

Staging Roberto Bonati's *The Blanket of the Dark*: A Twenty-first Century Vision of 'The Scottish Play'

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In writing about jazz, in appreciating jazz, even in playing jazz, what needs to be appreciated is that, more than any starting point, more than any chord voicing, more than any particular texture, it is the *performance* that is paramount.

(Collier [C] 7, original emphasis)

Introduction

The Department of Music at Rhodes University inaugurated the International Spring Music Festival in 2009. One of the central educational goals of this festival is to provide a platform for student performers to interact with local and international music professionals and to exchange knowledge about performance practice through making music together. The shortage of informal venues for public performance and Grahamstown's relative physical isolation from major centres are factors that tend to limit possibilities for students to perform in front of an audience, and the festival provided a number of opportunities for this.

One of the special guests of this inaugural event was the Italian double bass player and composer Roberto Bonati, who directed an ensemble of students, lecturers and professional guest musicians in the South African première of his extended composition *The Blanket of the Dark: A Study for Lady Macbeth*. I first encountered Bonati through the offices of the Italian Institute of Culture in Pretoria, who facilitated the hosting of Bonati and his group (the RARA Quartet) for a workshop and performance at the Tshwane University of Technology. At the time, we expressed interest in a further visit by Bonati for the purpose of performing some of his music with a student ensemble. I was able to facilitate a visit by Bonati to Grahamstown in August 2009.

The specific aims of this particular project were:

- To offer students the opportunity of working with a highly rated international jazz composer
- To introduce some of them to improvising in a relatively 'nurturing' environment
- To expose them to a real world task in realising a complex and challenging composition under the kind of time pressure that professional musicians experience
- To foster 'team spirit' in the ensemble.

Unlike some South African music education institutions specialising in jazz studies, Rhodes music students have the opportunity of engaging with Western art music as well as jazz, and many of them possess good to excellent sight reading skills, which seemed likely to make the rehearsal process considerably easier. Since jazz studies is a relatively new offering at Rhodes, however, there is a fairly small number of jazz studies students and many of them have little or no experience of the jazz tradition, its performance practice or its socialisation protocols. As Bastien and Hostager define it,

[j]azz is a social form, in that it is generally performed by a group of players, frequently all simultaneously improvising. Although it is self-consciously spontaneous, creative, and expressive, jazz is produced through a set of formal musical theories and set of known social

practices designed to enable novel and innovative performances by accommodating both individual differences and internal (theoretical and practical) changes.

(95)

Their 1992 study of the performance practice of a ‘zero-history’ small jazz ensemble (in other words, a group of musicians who had not previously met or worked together) was a pioneering work, and was followed by two ground-breaking new perspectives (Berliner and Monson) which similarly took performance in the jazz idiom as starting points for research. As Monson states:

Music can be centrally involved not only in the production of performances but in the establishment and maintenance of human and/or spiritual relationships. I believe the creation of emotional bonds is tied to the historical contexts of performances as well.

(181-82)

Returning to the history of the Bonati ensemble: ¹at the beginning of the second semester (July 2009), the sheet music became available and the process of pre-production began. We distributed the music accordingly, and provided audio examples of the recorded music placed in the departmental library, so that participants could listen to the musical examples while following the score.

What was not apparent to some students from the outset (as later became evident) was the immediate purpose of having to assimilate and master a substantial amount of brand-new music, some of which made considerable technical demands on the musicians involved. One of the major challenges in the early stages of the project was discovering that we had, to some degree, overestimated the amount of time available to some of the musicians who were not Music majors and who had fairly demanding academic schedules to manage. Gareth Walwyn, a PhD (Composition) student, ran the rehearsals in the pre-production stage of the project so that I could focus my energies on playing double bass in the ensemble.

