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## Mark Eliot Jacobs, Composer



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## Biography

Mark Eliot Jacobs, born in 1960, is an instructor of music theory, composition, and low brass at Southern Oregon University in Ashland, Oregon, USA. He is also the principal trombonist in the Rogue Valley Symphony, also based in Ashland, Oregon.

Mark holds the degree Doctor of Music from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois in Music Composition (1986). Mark has written for a wide assortment of musical ensembles, including string quartet, wind quintet, brass quintet, band, and orchestra. A recent work for alto flute, viola, and guitar, *The Islands*, while a new work, makes homage to the flute, viola, and harp trio of Claude Debussy of 1915.

His latest work, *Las Ranas de Katanchel*, for orchestra with natural sounds from the Yucatan, will be premiered by the Rogue Valley Symphony directed by Martin Majkut on November 5th in Ashland, Oregon. Subsequent performances will be on November 6th and 7th in Medford and Grants Pass, Oregon, respectively.

## Las Ranas de Katanchel

Mr. Jacobs' latest work, *Las Ranas de Katanchel*, for orchestra with natural sounds from the Yucatan, will be premiered by the Rogue Valley Symphony directed by Martin Majkut on November 5th in Ashland, Oregon. Subsequent performances will be on November 6th and 7th in Medford and Grants Pass, Oregon, respectively.

The composition of *Las Ranas de Katanchel* resulted from an invitation from Mónica Hernández and Aníbal González to stay at their eco-resort Hacienda Katanchel in the Yucatan during the rainy season and record the sounds of the local frogs with the idea of incorporating them into a new piece of music. I saw an opportunity to bring my interests in the frogs and Mayan mythology together into a single work.

I first became aware of the rich folklore of the Mayans when I studied *Ecuatorial*, a musical composition by Edgard Varesé written in 1934. It is based on a text from the *Popol Vuh*, the Quiché Mayan book of the “Dawn of Life” translated into Spanish by the Guatemalan novelist Miguel Asturias. The text is a prayer for the sustenance of life from the last part of the book. I became interested in the mythological stories of the beginning of the world presented in the book. There are many parallels between the events in the *Popol Vuh* and those from other world cultures, telling the universal human stories of origins.

The “program” behind the piece is an amalgamation of stories from the mythologies of the Quiché, a Mayan people from what is now Guatemala and Honduras, and the Maya from the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. Although similar, the folkways and beliefs of these two peoples have several distinctions: it’s a bit like comparing ancient Greek and Egyptian mythologies.

Melded to these myths is the global modern-day story of frogs and their role in the ecological health of the world. Amphibians today are in trouble. More than 30% of all amphibian species today face extinction. According to Conservation International, habitat loss, disease and climate change have contributed to the loss of whole species within the span of a single breeding season. So sensitive to changes in the environment, they truly are our “canaries in the coal mine.” Conservation International is currently sponsoring “The Search for Lost Frogs,” a world-wide scientific exploration seeking amphibian species long thought to be extinct. Visit [www.conservation.org/campaigns/lost\\_frogs](http://www.conservation.org/campaigns/lost_frogs) for more information.

A central figure in the program of the piece is the Yucatecan goddess Ixchel (comparable to Xmucane in the Quiché *Popol vuh*). She is the goddess of midwifery and medicine. She is associated with time keeping and seems to be intimately associated with the sacred Mayan 260-day Mayan calendar, the Tzolkin.

The Tzolkin is the “sacred” component of the traditional Mayan calendar that, in combination with the 365-day solar calendar, the Haab, marked the days into a complete cycle of 18,980 days (52 years in the Western calendar), known as the “Calendar Round.” Unlike the solar-based Haab, the Tzolkin has no reference to any celestial cycle. It is now believed that it may originally have been a midwife’s calendar: 260 days is roughly the amount of time from a pregnant woman’s first missed menstrual period to the day of birth. Modern obstetricians use a 40-week calendar (280 days) which starts the count from the last period that the woman experienced. Necessarily, the Tzolkin is particularly sacred to Ixchel.

Since years per se were not recorded, and the 52 years of the Calendar Round is not a long enough period to record historic events, a larger calendar, the “Long Count” was devised. Long Count dating was used on monuments in the great cities of the ancient Maya to record the reigns of monarchs. The long count starts on the traditional date of creation, probably August 11, 3114 BC in the modern Western calendar, and measures time in units of 144,000 days called “Baktun” (approximately 394½ solar years). We will enter the 14th Baktun on December 21, 2012. Rather than a date of cataclysm, this event is in reality a kind of “New Years Day” – a beginning, not an ending.

