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Starmount Vespers is an oratorio-style composition for SATB choir and string orchestra on the subjects of cyclicity and self-similarity. Cyclical phenomena are widespread in the natural world (day and night, sleeping and waking, seasons, tides, etc.) and occur on many structural levels. *Starmount Vespers* seeks to exemplify these harmonious relationships in both text and music, drawing influence from other cyclical works (such as Orff's *Carmina Burana* and Vivaldi's *Gloria*), the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence, and the compositional approaches of Danish composer Per Nørgård. Nørgård's third symphony, in particular, is a mature representation of his melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic self-similar structures and informed much of *Starmount Vespers'* composition. The texts were selected from the poetry of Thomas Hardy, H.P. Nichols, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and were adapted by the composer to better fit the narrative. The resulting fourteen-minute composition both delivers a textual narrative on self-similarity and, through fractal patterns embedded in the musical parameters, *embodies* the text.

STARMOUNT VESPERS: AN ORATORIO FOR VOICES AND STRINGS

by

John A. Stemke

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Music

> Greensboro 2016

> > Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Starmount Vespers is an oratorio-style work for SATB choir and string orchestra on the subjects of cyclicity and self-similarity. Cyclical phenomena are widespread in the natural world, and often occur on many structural levels; for example, one could consider the earth's daily rotation around its axis and yearly rotation around the sun to be similar events operating at different speeds. By writing *Starmount Vespers*, I hope to embody these types of harmonious relationships in both text and music, drawing influence from other cyclical works (such as Orff's *Carmina Burana* and Vivaldi's *Gloria*), the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence, and the hierarchical compositional approaches of Danish composer Per Nørgård. Nørgård's third symphony, in particular, is a mature representation of his melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic self-similar structures and informed much of my work.

To form the text for *Starmount Vespers*, I selected poems by several writers and adapted them into a cyclical narrative. The finalized text used in the score is original to my composition; in addition to reordering and repeating several lines, I wrote new stanzas to emphasize certain themes or link existing material. All of the text can be derived from "The Selfsame Song," by Thomas Hardy; "The Throstle," by Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and both versions of "Evening Hymn," by H.P. Nichols. The full texts of these poems can be seen in Appendix A.

1

In the first section of *Starmount Vespers*, the narrator (the active voice in the text; not an actual narrator/performer) recalls hearing a bird that has been singing the same song for many years. Second, the bird's song itself is presented: a plea for a new year of renewal. Evening then draws nigh, and the narrator prepares for rest as the bird drifts off to sleep. The narrator then once again recalls the bird's song, this time realizing (and accepting) that both the bird and those with whom the narrator previously listened to its song are no longer living. The narrator then offers an evening prayer of benediction for his loved ones, supplicating for the blessings of morning light.

Many musical features of *Starmount Vespers* exhibit self-similarity. Particularly, patterns of melody, harmony, and rhythm occur on many levels (e.g. over various spans of time), creating tiered, hierarchical relationships. In this way, I posit that the self-similar musical features not only underline and support the narrative, but, over the course of the composition, *become* the structure; that is, these patterns *are* the self-similar phenomena described by the text. After briefly discussing some basic principles of self-similarity (Chapter II) and the influence of Per Nørgård's approaches (Chapter III), I will illustrate the self-similar properties of *Starmount Vespers* (Chapter IV).

CHAPTER II

PRINCIPLES OF SELF-SIMILARITY

The study and application of self-similar structures spans many disciplines such as geometry, number theory, physics, chess, and music.¹ One of the most common selfsimilar patterns studied is the *fractal*, as originally coined by Benoit Mandelbrot in 1975. Although considered difficult to succinctly define,² a fractal can generally be described as a pattern "that can be magnified or reduced infinitely without any essential change in [its] structure.³ An example of a visual fractal is shown in Figure 1. A similar effect can be created by facing two mirrors toward each other and looking into one of them: this will create a chain of reflections growing infinitely smaller inside of itself. Visual fractals also exist in the natural world; coastlines, mountains, snowflakes, trees, ferns, blood vessels, and broccoli all exhibit the same shape on multiple magnification levels. Due to the geometric and proportional nature of these phenomena, fractals are primarily studied by the scientific and mathematical communities.⁴

¹ Ignacio Palacios-Huerta, "Tournaments, Fairness and the Prouhet-Thue-Morse Sequence," *Economic Inquiry* 50.3 (July 2012): 848 (accessed April 3, 2016).