The Blanket of the Dark and the big band repertoire

The Blanket of the Dark was premièred during the ParmaFrontiere Festival (of which Bonati is the artistic director and founder) in 2001. The 14-piece ensemble consisted of a number of Italian professional musicians, organised differently from the usual American big band. Big bands normally comprise clearly defined sections, typically four trumpets, five saxophones, four trombones and a rhythm section. A substantial amount of music has been composed (or arranged) for this particular format, and the wide range of tone colours and dynamic combinations available has attracted the attention of some highly innovative and imaginative musicians, such as Duke Ellington, Gil Evans and Maria Schneider (to name a few). Fred Sturm has surveyed the stylistic evolution and increasing sophistication of the big band genre through detailed analysis of the technical tools used by contemporary jazz composers. Sturm cites the arranger Jim McNeely as follows:

There’s a music out there that combines the jazz rhythmic language and more intense harmonic material that hasn’t been explored yet. And it’s not just between jazz and classical music; for me, it could be Charles Ives and James Brown.

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McNeely is suggesting that this musical language of the future, which bridges the ostensible divide between jazz and Western European art music, will tend to draw on (as well as assimilate) global stylistic influences. In Europe, however, as Mike Heffley argues, jazz composers and arrangers have drawn inspiration from a rich tradition of experimental music since the 1960s; it might be argued that these composers have developed a repertoire already foreshadowing the synthesis of which McNeely speaks. This alternative repertoire is exemplified by the work for large ensemble of European composers like Django Bates (United Kingdom), François Jeanneau

(France), the Berlin Contemporary Jazz Orchestra and Globe Unity Orchestra in Germany, as well as in the United States of America by Carla Bley, Either/Orchestra and others, whose music articulates an oftentimes ironic perspective on the big band tradition.

These composers often work with ensembles which incorporate orchestral instruments (strings, French horn, oboe, and so on) as well as the more typical jazz instrumentation, combinations which provide the arranger with greater flexibility and a wider palette of available tone colours. In so doing, such composers are able to draw on the resources and idioms of jazz (its rhythmic language and openness to improvisation), the Western art music tradition (with its focus on notation and a rich repertoire stretching from the medieval period to opera and beyond), and a wide variety of global musical forms and approaches.

Bonati's 2005 *A Silvery Silence: Fragments from Moby Dick*, for example, sets extracts from Melville's text in a soundscape drawing from Hebrew cantillation, Polynesian drumming and elements of jazz and Western art music to make a unique musical statement, while *The Blanket of the Dark* combines diverse musical sources from the music of Thomas Morley (a contemporary of Shakespeare's who provided some of the incidental music for the plays) to Verdi's *Lacrymosa* (from his *Messa da Requiem*), as well as the rhythmic and harmonic flavours of both jazz and contemporary 'classical' music. As Steven Loewy writes in his review of *The Blanket of the Dark*:

Bonati pulls from a multitude of sources, and while composers are sometimes praised for mixing genres, few do it on the grand scale evidenced here. At any moment, in almost any piece, expect one or more of pop and rock roots, hard-hitting straight-ahead jazz solos, free improvisation, and operatic grandeur. There is an orchestral touch to the instrumentation, which includes viola, cello, clarinet, and oboe among the 13 players (not including the conductor or the vocalist).

(n.p.)

Out of her 'comfort zone' and into performance

For the Grahamstown performance of Bonati's composition, Lotta Matambo (a Masters student from Finland) performed the vocal role of Lady Macbeth. As sole protagonist and dramatic focus of the music, with no other characters appearing to carry the action forward, the responsibility of the narrative role rests entirely with the singer herself. This compositional approach makes the role of Lady Macbeth a very challenging part to sing, since it is both technically and emotionally demanding. Bonati himself confirms the significance of the role in stating: "I had some rehearsals with the singer alone ... while I was writing the music." (Bonati [A] n.p.) It seems evident from this statement that the part of Lady Macbeth called for extra time and energy and a high degree of collaboration between composer and singer to realise the composition and her part as central to the development of the plot. As John O'Connor (178) notes: "It is curious that, of all the things Lady Macbeth might have become famous for in the four centuries since her first appearance – blood-soaked palms, sleep-walking, self-destruction – the one that has captured the media's attention most vividly is the notion that she plays the determined, manipulative wife behind the ambitious yet weak man."²

