

The Freedom of Control and the Control of Freedom: Free Style vs Strict Style Just Intonation in the Works of Lou Harrison

Abstract. The American composer Lou Harrison posited two different approaches to composing in just intonation: “Strict Style,” or composing within a predetermined scale or gamut; and “Free Style,” which he described as composing “with whatever intervals one feels that he needs as he goes along.” Harrison composed just a few pieces using this technique between 1955 and 1974. This is a poorly understood aspect of Harrison’s oeuvre. There is a need for a re-examination of these ideas and a clarification of the terms. I analyzed his three completed Free Style compositions: *At the Tomb of Charles Ives*, *A Phrase for Arion’s Leap*, and *Simfony in Free Style*; as well as an example of Strict Style, chosen from among the hundreds that he wrote using that approach. Judging from the names and descriptions of these two compositional approaches, we may assume that the works in Free Style would be the more intuitive. Analysis shows that the matter is not that simple. Constraints emanate from the composer’s preferences and theoretical/historical understanding. It becomes clear that Harrison was not just assembling intervals using his fecund melodic sense, but in some places, thoughtfully combining modal and tetrachordal types according to his musical needs. Conversely, Strict Style allowed a more intuitive approach with the composer able to freely use pitches from within the chosen gamut. Hence, the Free Style is often more rational while the Strict Style is more intuitive. Though he wrote only three Free Style pieces, they display the same richness of ideas and expressivity as his many Strict Style compositions. The distinction between these two approaches informs the work of many composers who use just intonation and other microtonal approaches to the present day.

Keywords: Just intonation, Free Style, Strict Style, Epimores, epimoric ratios, Superparticular, Tetrachords, Enharmonic, Chromatic, Microtones, Lou Harrison.

The American composer Lou Harrison (1917–2003) posited that there are two different approaches to composing in just intonation: “Strict Style,” defined as composing within a predetermined scale or gamut; and “Free Style,” which he described as composing in such a way that “you don’t have a preliminary concatenation of tones or intervals but a free association of intervals that you know and associate as you wish for artistic purposes” (Doty 1987). His concept of Free Style is recognized as a significant contribution to music theory (Polansky 1987). Harrison composed just a few pieces using this technique between 1955 and 1974. At that time, practical matters of performance seemed almost insurmountable. Technological advances now facilitate both composition and performance of Free Style pieces. This, however, is still a poorly understood aspect of Harrison’s career and oeuvre. It is my intent to re-examine these ideas and clarify the meaning of the terms.

Judging from the names and descriptions of these two compositional approaches, we may be tempted to assume that the works in Free Style would be the more intuitive; and the Strict Style, more rational. Analysis shows that the matter is not that simple. Practical matters of performance impose certain restrictions, while other constraints emanate from the composer’s preferences and theoretical/historical understanding. It becomes clear that in his strict pieces, Harrison was not just assembling intervals using his fecund melodic sense, but rather, in some places, very thoughtfully combining modal and tetrachordal types according to his musical needs; in other places, using an almost serial approach based on what he termed “interval controls” (Harrison 1971).

Harrison’s interest in just intonation was sparked by his reading of *Genesis of a Music* (Partch 1949) which he read on the recommendation of Henry Cowell. Harry Partch (1901–1974) had an idiosyncratic approach to just intonation; this became a dominant influence among Americans drawn to just intonation and other forms of microtonality. Harrison was among the first to carry the banner of just intonation which he did with the zeal of a convert.

In his *Music Primer*, he plainly states, “Just intonation is the best intonation” (Harrison 1971). This quote appeared on page one of every issue of *1/1: The Journal of the Just Intonation Network* – a rallying cry for like-minded composers and theorists. He goes on to say, “The ratios $1/1$ $2/1$ $3/2$ $4/3$ $5/4$ $6/5$ ~ to ∞ are analogs of actual events, i.e. A, 440 v.p.s. is to A, 220 v.p.s. (an “octave”) as 2 is to 1; therefore $2/1$ correctly represents an “octave.” $3/2$ correctly represents a trued “fifth,” $5/4$ a trued “major third,” etc.”

Just intonation is distinct from other tuning systems because it is non-tempered. Just intervals are derived from the harmonic series and often expressed as ratios in the manner Harrison describes above. You can think of the ratios as describing an interval between two members of a harmonic series, for example, $3/2$ represents the interval between the third and second harmonics of a fundamental represented by the integer 1. $15/8$ represents the interval between the fifteenth and eighth harmonics of a fundamental represented by 1, etc.