² K.J. Falconer, *Techniques in Fractal Geometry* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, Inc, 1997), xi (accessed April 3, 2016).

³ Anders Beyer, ed, *The Music of Per Nørgård: Fourteen Interpretative Essays* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1996), 66.

⁴ Falconer, *Techniques in Fractal Geometry*, xi.

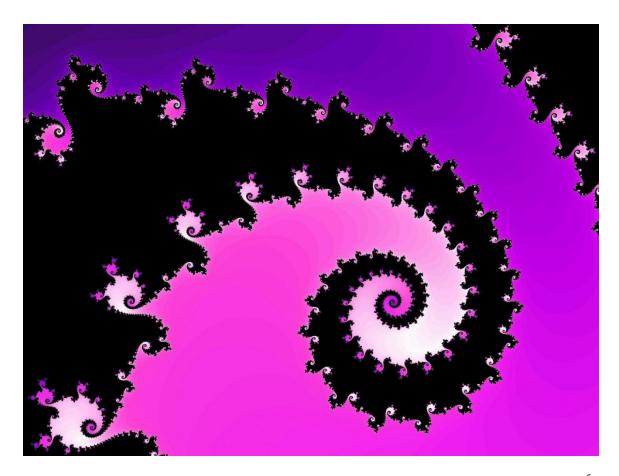


Figure 1. A Fractal Spiral. "Zooming" in or out will eventually result in the same image.⁵

In music, fractal structures can be created within the domain of one or more parameters, such as pitch, rhythm, timbre, texture, or dynamics. For example, a musical event that takes place within a 4/4 measure could, on a larger scale, occur over the course of a four-bar phrase or over the course of four phrases. Parameters can also be mapped onto various number series such as the Fibonacci sequence (as used by Iannis Xenakis

⁵ Irina Pechkareva, "Decorative Fractal Spiral." http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=108880&picture=decorative-fractal-spiral&large=1 (accessed April 4, 2016).

and others),⁶ the Golden Spiral, or the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence (which I will discuss in Chapter III). Additionally, composers such as Gary Lee Nelson have used computer algorithms and replacement grammar to manipulate musical elements into fractal-like structures.⁷

While using numerical structures to organize musical parameters was not a new practice when Mandelbrot brought fractals into mainstream research, the recursive and infinite nature of fractals offered new perspectives and challenges: how could a composer write music that repeats endlessly yet still maintains listener interest? Many composers have solved this problem by ensuring that the music takes precedence over the algorithm. For example, after using a Hilbert curve to generate one of his compositions, Nelson decided that it was "too symmetrical and produced rather dull patterns with little variety in pitch or rhythm," so he then twisted and warped the structure to create asymmetry, which was "better suited to make the piece [he] envisioned."⁸ When asked if Xenakis' mathematically-modeled music is "abstract and sterile," Jonathan Cross wrote, "Not at all. [Xenakis'] music, like the man, is all too human and he always asserted the primacy of music over mathematics—music, he believed, is never reducible to mathematics, even though they have many elements in common."⁹ In a similar manner to Nelson and others, I used fractal patterns in *Starmount Vespers* to primarily to *inform* compositional

⁶ Jonathan Cross, "Composing with Numbers: Sets, Rows and Magic Squares," in *Music and Mathematics: from Pythagoras to Fractals*, edited by John Fauvel, Raybmond Flood, and Robin Wilson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 145-46.

⁷ Gary Lee Nelson, "Real Time Transformation of Musical Material with Fractal Algorithms," Gary Lee Nelson, 1 (accessed January 16, 2016).

⁸ Nelson, "Real Time Transformation of Musical Material with Fractal Algorithms," 6.