The large structure of the piece starts with an exposition which introduces the musical material developed in the succeeding sections. Following that are two passacaglias based on the Tzolkin, a journey through the underworld of Xibalba, and a rebirth in the form of the arrival of long-hoped for spring rain. Many listeners will hear the large sections of the work as distinct yet connected movements.

The exposition starts with the frogs. In Mayan mythology it is believed that when a frog sings it is calling for rain. There is a ceremony still practiced in much of the Mayan world in which little children imitate the songs of frogs to call to the rain god Chaac. As depicted in ancient art, Chaac himself resembles a frog with a very long nose. His image can be seen adorning the exteriors of the buildings of ancient cities like Chichen Itza and Uxmal in the Yucatan. After the frogs, we hear the 13-note theme of the impending passacaglias. The birds of the Yucatan jungle depict the first dawn. We now hear the “cosmic clock” – Ixchel’s celestial time so important to the Maya. It is in a 20-beat pattern here segmented into descending Fibonacci numbers (8+5+3+2+1+1.) Next is a depiction of the creation of the world from the Popol vuh. Kukulcan (Plumed Serpent to the Quiché, Quetzalcoatl to the Aztecs) and Chaac (Hurricane or “Heart of Sky” to the Quiché), have a conversation about what the world should be like, which starts the creation itself. Ixchel makes her first appearance in an English horn solo.

Next comes the first of the two passacaglias. It is based on the 13-note theme heard just after the frog songs at the beginning of the piece. Its twenty brief variations result in a full cycle of the Tzolkin. The piece goes "off the tracks" of the variations from time to time, but always returns to the correct beat (day). The variations are grouped into sets using the Fibonacci numbers introduced with the cosmic clock. Each set is a half-step lower in key than its predecessor. The events of the early earth as described in the Popol Vuh are depicted here: the creation of mud people and then wooden people, all of which were found to be wanting by the gods. During the first passacaglia, the trombones emphasize every 20th note, which creates the theme of the second passacaglia. There is an uncanny resemblance of the new theme to the old. The second passacaglia is played twice as fast (and so lasting half as long) as the first. The second passacaglia depicts the flood that the god Chaac brought to destroy the mud and wooden people. It continues the one-octave chromatic key descent leading to the story of the hero twins in Xibalba.

The Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, are semi-divine sons of the Maize god, Hun Hunahpu. Hun Hunahpu and his own brother Vucub Hunahpu were killed by the Lords of Xibalba by treachery. The twins make a journey to Xibalba to bring their father back from the dead and exact revenge on the Lords. The hero twins ultimately triumph and utterly destroy the lords of Xibalba. The resurrection of their father results in the annual harvest of corn. The twins were ball players. In addition to defeating the Lords of Xibalba on the ball court, they must face six houses of torture: the Houses of Dark (where Hun Hunahpu fell), Razors, Cold, Jaguars, Fire, and Bats. These are represented by six musical settings with a duration ratio of 8+5+3+2+1+1, the Fibonacci numbers from the exposition. The House of Jaguars is portrayed by Ixchel's theme from the exposition in retrograde inversion. Like many of the Mayan deities, she also contains her own sinister opposite nature and is associated with the predatory jaguar in addition to being the guardian of pregnancy and childbirth.

After the Hero Twins' success in Xibalba, they become the Sun and the Moon. The scene is now set for the introduction of human beings into the world. The frogs return to redouble their prayer to Chaac for rain. After this, the horns introduce the age of human beings on the earth, and the celebration of the coming of the rain. The celebration music, "Leaving Xibalba" accompanied by a recording of a gentle thunder storm and consists of a popular song-form with a 20-bar chorus and a 13-bar bridge. The bridge is the "Ixchel" theme first heard in the exposition. The bridge of "Leaving Xibalba" is based on a chromatically descending harmonic progression, presenting a compressed rendering of the key scheme of the passacaglias.

The natural sounds heard in the piece were all recorded by the composer near Hacienda Katanchel in the Yucatan in September of 2000. The only modification of the sounds consists of acoustical enhancement and montage.