For a variety of reasons – musical and practical – composers and theorists have found that tempering or compromising these intervals by tiny amounts provided a solution that kept the required pitches to a manageable number, especially for fixed pitch instruments such as keyboards and fretted instruments. This is where the various meantones, circulating or well temperaments, and equal temperaments come into play.

David Doty gives one of the clearest definitions of just intonation. He calls it, “any system of tuning in which all of the intervals can be represented by whole-number frequency ratios, with a strongly implied preference for the simplest ratios compatible with a given musical purpose” (Doty 1994).

A “given musical purpose” in a just intoned composition could vary from composer to composer and from piece to piece, but to give one example that is fairly common, we will need to touch upon the issue of “prime limits.” In music-mathematical terms, a prime limit is the highest prime number used in a set of ratios. The historical tuning common in Europe before the Renaissance was 3-limit or Pythagorean tuning. All the ratios could be formed using only the primes 2 and 3. Musically, this meant that all the intervals could be derived by combining and stacking octaves (2/1) and fifths (3/2). This resulted in a major third of 81/64 rather than the simpler 5/4.

When later composers began to use the major and minor thirds as consonances, they needed to accept intervals of the 5-limit in order to get major thirds of 5/4 and minor thirds of 6/5. Hence, in a 3-limit context a major third would be 81/64 but in a 5-limit context, a major third would be 5/4. Common practice never fully accepted the move to the 7-limit and beyond, though a number of musicians advocated for these changes to little or no avail. Since the mid-twentieth century, though, more composers have availed themselves of these resources. Partch worked with an 11-limit gamut and Harrison variously used limits up to thirteen in different works. Each of these different prime limits would add different available options for our familiar intervals as well as some for which our 12-note equal temperament system (12EDO or “12-tone equal division of the octave”) gives no adequate approximation.

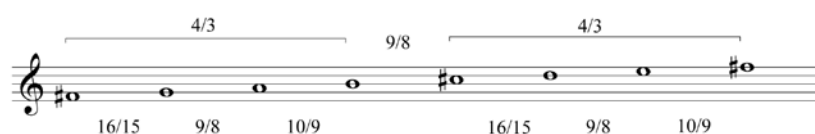
Again, in *Music Primer*, Harrison defines the two compositional styles in question:

After only a brief study of intervals it becomes clear that there are two ways of composing with them: 1) arranging them into a fixed mode, or gamut, & then composing within that structure. This is the Strict Style, & is the vastly predominant world method. However, another way is possible – 2) to freely assemble, or compose with whatever intervals one feels that he needs as he goes along. This is the Free Style. Lovely new devices & expressions are possible in this style... (Harrison 1971)

Examining one of Harrison’s many Strict Style pieces will give us insight into some of his other musical preferences and interests. Among these are instrument building, epimoric intervals, tetrachords (especially equal tetrachordal scales), and clear tonal centers. It will also illuminate his choices of intervals from the enormous number of choices available in just intonation.

Early in his career, Harrison established himself as a composer of percussion ensemble music in a series of concerts that he co-produced with fellow composer John Cage. These ensembles often included found instruments such as trash cans, brake drums, and flower pots. This early experience and his interest in Asian music led Harrison to instrument building in the 1970s, in collaboration with his partner William Colvig (1917–2000).

One of their first big projects was a set of tuned idiophones that they first called the “American Gamelan” but later became known as “Old Granddad.” The basic tuning of the ensemble is a syntonic diatonic scale that can be expressed as the ratios seen in Example 1. This scale traces back to Claudius Ptolemy (circa 85–165 CE).