⁹ Jonathan Cross, "Composing with Numbers: Sets, Rows and Magic Squares," 145-46.

decisions, generate musical ideas, and ensure large-scale coherence. I will discuss these processes in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER III

INFLUENCE OF PER NØRGÅRD'S MUSICAL APPROACHES

One of the most significant influences on the development of *Starmount Vespers* was the music of Danish composer Per Nørgård. Although his compositional techniques and style have changed over the years, he is perhaps most commonly known for his work during the 1960s and 1970s writing "hierarchical music," where "melody, rhythm and harmony are regulated according to principles derived from the same basic idea, and where many musical processes are kept together in fundamental harmony by their shared relationship with the (sometimes inaudible) basic structure, the infinity series."¹⁰ The series mentioned here is *melodically* infinite; it represents a single sequence of pitches whose entire content and process is generated by the first musical interval. In the case of Figure 2, the generating interval is a diatonic step. Notice that the sequence of pitches can be *exactly* replicated by reading only the every fourth pitch, or every sixteenth pitch.

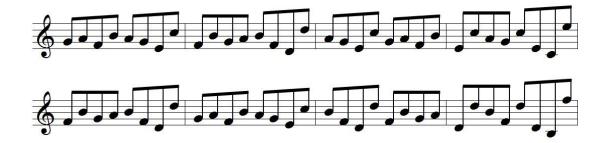


Figure 2. Diatonic Version of Nørgård's Melodic Infinity Series. The first 64 pitches are notated here.

¹⁰ Anders Beyer, ed, *The Music of Per Nørgård: Fourteen Interpretative Essays*, 71.

Nørgård is most well-known for his *melodic* infinity series, but he also utilized infinite self-similar patterns in his rhythmic and harmonic structures. His rhythmic system can be derived from the golden section. Although this hierarchical ratio has been widely used in many disciplines (visual arts, architecture, musical form, paper sizing),¹¹ Nørgård's creation of rhythmic structure from the pattern was novel for its time.¹² Using the natural harmonic series to generate pitch material added an additional layer of self-similarity to his music because the harmonic series is, by definition, a fractal; it contains the entire harmonic series of each of its partials (and the harmonic series of their partials, and so on). This property of the harmonic series is shown in Figure 3.

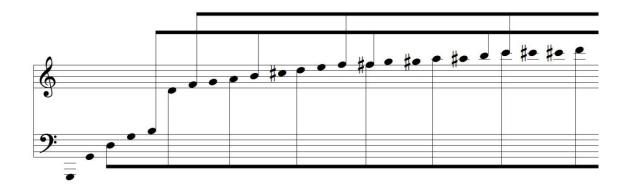


Figure 3. The Harmonic Series as a Fractal.

Nørgård's third symphony, in particular, is considered to be one of the crowning jewels of his career, as it expresses all three infinite series interwoven together. As Erling Kullberg writes,

¹¹ "International Paper Sizes & Formats," *PaperSizes.org*, http://www.papersizes.org/ (accessed April 4, 2016).

¹² Anders Beyer, ed, The Music of Per Nørgård: Fourteen Interpretative Essays, 80.

...this symphony is a *musical* answer to a question posed at the level of *general epistemology*. For many years [Nørgård] had attempted to study and discover why it is that all things in the world seem to be interrelated, both large and small. He became more and more convinced that there was an all-embracing cosmic connection, and this idea forms the theme of the Third Symphony.¹³

Parts of the third symphony use a variation of the melodic infinity series with only two notes; this binary series is also known as the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence. There are a number of possible ways to derive the sequence, but perhaps the easiest is to begin with the generating unit 01 and then initiate a process of replacement, where each 0 becomes 01, and each 1 becomes 10. In this way, 01 becomes 0110. A repetition of this process changes 0110 into 01101001. 01101001 then becomes 0110100110010110. After two more iterations, this sequence of sixteen numbers forms the palindromic sixtyfour-number pattern shown below:

0110 1001 1001 0110 1001 0110 0110 1001 1001 0110 0110 1001 0110 1001 1001 0110

As a derivation of Nørgård's melodic infinity series, this sequence exhibits similar properties. Reading every other number, or every fourth number, or every eighth number, etc. will result in the same sequence of numbers. The third symphony employs the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence most prominently in the section surrounding measure

¹³ Erling Kullberg, "Symphony No. 3," Per Nørgård: An Introduction to the Composer and his Music, http://www.pernoergaard.dk/eng/udvalgte/140.html (accessed March 3, 2016).