It seems fair to affirm that Bonati's characterisation of Lady Macbeth in *The Blanket of the Dark* generally conforms to this picture, especially given the absence of Macbeth and any of the other characters. Placing the emphasis on the female protagonist makes it possible for Bonati to explore the inner life of Lady Macbeth through a series of what may be termed 'musical soliloquies'. A similar emphasis obtains with regard to Shostakovich's 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District*, of which the composer wrote: "I worked on Lady Macbeth for almost three years. I had announced a trilogy dedicated to the position of women in various eras in Russia." (quoted in Volkov 106)³ Shostakovich explicitly placed the emphasis on the central role of Lady Macbeth as female protagonist. Initially, the opera enjoyed two highly successful premieres, as David Fanning notes:

The two premières of *Lady Macbeth* – in Leningrad on 22 January 1934, in Moscow two days later – turned the spotlight on Shostakovich as never before. The opera was a resounding popular and critical success, and prominent musicians were lavish in their praise. Negative reaction came from the conservative wing of the Composers' Union, but at this stage Shostakovich was able to shrug it off with confidence.

(n.p.)

With respect to his characterisation of Lady Macbeth, Shostakovich further noted: "It's rather difficult to explain, and I've heard quite a bit of disagreement on the matter, but I wanted to show a woman who was on a much higher level than those around her. She is surrounded by monsters." (in Volkov 107) This is an altogether quite different view of the Lady Macbeth stereotype than might be expected, and Shostakovich's musical style and sympathetic portrayal of the character famously earned him Josef Stalin's wrath, as typified by this invective in *Pravda* (28 January 1936): "The composer of *Lady Macbeth* was forced to borrow from jazz its nervous, convulsive, and spasmodic music in order to lend *passion* to his characters" (original emphasis).

As Fanning indicates, Shostakovich's portrayal of the Lady Macbeth character in a more or less sympathetic light was a departure from Leskov's original moral perspective in the short story:

Where in *The Nose* Shostakovich professed maximum fidelity to Gogol, here he deliberately inverted Leskov's attitude to his heroine, Katerina Izmaylova, excusing her murders and laying the blame on the surrounding social order. There is nothing to stop us reading the indictment in *Lady Macbeth* as allegorically applicable to other societies, including Shostakovich's own.

(n.p.)

John O'Connor details the notorious controversy that sprang up around Shostakovich's masterpiece, concluding: "Not only was it a thinly veiled comment on the state of post-revolutionary Soviet Russia; it openly depicted sex, and portrayed the murdering Katerina sympathetically. There were to be no more performances in Stalin's lifetime." (214)

Thus, with a clear understanding of the centrality of her vocal role in *The Blanket of the Dark*, Matambo spent a lot of time and energy learning the music in advance and was well prepared when the rehearsal process began. Bonati noted and recognised her devotion to the project and attention to the details of the music ([A] n.p.). In a subsequent informal discussion with the author, Matambo confirmed that it had been a challenging experience which moved her out of her 'comfort zone', but that ultimately the performance itself had been rewarding once the challenges of the music had been overcome. These sentiments were echoed by other members of the ensemble who likewise highlighted the challenges and rewards of realising the music in performance.

In response to a question that I posed to Bonati regarding the status of the musicians who participated in the original performance of the piece, he responded by confirming that "all the musicians in the ParmaFrontiere Orchestra are professional. They are some of the most interesting players in the scene." (Bonati [A] n.p.) Such experienced professionals would already have undergone the socialisation processes described by R. Keith Sawyer:

In both improvisational theater and jazz, performers must first be trained in improvisation in classes, and then socialized into the community of practice through rehearsals and, finally, performances in front of an audience.

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For a student ensemble, performing *The Blanket of the Dark* represented an opportunity to engage with a highly challenging musical work and through this engagement to begin the socialisation process Sawyer refers to above. Since many of them come from a background of training in Western art music and are not experienced improvisers, Bonati's piece – which is thoroughly notated – was very appropriate with regard to the skills and competencies of novice

improvisers. This situation made it possible for informal mentorship to take place, where the more experienced professionals in the Bonati ensemble were able to assist and guide the younger players in dealing with the musical and technical challenges posed by the composition. As British composer and saxophonist Iain Ballamy has observed of the mentorship process, it works in both directions: “It is essential for young players to have contact with musical mentors and for older musicians to connect with an upcoming generation from whom they can learn, whilst passing on their wisdom and craft, ensuring it endures.” (Iain Ballamy’s Anorak n.p.)

