to assemble themselves into clear structure without my conscious direction. This may not be an unusual experience for composers who work from a place of great intuition and my compositional process could well be viewed as a kind of formalized intuition. But the emergence of coherent design from a collection of divined details leaves me in a place from which I can only acknowledge the mystery. And while I am not an Andean man nor can I ever be assimilated into the indigenous spiritual culture of the Andes, I am deeply reshaped by my encounters with my Andean teachers and can strive to express the world-view and the world-feeling that has emerged in me in response to this cross-cultural embrace.

## 6. REFERENCES

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