65 by replacing 0 and 1 with the pitches A and G-sharp. A reduced score is shown in Figure 4. Notice how the same sequence operates concurrently on multiple metric levels.



Figure 4. Symphony No. 3, Reduced Score, mm. 65-67.

Notably, the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence was also part of my initial inspiration for *Starmount Vespers*. I was already familiar with its structure due to its use in turntaking games and tournaments as a better approximation of fairness than strict alternation¹⁴ and sought to find a way to musically represent it. While researching its history and discovery, I learned of Per Nørgård's music and instantly began studying it for creative stimulation. In order to keep *Starmount Vespers* more focused, I decided to

¹⁴ Ignacio Palacios-Huerta, "Tournaments, Fairness and the Prouhet-Thue-Morse Sequence," *Economic Inquiry* 50.3 (July 2012): 848-49.

specifically concentrate on Nørgård's use of the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence, rather than trying to incorporate his other treatments of melody, rhythm, and harmony. As I will show in Chapter IV, several elements of *Starmount Vespers* are based on the structure of the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence.

CHAPTER IV

SELF-SIMILARITY IN STARMOUNT VESPERS

In the same way that the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence can be generated from its first element (01), much of *Starmount Vespers*' content can be derived from its initial materials. In this chapter, I will discuss my use of the opening ostinato as melodic generator, and first section (mm. 1-80) as harmonic generator. Additionally, I will highlight my use of the Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence in several contexts.

The opening six-note ostinato of *Starmount Vespers*, shown in Figure 5, is the seed from which much of the melodic material in the first section of the composition is generated. The ostinato (E, A, F-sharp, B, C-sharp, A) continues without pause until the end of the first section, with occasional adjustments in instrumentation, tessitura, or pitch content to better fit the local context. The ostinato is the smallest fractal level at which this melodic pattern will occur; a second, higher level can be seen in Figure 6, where the same six ostinato pitches also form the notes of the first phrase sung by the choir when the sopranos and altos enter in measure 18. This is a similar concept to the canonic technique of augmentation; however, *augmentation* implies a precise mathematical ratio between the rhythmic values of the two levels (generally 2:1),¹⁵ whereas this choir melody treats rhythm freely. The sung words, "A bird bills the selfsame song," suggest

¹⁵ Thomas Benjamin, *The Craft of Tonal Counterpoint*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 117, 290.

that the violin ostinato may represent the birdsong, and by no coincidence, this "song" is significant to the narrative structure of *Starmount Vespers*.



Figure 5. Violin Ostinato, mm. 1-4.



Figure 6. Soprano, mm. 18-23.

Additionally, the pitches that begin the first five phrases sung by the choir in the first section outline the same ostinato pattern. This can be seen in Appendix B, measures 18, 23, 32, 36, and 40. Notably, the sixth and final pitch, A, is missing. The problem of this "misplaced phrase" is essential to the musical narrative and is eventually resolved in the coda of *Starmount Vespers*. This deformity also occurs textually; the first section's text (Thomas Hardy's "The Selfsame Song") is a three-stanza poem, but its final stanza, like the final pitch of the ostinato, does not appear until the coda, in measure 359.

In the same way that the opening melodic ostinato occurs on multiple levels throughout the composition, the formal harmonic plan of the first section also occurs at a larger fractal level throughout the piece. Figure 7 shows the harmonic centricities of each section of *Starmount Vespers*. Dividing the opening section into five parts creates a "map" of the overall harmonic plan for the piece because, like the aforementioned opening string ostinato, the harmonic structure of the first section is simply a more succinct presentation of the harmonic structure of the entire composition (A, B/G, C/A-flat, G, and A) embedded into itself. The five parts in question are measures 1-43 (text stanza 1), measures 44-51 (first half of text stanza 2), measures 52-59 (second half of text stanza 2), measures 60-76 (text stanza 1 reprise), and measures 77-80 (coda).