The alto saxophonist Rick van Heerden took care of many of the soloing duties during the performance, but Bonati also used a number of gestures in his conducting to shape collective and solo improvisation in the moment. These included indications as to duration, pitch, and dynamic levels which share a degree of similarity with other gesture-based systems such as Conduction (devised by the improviser Butch Morris) and the New York-based alto saxophonist and composer Walter Thompson’s Soundpainting (see Duby). In the context of *The Blanket of the Dark*, these improvised sections contributed both to the dramatic tension and atmosphere of the piece as well as providing opportunities for novice improvisers to create spontaneous music in the moment.

Bonati, Verdi, the Duke and the Bard

The British jazz composer Graham Collier, in referring to jazz composition as a continuum, has characterised Bonati’s vision as composer and educator as “a good exemplar” of this continuum: “As an instrumentalist, composer, educator and director of the Parma JazzFrontiere Festival, he knows the past is important, but is working for the future as well.” (Collier [B] n.p.)

The past speaks directly to us through *The Blanket of the Dark* in a number of ways: two of Bonati’s compositions (*Lady Morley* and *Lady Tango*) are based on material from a *Fantasia* for two bass viols composed by Shakespeare’s contemporary Thomas Morley, and there is a direct quotation of the *Lacrymosa* from Verdi’s *Messa di requiem*. As Bonati acknowledges in the notes to the recording:

A sincere and essential homage to Verdi, other than the presence of *Lacrymosa* from the *Messa di Requiem* is the use of the *scala enigmatica* (one of the many innovations that the maestro from Bussetto pulled out of his elegant top hat) in the sleepwalker scene and the ostinato rhythmic pattern in quadruplets *ostinato (sic)* in the finale quoting the Prelude of *Macbeth*.

(n.p.)

In so saying, Bonati indicates his awareness of Verdi’s legacy, the original inspiration for the piece having been the centenary of Verdi’s death in 2001. Initially Bonati wished to write a piece based on Verdi’s music and especially his female characters, but as the work progressed his attention shifted to consideration of the two Verdi operas directly inspired by Shakespeare, *Otello* and *Macbeth*.

The inclusion of the faintly anachronistic *Lacrymosa* in *The Blanket of the Dark* (as a reduced version for small ensemble) is a moment of clear tonality in a musical landscape which is predominantly fairly dissonant or atonal, and in this instance a setting from which the singer is absent. The *Lacrymosa* melody instead forms the backdrop to a piano improvisation by Stefano Battaglia (on the original recording). Writing of Battaglia, Joslyn Laine notes: “Active in both classical and jazz music, he has performed at a number of European festivals of each, including the 1986 *J.S. Bach Festival* in Düsseldorf and the *Umbria Jazz Festival* on several occasions during the ’80s and ’90s.” (n.p.) Both he and Bonati seem demonstrably at home with the demands and different languages of each genre.

Steven Loewy’s review of *The Blanket of the Dark* acknowledges Bonati’s “depth of vision” and compares his working methods to those of Duke Ellington:

There are few writers anywhere with the depth of vision of Bonati or with his encyclopedic knowledge of musical traditions, and it is not difficult to compare his *modus operandi* to that

of Ellington, by way of a wholly different set of influences, regional, ethnic, and operational. While the instant recording is difficult to grasp, it rewards the attentive listener with densely layered hooks that challenge conventional perspectives. Bonati is nobody's person but his own, and this release adds another important page to his discography, which is over time becoming one of the most impressive collections of works for large ensembles.

(n.p.)

In contrast to the lavish staging of Verdi's *Macbeth*, Bonati's *The Blanket of the Dark* was performed in the fairly austere setting of the Drill Hall at St Andrew's College, with rudimentary lighting and the performers on the same level as the audience. It might be argued that this lack of an overtly theatrical setting opens the way for audience members to construct their own version of events from the musical cues provided and that their experience of the performance is a kind of *tabula rasa* for the audience. Since little is happening in the way of grand gestures on a theatrical level other than the activities of the musicians and the conductor, members of the audience are free to conjure up whatever imagery or recollections they care to through listening. As Simon Hattenstone puts it: "Listening is hearing connected to the intellect, the emotions, all the cultural baggage that you carry." (quoted in Oddey 173)