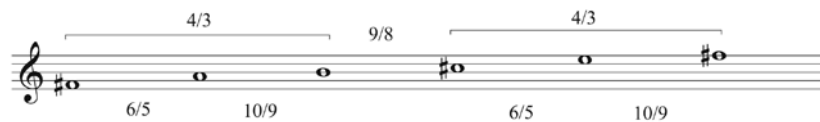
Example 1. Ptolemy’s Syntonon Diatonic

The consecutive intervals of this scale are all epimoric. Epimores, or to use the Latinate form, “super-particular” intervals, are intervals whose ratios take the form $x+1/x$. Simply put, the numerator is exactly one unit higher than the denominator. These intervals have a unique acoustical property – the primary difference tone of an epimoric interval sounded simultaneously is the fundamental of a harmonic series that contains both pitches. This gives these intervals a particular kind of resonance. Long before science was able to explain

this, many musicians and theorists as diverse as Ptolemy and Partch showed a preference for epimores. Harrison expressed his predilection for them in an interview with David Doty "... I found that I am getting to be like Claudius Ptolemy. I have to have an interlocked series of superparticular ratios. There's no getting around it, I'm unhappy if I don't" (Doty 1987). Epimores represent the simplest version of each interval type. For example, the epimoric just major third, $5/4$ (386.314 cents) can be compared to the non-epimoric Pythagorean major third, $81/64$ (407.82 cents). Both have their purpose, but the $5/4$ is arguably more consonant in most contexts (Tenney 1988).

The structure of the scale is typical of ancient Greek protocols – two disjunct equal tetrachords with the framework of two perfect fourths ($4/3$) connected by the major second ($9/8$). Each of the tetrachords is divided by the same intervals appearing in the same order. All of the consecutive intervals (and the framing intervals just mentioned) are epimores. Note that the two sizes of just major seconds are both represented – $9/8$ (203.91 cents) and $10/9$ (182.404 cents).

The Strict Style is a natural fit for these constructed instruments. Harrison composed just a few pieces for this particular ensemble all in the Strict Style. In the *Suite for Violin and American Gamelan* (1974), Harrison and his collaborator, Richard Dee, use a variety of subsets of the full gamut and several different tonal centers to achieve variety. Movement IV, *Jahla 1* is an interesting example. The scale shown in Example 2, though a pentatonic subset of the syntonic diatonic, is still constructed of epimores for all of the consecutive intervals and the framework. The just minor third, $6/5$ is 315.641 cents.



Example 2. Pentatonic Subset used in *Jahla 1*

As shown in Example 3, Harrison and Dee establish a clear tonal center on F sharp. It is easy to see that, having predetermined the pitch materials, a composer can then rely on intuition and his or her ear to create the piece. As Harrison stated, this is the most common method of composing in the world. It is also the method that he himself turned to most often.

Among his pieces in Strict Style just intonation we can count all of the pieces that he composed for his struck-idiophone and "gamelan" ensembles; those for retuned keyboards such as the *Incidental Music to Cornielle's "Cinna"* (1957); all of his works for guitar; and such pieces as *Concerto in Slendro* (1961) and the *Four Strict Songs* (1955) – among many others.

When we consider the Free Style we are presented with a very different story. Harrison only composed three complete pieces in this manner: *Symphony in Free Style* (1955); *At the Tomb of Charles Ives* (1963); and *A Phrase for Arion's Leap* (1974). This last one is only thirty-six seconds long. He, himself, admits to the complications involved in this kind of composition. In 1987, he was still unsure of the practicality:

... And so far as I know there's still not an instrument that's capable of doing that, either electronic or any other kind ... I would love to hear an extended piece. I have sketches for extended pieces in the free style, but there's no way of doing it. ... After all these pieces have been extant for 25 years. That's a quarter of a century.

Symphony in Free Style was premiered, and subsequently recorded, in 2001 (46 years after its composition) in New York City by the American Festival of Microtonal Music Ensemble under Johnny Reinhard.

Example 3. Excerpt, Harrison, *Suite for Violin and American Gamelan*, fourth movement

This is the only performance and recording to date on acoustic instruments. There is also an electronic rendition by David Doty. The reason for the infrequent performances is the instrumental requirements of twenty microtonal flutes (played by four or five musicians) with holes drilled to achieve the required pitches. The rest of the ensemble consists of viols (with specially placed frets), several diatonic harps, tack piano, and percussion. All of the instruments have their pitches determined before the performance, of course. The free choice of intervals is a compositional procedure rather than a performance technique. This is in contrast to the string quartets in just intonation by the American composer Ben Johnston (b. 1926) in which the performers need to learn to hear extremely complex microtonal pitch relationships and, in some cases, produce several dozen distinct pitches to the octave in a single work.