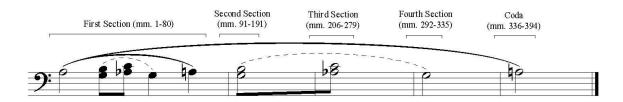


Figure 7. Harmonic Centricities in Starmount Vespers.

The centricities in Figure 7 are also similar to the Prouhet-Thue-Morse pattern. If the C/A-flat third part (or section, depending on the level of examination) is regarded as "neighboring" to the surrounding G sections, then both the first section and all of *Starmount Vespers* demonstrate an A-G-G-A iteration of the pattern. The palindromic nature of the Prouhet-Thue-Morse pattern was one of the primary reasons I decided to employ it in this composition; instead of simply alternating back and forth between two ideas, I could delay the return of the first idea—in this case, an A centricity—until the end. Combining this harmonic structure with the aforementioned "misplaced phrases" of the melody and text allowed me to build structural tension by withholding significant events until the coda.

Additionally, tracing the iterations of the opening melody (a folk-like setting of the first stanza of Hardy's "The Selfsame Song") creates a large-scale iteration of the Prouhet-Thue-Morse pattern. The primary melody appears twice in the first section: once in A major (measure 18) and once in G major (measure 43). The fourth section brings about its return in G major (measure 296), and the coda presents it for the final time in A major (measure 335). Combining these four occurrences yields yet another A-G-G-A structure. Within each of these sections, "half-patterns" also occur locally in the persistent string chords; Figure 8 demonstrates the A-G of the first section (left) and the G-A of the fourth section (right).

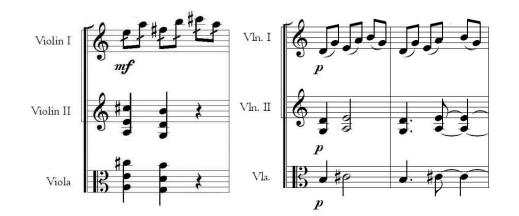


Figure 8. String Chords, m. 4 and mm. 297-298.

The Prouhet-Thue-Morse sequence also generates several smaller-scale structures in *Starmount Vespers*, such as the music of the violins and violas beginning in measure 232 (shown in Figure 9). The uppermost pitches of the Violin I part follow this pattern exactly, in a similar manner to the Nørgård excerpt from Figure 3. The rhythms of the Violin II and Viola parts also exhibit this pattern, alternating between duple and triplet eighth notes.

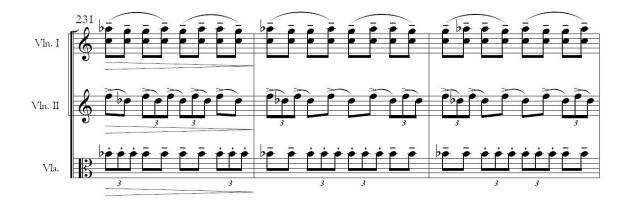


Figure 9. Violins and Violas, mm. 231-233.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

One may wonder if adhering to a strict set of structural principles would limit compositional inspiration and musical quality, as the composer is "forced" to include specific musical elements at certain points throughout the work. While writing *Starmount Vespers*, I found that this method achieved the opposite effect; my studies of self-similar structures served as a constant source of motivation and impetus. Simply beginning to write music that strictly adhered to the fractal structures often inspired me to alter or expand them. Lionel Pike writes,

Nørgård sometimes twists or ignores the system for musical purposes; and one may wonder whether the vast apparatus of underlying theory is strictly necessary. Yet he himself maintains that many of his inspirations would not have occurred to him without the infinity series.¹⁶