Whether demonstrating "cultural baggage" or simply an awareness of the past, Bonati and Collier both (like many other jazz arrangers) recognise the contribution made to the field by Duke Ellington, perhaps one of the twentieth century's most significant composers. Writing about Ellington's 1957 Shakespeare-inspired suite *Such Sweet Thunder*, Douglas M. Lanier characterises the composition as follows:

He conceives of his suite as a series of musical portraits of Shakespearean characters, ending coda-like with a portrait of Shakespeare himself – it is essentially a suite of solos. The well-worn conception of Shakespeare as primarily a creator of distinctive characters accords with Ellington's own compositional methods, for he famously used the distinctive sound of individual band members as a starting point for his compositions. Strikingly, Ellington plays down the tragic trajectories of Shakespeare's plots, reserving indication of their fates for a single ominous final note or unresolved chord.

(n.p.)

While Bonati has recently paid tribute to the Duke in performing selections from Ellington's *Sacred Concerts* in Parma (April 2009), *The Blanket of the Dark* clearly is conceived differently from *Such Sweet Thunder*. Throughout the suite, Ellington tends to downplay the tragic turn in Shakespeare, as Lanier notes. In contrast, Bonati's *Blanket of the Dark* depicts Lady Macbeth's descent into madness in uncompromising terms. In notes to the recording, he writes: "Lady Macbeth lives an inner life which is parallel to the events of the tragedy, an obscure path (originally: *un oscuro percorso*) driving her down, slowly but surely, to darkness, sorrow and self-destruction." (Bonati [C] n.p.) *Oscuro* in Italian can also signify 'dark', as in the term *chiaroscuro*, and certainly the music conveys a sense of foreboding from the outset, maintaining the dramatic tension through a dark and dissonant soundscape.

A notable exception is Bonati's mostly tonal setting of the *Witches' Dance*. Terry Eagleton comments: "The witches signify a realm of non-meaning and poetic play which hovers at the work's margins, one which has its own kind of truth; and their words to Macbeth catalyze this region of otherness and desire within himself, so that by the end of the play it has flooded up from within him to shatter and engulf his previously assured identity." (2) Obviously, in the setting of *The Blanket of the Dark*, the previously assured identity to which Eagleton refers is that of Lady Macbeth, and her progressive inner disintegration bears witness to the dire consequences of attempts to overturn a patriarchal social order. Catherine Belsey's (135) eloquently framed question emphasises this aspect of *Macbeth*: "How are we to read this play, where the feminine is exiled or killed, witches should be women but have beards (1.3.44), Macbeth's wife demands to be unsexed in order to be a better partner in crime (1.5.39), and masculinity exceeds its own bounds – but only just – and becomes tyranny?"

Group flow

Performing the piece required a high degree of focus and concentration from each participant in following Bonati's conducting and the musical score, the kind of commitment that the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described as a "flow activity" (30ff). This term describes a task exhibiting a high degree of congruency between challenges (in this case, of performing the music) and skills (the ability to perform it accurately). Csikszentmihalyi defines the conditions for this in terms of clarity of goals:

Flow tends to occur when a person faces a clear set of goals that require appropriate responses. It is easy to enter flow in games such as chess, tennis, or poker, because they have goals and rules for action that make it possible for the player to act without questioning what should be done, and how. For the duration of the game the player lives in a self-contained universe where everything is black and white. The same clarity of goals is present if you perform a religious ritual, play a musical piece, weave a rug, write a computer program, climb a mountain, or perform surgery.

(28-29)

The only drawback in applying Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow to the Bonati ensemble's performance is that Csikszentmihalyi tends to frame the flow experience at the level of the individual participant. His student R. Keith Sawyer, himself an occasional jazz pianist, has extended Csikszentmihalyi's concept to account for the flow experience in a group context. Various descriptions as "group flow" or "group genius", Sawyer's work ([A], [B], [C], [D]) has provided an interpretative framework on the ensemble level. Sawyer's notions of group flow and group genius provide an account of improvisational activities for performing groups and organisations alike, and recent findings in neuroscience have lent support to the idea that group genius may be located in a combination of neural networks. In describing these networks, the philosopher Paul Churchland states: "Human social cognition is at least comparable in its subtlety and complexity to human physical cognition, and in both cases the neural networks involved have scores or even hundreds of distinct neuronal layers, each contributing its small chorus to the collective cognitive performance." (180)