Example 4. Beginning of Harrison's *Symfomy in Free Style*

As can be seen in Example 4, the Harrison uses imitation and sequences that expand and contract by consecutive epimoric intervals. The tuning of some of the flutes reflects this as well. He uses a hexatonic scale of consecutive epimores on Flute 1, shown in Example 5. Here you can see that the old Greek tetrachordal framework of two $4/3$ s connected by a $9/8$ still underlies Harrison's method. A voracious reader in general, Harrison was particularly well-read in the classics of tuning and had a particular affinity for Ptolemy's *Harmonics* (Solomon 2000). It is possible that he was led to this construction by a familiarity with Ptolemy's Equable Diatonic tetrachord ($12/11 - 11/10 - 10/9$) and noticed that the next epimore in order, $9/8$, was the traditional interval of disjunction; and that the following two epimores $8/7$ and $7/6$ were a duple division of the $4/3$ tetrachord.

Example 5. Tuning of Flute 1 for *Symfomy in Free Style*

The first two intervals, $12/11$ and $11/10$, are three-quarter tones of different sizes. As stated earlier the intervals in this order gradually increase in size. If arranged so they increase as they descend, they can be considered to be members of the same harmonic series. When these same intervals are arranged as they are in Example 5 (smallest at the bottom), they are members of a theoretical subharmonic series. Partch referred to these as *otonality* and *utonality*, respectively (Partch 1949).

Harrison's *Symfomy* uses this gradual intervallic increase and decrease to create the themes and the contrapuntal devices. He takes a different approach in his next Free Style work eight years later.

At the Tomb of Charles Ives pays homage to Ives partly by reference to one of his more well-known works, *The Unanswered Question*. In his work, Ives uses a solo trumpet playing nearly identically-repeated phrases over a slow-moving C major string background. The most obvious parallel in Harrison's tribute is the repeated solo trombone phrase over an open fifth ($3/2$) on C and G in the strings shown in Example 6. In a way, this piece is like a combination of Strict Style and Free Style. The trombone and harp I are in a simple anhemitonic pentatonic throughout. It is the other instruments that participate in the "free" aspect of this composition.

AT THE TOMB OF CHARLES IVES

Largo, $M.M. = \text{circa } 48$

The musical score is for Harrison's 'At the Tomb of Charles Ives'. It is a Largo piece with a tempo of approximately 48 beats per minute. The score is written for a full orchestra, including Trombone, Psalteries, Dulcimers, Harps, Tam Tam, Violins, Viola, Violoncello, and Contra Bass. The score is in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as *mf*, *espr.*, *mp*, and *L.v.* The score is numbered (5) at the bottom right.

* The fractional numerals ($7/6, 4/3$ etc.) indicate the exact proportions of the intervals.

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Example 6. Page 1, Harrison, *At the Tomb of Charles Ives*

The strings, with intonational assistance from harps II and III, depart from the C pentatonic the most before the last repeat of the trombone phrase. The intervals are mostly drawn from just-intoned diatonic modes on several different tonics in fairly rapid succession. Harrison seems to have made concessions toward playability in this piece and it has indeed proven to be the most frequently performed of the three.

Harrison's last completed Free Style composition was *A Phrase for Arion's Leap*. This is a very short piece for three *ya chengs* (Chinese bowed zithers), metal strung harp, troubadour harp, and non-pitched percussion. The only known performance was a home recording by Harrison, William Colvig, and Richard Dee. Harrison said of the recording, "... you can splice together tapes, and I have done that - you know *Arion's Leap* is only spliced once. But that's because we would reach over here for this, then bow that over there ... we managed to assemble that, and with one splice, and that was astonishing. But my God, it's only that long!" (Doty 1987)

I have chosen this piece to analyze most thoroughly here not because it is the shortest but because it represents his most mature effort in this style. Larry Polansky re-notated this piece a number of years ago in order to show the absolute intervals. It was a transcription that didn't change any of Harrison's score but essentially added an analysis to show different relationships. Harrison's original notation had shown only the interval ratios from one pitch to the next. Polansky's showed the growth of the pitch space from the starting pitch of E which he treated as 1/1 (Polansky 2009).

I take a slightly different approach here. I believe that Harrison was treating D as a subtle tonal center for a variety of reasons. It is iterated more than any other pitch in the piece - nine times. The next most frequent pitch is A at five iterations. D also has the longest duration of the entire piece. It is doubled in octaves at beat three. The only other pitch that gets an octave doubling is A. The widest melodic leap is to D. It is also the lowest sounding pitch in the piece. The first phrase leads to it and the last phrase leads from it; and until the trill at the end, it is the only pitch articulated with an ornament.