In this way, my desire to develop the music further—and avoid monotony—led me to modify the patterns and use their resulting musical textures as the basis for a section of music. For example, the melodic content of the third section (the violin lines in Figure 9 and the choir melody, mm. 206-260) was initially written as an exact Prouhet-Thue-Morse pattern. While the melodic contour of the choir melody in measures 206-222 (see Appendix B) still adheres to this structure, the melody when the choir reenters in

¹⁶ Lionel Pike, "Review," *Music & Letters* 78.1 (Feb. 1997), http://www.jstor.org/stable/737521 (accessed January 3, 2016), 126.

measure 228 does not. Although it begins in a similar manner, by measure 233 the melody has clearly changed.

In my future work, I hope to expand *Starmount Vespers'* compositional procedures by finding additional structures on which to base my music. While the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic patterns in *Starmount Vespers* certainly have further avenues to explore, researching new patterns and properties of self-similarity will both spawn new musical ideas and supplement my understanding of familiar concepts. Additionally, I would like to further investigate the relationship between text and musical structure. The texts of *Starmount Vespers* are *about* cyclical and self-similar phenomena, and I sought to embody them in the music. However, I marvel at the prospect of one day setting a text that, instead, *is* self-similar, and eagerly wonder what types of musical connections would result.

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APPENDIX A

SELECTED TEXTS

The Selfsame Song (Thomas Hardy)¹⁷

A bird bills the selfsame song, With never a fault in its flow, That we listened to here those long Long years ago.

A pleasing marvel is how A strain of such rapturous rote Should have gone on thus till now Unchanged in a note!

- But it's not the selfsame bird. -No: perished to dust is he . . . As also are those who heard That song with me.

¹⁷ Thomas Hardy, "The Selfsame Song," Public Domain Poetry, http://www.public-domain-poetry.com/thomas-hardy/selfsame-song-17166 (accessed January 26, 2016).

The Throstle (Alfred, Lord Tennyson)¹⁸

'Summer is coming, summer is coming. I know it, I know it, I know it. Light again, leaf again, life again, love again,' Yes, my wild little Poet.

Sing the new year in under the blue. Last year you sang it as gladly. 'New, new, new, new'! Is it then so new That you should carol so madly?

'Love again, song again, nest again, young again,' Never a prophet so crazy! And hardly a daisy as yet, little friend, See, there is hardly a daisy.

'Here again, here, here, here, happy year'! O warble unchidden, unbidden! Summer is coming, is coming, my dear, And all the winters are hidden.

¹⁸ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Throstle," Public Domain Poetry, http://www.public-domain-poetry.com/alfred-lord-tennyson/throstle-655 (accessed January 26, 2016).

Evening Hymn [1] (H.P. Nichols)¹⁹

The bird within its nest Has sung its evening hymn, And I must go to quiet rest, As the bright west grows dim.

I see the twinkling star, That, when the sun has gone, Is shining out the first afar, To tell us day is done.

If on this day I've been A selfish, naughty child, May God forgive the wrong I've done, And make me kind and mild.

May he still bless and keep My father, mother dear; And may the eye that cannot sleep Watch o'er our pillows here,

And guard us from all ill, Through this long, silent night, And bring us, by His holy will, To see the morning light.

Evening Hymn [2] (H.P. Nichols)²⁰

The sun has set behind the hill, The bird is sleeping in his nest; And now, when all around is still, I lay me down to welcome rest.

May the kind God, who lives above, And watches o'er us day and night, Bless us, and grant us, in His love, Again to see the morning light.

¹⁹ H.P. Nichols, "Evening Hymn," Public Domain Poetry, http://www.public-domain-poetry.com/h-pnichols/evening-hymn-28000 (accessed January 26, 2016).

²⁰ H.P. Nichols, "Evening Hymn," Public Domain Poetry, http://www.public-domain-poetry.com/h-p-nichols/evening-hymn-27977 (accessed January 26, 2016).

APPENDIX B

SCORE OF STARMOUNT VESPERS

an Oratorio for Voices and Strings

2016

Ash Stemke

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Starmount Vespers



Starmount Vespers





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C.