In the case of the Bonati ensemble's performance, these neural networks enabling each individual musician to engage in the formidably complex task of musical interaction are working in communicative interaction: with their instrument of choice and the musical score, with their fellow-musicians, and with the audience through the process of performance itself. In this sense, a particular musical ensemble may be said to behave in similar fashion to any group of specialists whose energies are devoted to an absorbing task, be it a symphony orchestra, a football team, or the cast of a play, for argument's sake. Churchland's concept of human social cognition goes some distance in explaining the mystery of the group flow phenomenon. It is tempting to attempt a description of the phenomenology of a given performance in metaphysical terms such as energy or spirit, but perhaps it is simply a case of the formation of a number of individual neural networks simultaneously united in a social process. Bastien and Hostager describe the underpinnings of their research methodology as follows:

Symbolic Interactionism views human beings as actively engaged in constructing meaning, relationships, and what are perceived as the rules and structures of society. It is an individualistically oriented theory of people and society, locating action with the individual as an actor rather than seeing people as essentially reactive elements of a social system.

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Seeing the activities of the Bonati ensemble through Symbolic Interactionist lenses does not of necessity exalt the individual above the collective. Bastien and Hostager's study is above all things predicated on the communication protocols of their object of research (a jazz quartet creating spontaneous music through the social determinants as well as the enabling circumstances of group interaction).

As an exercise in *praxis*, “the ancient Greek term for acquired skills, for learned abilities, for practical knowledge or knowledge of how to do things” (Churchland 158), the staging of *The Blanket of the Dark* enabled a group of musicians in a small university town in South Africa to unite in the engrossing task of performing a complex and emotionally charged piece of music. I have no doubt in my mind that this was a formative learning experience for many of the young musicians involved, and certainly the realisation of the composer’s aims empowered performers and audience alike to gain renewed respect for the suffering of the unfortunate Scotsman’s spouse as depicted in Bonati’s majestic score.

Author’s note: As Graham Collier states, “Jazz is a continuum from Louis [Armstrong] all the way up to Roberto Bonati and beyond. We owe students an education that will demonstrate this.” (Collier [A] n.p.) I believe that all of us gained an understanding of Collier’s view of jazz as a continuum through this experience. My gratitude and thanks go to Alberto Manai of the Italian Institute of Culture (Pretoria), Conservatorio “A. Boito” di Parma and Rhodes University for logistical and financial support, the members of the Bonati ensemble and especially Roberto Bonati for his leadership and vision in making the project possible. This article is based upon work supported financially by the National Research Foundation (NRF), but the opinions and findings it expresses are those of the author and the NRF does not accept liability in this regard.

NOTES

1. The Bonati ensemble consisted of the following participants: Lotta Matambo (MMus Finland: voice), Nick Fidler (BMus I: viola), Elizabeth Baird (BA III USA: cello), David Scott (BA III: trumpet), Andrea Hobson (MMus: euphonium), Dan Lulua (MMus: trombone), Hilary Paterson (MMus, professional musician: oboe), Andrea Wilde (BMus IV: clarinet), Julia Saporta (BA III: clarinet), Rick van Heerden (MMus, professional musician: alto saxophone), Tracy Beangstrom (BA III: tenor saxophone), Luke Clayton (BMus IV: guitar), Gareth Walwyn (PhD: assistant musical director, piano), Marc Duby (PhD, professional musician: double bass), and Jay Latter (BMus IV: drums).

2. O’Connor concludes by describing the consequences of this notion for politicians’ wives as follows: “These days, any politician’s wife who dares to deviate for a moment from her allotted doormat status, and whose career background, wit and professional skills ought to recommend her as potentially valuable helpmeet will sooner or later be labelled ‘the Lady Macbeth of ...’ (Downing Street, the White House, Fleet Street ... fill in as required), her alleged influence suspected as being both sinister and dangerously unaccountable” (178).

3. It is important to note in this regard that Shostakovich drew his inspiration for the opera from a short story by Nikolai Leskov, and not the Shakespearean text itself.

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