

for/against

an improvisation framework for three or more musicians

Colin G. Johnson

Programme Note

for/against is an improvisation framework for a group of musicians. One of them plays the solo part from a concerto-like piece of music. The remaining musicians are divided into two groups, which improvise material. One of these, the *for* group, plays material that is supportive of the soloist's performance, e.g. by providing accompaniment, filling in gaps, imitating and echoing the solo part. The other group, the *against* group, plays material that is contrasting with the solo part, e.g. by playing material in a very different style, parodying the solo part or playing in a very contrasting dynamic.

Biography

Colin Johnson is active in composition and improvisation. He is particularly interested in pieces that have explored structured frameworks in which human musicians work with a mixture of technology, composed material, random choices, theatrical miniatures, found texts from internet searches, and improvised material. He is particularly interested in ways of structuring musical and theatrical material by drawing on ways in which people have attempted to formalise complicated systems: computer programs, role-playing games, instruction manuals, finite state machines, flow charts, examination rubrics, engineering drawings, assembly instructions for flat-pack furniture, signage, et cetera. Sometimes he writes straightforward music for acoustic instruments. When not doing this he works in teaching and research in computer science and mathematics at the University of Kent. The current piece is one of a number of recent pieces that have provided frameworks for improvisation, including *Secure/Insecure* (2013) and *hic sunt dracones* (2011).

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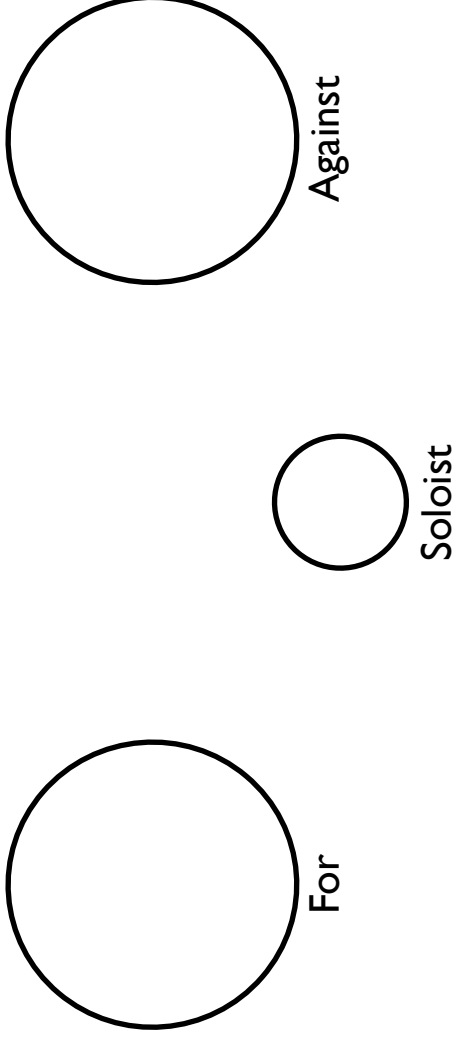
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Stage setup: One musician (who must be familiar with notated music) is assigned the role of *soloist* and sits/stands downstage of the other musicians, who are grouped into two (roughly equally sized) groups, called *for* and *against*. There should be a reasonable distance between the three groups.



Performance: The soloist chooses a piece of notated music that would usually be played with the accompaniment of an ensemble, e.g. the solo part of a concerto movement. The soloist plays this from start to finish, including all rest bars, doggedly ignoring anything the remainder of the ensemble is doing. Whilst this is being played, the other musicians play an improvisation with the following guidelines. The *for* group play in support of the soloist, for example (but by no means confined to) accompaniment, harmony (in the broadest sense), imitation, filling in gaps, etc. The *against* group play in contrast the soloist, for example (but by no means confined to) by playing contrasting material, material in a very different style, providing an “accompaniment” that is very different rhythmically or harmonically to the solo part, etc. Ideally, the groups should listen carefully to each other as well as to the soloist and attempt to offer a coherent sense of support or contrast. There is not need to try to play in the style of the soloists piece; indeed, this is discouraged. Either the soloist or ensemble can begin the performance; the ending is by tacit agreement between the players.