My notation here (see Example 7) borrows Polansky’s idea of notating absolute pitch ratios (here below the staff) while retaining Harrison’s original notation for note to note interval ratios on and above the staff. Rather than using the first pitch as 1/1 as Polansky did, I give that designation to D in order to show the tonal relationships to that pitch.

Precision Piece: "A Phrase For Arion's Leap"
 Renotated with analysis (ratios below the staff) by James Dalton

Lou Harrison
15 Dec., 2517

Poco Agitato

3 Ya Chengs

Metal Strung Harp

Troubadour Harp

Percussion

© 1974 by Lou Harrison

Ratios on and above the staff are from Harrison's original notation and represent the intervals between pitches.

Ratios below the staff represent the pitches as relative to the D tonal center (1/1).

Example 7. Complete score of Harrison, "A Phrase for Arion’s Leap," with analysis

This piece seems to be all about the tetrachords. It opens with two conjunct tetrachords. The first four pitches are an enharmonic tetrachord proposed by Ibn Sina (980–1037) a Persian theorist and polymath also known by the Latin version of his name, Avicenna.

This tetrachord is 40/39 – 26/25 – 5/4. The fourth through seventh notes are a chromatic tetrachord attributed to Didymus (1st century BCE): 16/15 – 25/24 – 6/5. These two tetrachords lead to 1/1 as I mentioned above. The last phrase begins on 1/1 and leads from it using a condensed form of the same intervals with the 5/4 left out.

The ya cheng parts are another representation of a tetrachordal division. The two outer ya chengs are a perfect fourth (4/3) apart and the middle one divides that fourth into two septimal (based on the seventh harmonic) and epimoric intervals – 8/7 and 7/6. This chord moves through a modal permutation of the Didymus chromatic tetrachord heard in the opening. This kind of modal permutation traces back to Arab theorists such as Al-Farabi (c. 870–950).

Modal permutation of tetrachords is the changing of the order of small, middle, and large intervals. The original form of the Didymus chromatic was M, S, L; the form used in the ya chengs is S, M, L.

All of the consecutive intervals in this piece (see Harrison's ratios above the staff) are epimores or complements (inversions) of epimores except the 128/75 and 96/75 in the troubadour harp near the end of the first system. However, if the pitches of this passage are arranged in scale order from D, it becomes evident that the underlying structure is an equal tetrachordal scale of epimores in yet another modal permutation of the Didymus chromatic – S, L, M.

The climax of the piece has two intervals of the thirteenth harmonic (13/12 and 14/13) over an octave on the dominant (3/2). Of the twenty-eight pitches in the composition (see Example 8), all the others derive from the two tetrachords of epimores in various permutations.

In Harrison's practice, Free Style requires a great deal of conscious control rather than a free expression of musical intuition. This stems in part from the strictures of instrumental performance, but also from Harrison's desire to use the intervals of just intonation in ways informed by his knowledge of acoustics and the ideas of earlier theorists.

Conversely, Strict Style often allowed a more intuitive approach with the composer able to freely use pitches from within the chosen gamut. Hence, the Free Style is often more constrained and rational, while the Strict Style is more intuitive.

With both approaches Harrison makes clear connections to earlier music and theories, including tetrachords cited by Didymus, Ptolemy, and Ibn Sina. He also shows a commitment to the Ptolemaic preference for superparticular or epimoric ratios.

Though the body of Harrison's Free Style works is small, it displays the same richness of ideas and expressivity as his more numerous Strict Style compositions. The distinction between these two approaches informs the work of many composers who use just intonation and other microtonal approaches to the present day.

Pitch	Ratio relative to D	Cents above D
D	1/1	NA
D#\	40/39	43.831
Eb	25/24	70.672
D#	16/15	111.731
E	10/9	182.404
Fb	28/25	196.198
E	9/8	203.910
E	256/225	223.463
F\	15/13	247.741
F	7/6	266.871
F	32/27	294.135
F	6/5	315.641
F#	5/4	386.314
Gb	32/25	427.374
G	4/3	498.045
Ab	64/45	609.776
A	3/2	701.955
Bb	25/16	772.627
Bb	128/81	792.180
Bb	8/5	813.686
B	5/3	884.359
B	12/7	933.129
C	7/4	968.826
Db	175/96	1039.498
C#	24/13	1061.427
C#	15/8	1088.269
Db	48/25	1129.328
D	35/18	1151.230

Example 8. List of distinct pitches used in "A Phrase for Arion's Leap"

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Kontrolės laisvė ir laisvės kontrolė: laisvasis stilius *vs* griežtasis stilius Lou Harrisono natūraliosios darnos kompozicijose

Santrauka

Anot amerikiečių kompozitoriaus Lou Harrisono (1917–2003), egzistuoja du skirtingi natūraliosios darnos kompozicinio pritaikymo būdai: „griežtasis stilius“, apibūdinamas kaip komponavimas pagal iš anksto apibrėžtą dermę ar garsyną, ir „laisvasis stilius“ – tai toks komponavimo būdas, kai „tu neturi iš anksto nustatytų tonų ar intervalų sekų, bet remiesi laisva intervalų asociacija ir traktuoji juos meniniams tikslams tinkamiausiu būdu“. Šis jo laisvojo stiliaus konceptas yra pripažįstamas kaip reikšmingas indėlis muzikos teorijos srityje. Taikydamas minėtą metodiką, Harrisonas 1955–1974 m. sukomponeavo tik keletą kūrinių.

Sprendžiant iš šių dviejų komponavimo būdų pavadinimų ir aprašymų, susidaro įspūdis, kad laisvojo stiliaus kūriniai yra intuityvesni, o griežtojo stiliaus – racionalesni. Vis dėlto analizė atskleidžia, kad viskas nėra taip paprasta.

Kad suprastume santykį tarp Lou Harrisono laisvojo ir griežtojo stilių, turime pažinti kitus jo stiliaus ypatumus ir muzikinius prioritetus. Tarp tokių yra epimoriniai intervalai, tetrachordai (ypač lygiosios tetrachordinės dermės) ir aiškūs toniniai centrai. Pirmieji du gali būti siejami su senovės graikų ir arabų teoretikų (Ptolemėjo, Didimo, Al Farabi, Ibn Sinos) darbais.

Epimoriniai intervalai – tai tokie intervalai, kurių santykio išraiška yra $x+1/x$. Paprastai tariant, skaitiklis yra vienu vienetu didesnis už vardiklį. Šiems intervalams būdinga unikali akustinė savybė – pirminis harmoniškai skambančio epimorinio intervalo diferencinis tonas yra obertonų spektro, kuriam priklauso abu intervalo tonai, fundamentinis tonas. Tai lemia ypatingą šių intervalų rezonanso pobūdį.

Struktūros, aptartos graikų teorijoje apie tetrachordus, ypač lygiosios dermės, domino Harrisoną kaip būdas organizuoti garso aukščius. Tetrachordinė dermė yra sudaryta iš dviejų grynųjų kvartų, atskirtų didžiąja sekunda. Siekiant lygiosios tetrachordinės dermės, abi kvartos turi būti padalytos į tuos pačius intervalus ta pačia tvarka. Natūralieji intervalai sąlygoja daug didesnę įvairovę nei lygaus derinimo atveju, t. y. intervalai gali būti platesni ar siauresni, palyginti su analogiškais temperuotais intervalais.

Perderinti klavišiniai instrumentai, pritaikytos gitaros ir kiti fiksuoto aukščio instrumentai, tokie kaip mušamieji idiofonai (juos gamino pats su savo partneriu Williamu Colvigu), yra tinkami griežtajam stiliui. Kadangi garsynas yra iš anksto apibrėžtas, kompozitorius gali laisvai rinktis iš nustatytų garsų ir komponuoti remdamasis intuityva ar ekspresyviomis aspiracijomis.

Laisvajam stiliui Harrisono praktikoje reikalinga didelė sąmonės kontrolė, todėl toli gražu tai nėra laisva muzikinė intuityva išraiška. Ji kyla iš tam tikrų instrumentinio atlikimo apribojimų, taip pat iš Harrisono aistros naudoti natūraliojo derinimo intervalus, atsižvelgiant į akustikos principus ir ankstyvųjų teoretikų idėjas.

Vadinasi, laisvasis stilius dažnai yra apribotas ir racionalus, o griežtasis stilius pasižymi intuityvumu.