# Cloud-Polyphonies

## I - Starlings

for six marimbas

**James Wood**

*to Michael Rosen*

***Cloud-Polyphonies***
2010-11

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## INSTRUMENTATION

Six 4-octave marimbas

Each player also requires two woodblocks. If possible, all woodblocks should be genuine, traditional wooden woodblocks, not plastic 'poly-blocks'. The two woodblocks for each player should be pitched about a 3rd apart, and each of the six pairs of woodblocks should be pitched in approximately the same register. A strong 'clattering' sound should result.

The players operate as two groups:

A: Players 1 - 3
B: Players 4 - 6

There is no need to separate the groups on the stage, but the three players of each group should be positioned very close to each other.

## ENSEMBLE

It is strongly recommended to use a click-track for the performance of movement 1 (*Starlings*) and movement 3 (*Buffalo*), whilst movement 2 is better performed with a conductor (or as chamber music without a conductor). A Logic File click-track is available through James Wood Edition, although it is likely that each performing group will prefer to make their own click-track.

## Notes for performance

### Accidentals

Accidentals appear before every note to which they apply except in the case of immediately repeated notes.  For extra clarity, cautionary naturals are used to cancel previous sharps or flats both in the same bar and across barlines.

### Dynamics

| | |
|---|---|
| *...mf* | a dynamic marked thus indicates the dynamic reached as part of (or at the end of) a current (or preceding) *crescendo* or *diminuendo*. It is not a sudden change of dynamic. |
| solo | passages marked 'solo' should be played one degree louder. |
| *meno* | passages marked '*meno*' should be played one degree quieter. |

### Articulation and phrasing

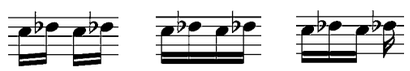
Rhythmic phrasing and articulation is expressed in notation primarily by the beaming together of groups of sixteenth-notes. The first note in each group should always be slightly stressed, just enough for the polyphonic, rhythmic phrasing to be clearly apparent in performance. The amount of in any case this type of stress should be less than a *marcato*, which in turn should be markedly less than an accent. Thus the three grades of stress increase in strength as follows:

'stress'  natural, subtle but clear, like the natural stress in speech

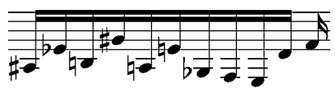
*'marcato'*  marked - more weight from the arm

'accent'  a sharp accent from the wrist

Hence there should be a clear difference in phrasing and articulation between the following:



During longer phrases care should be taken to play the phrases as smoot



Clearly, with this method of notation the beams no longer provide visual orientation to the main pulse, and therefore dotted barlines are used throughout to indicate the main (quarter-note or dotted quarter-note) beats.

### Mallets

Three types of mallets are needed for Cloud-Polyphonies I:

| | |
|---|---|
| VS-5 yarn | Medium-hard yarn-covered marimba mallets - for example Van Sice #5. [Van Sice/Vic Firth 115 (grey) used for Yale recording] |
| M3 rubber | Medium-hard rubber mallets - for example Musser M3, Vic Firth 155 (black), [Vic Firth 132 (green) used for Yale recording] |
| M4 rubber | hard rubber mallets - eg Musser M4 [Vic Firth 134 (yellow) used for Yale recording] |

The composer is aware of the vast quantity of mallet-types available on the market today, and so these specific models are intended only as examples. However it is important to respect the indication 'yarn' or 'rubber', whatever alternatives are chosen. Also please note that the change from M3 rubber to VS-5 yarn (and vice versa) should bring about primarily a change of colour and not of hardness, thus these two mallet-types should be of comparable hardness.

***Cloud-Polyphonies***
2010-2011
for percussion sextet

Like many composers before me, I have long held a fascination for the phenomenon of clouds. For Debussy they represented the perfect natural model for his "orchestration without feet" - a music which floats free from any discernible or definable bass-line; for Xenakis, Stochastic Clouds were a phenomenon where a myriad of random elements come together to form a tangible, controllable mass, whilst in Messiaen's *Transfiguration de notre Seigneur, Jésus Christ*, the mystical cloud which enveloped Christ on the mountain is depicted almost literally by clouds of string glissandi.

My interest recalls a little of all these representations, but specifically refers to the movements of large formations of organisms - whether animals, insects, birds, fish, water, steam or crowds of human beings - where, although the general direction of the mass is clear, the relationship in space between the individual elements within the mass are in a constant state of flux. Their freedom and individuality is nevertheless kept in check by a shared sense of purpose, as if some mystical spirit were controlling the behaviour of the individual elements, as a choreographer directs a group of dancers. Specific examples of this are shoals of fish, water particles subjected to the ebb and flow of tidal currents, flocks of migratory birds, herds of animals, clouds of water vapour, swarms of bees, and even crowds of Pilgrims at the Hajj.

When Mike Rosen first had the idea of inviting me to write a percussion sextet for a consortium of American Universities, my first thoughts were that a percussion sextet could be the perfect medium to explore this phenomenon in musical terms - and this led directly to *Cloud-Polyphonies*.

The 'Polyphonies' of the title refers directly to this phenomenon, and is realised in musical terms by a complex web of 'Points of Imitation', or distorted canons. The musical material for each percussionist consists of two distinct, polyphonic 'voices', making a total of twelve voices in all. The individual motifs which make up each voice are imitated in turn by each of the six percussionists, although both the motifs themselves and the rhythmic distance of each imitation are subject to continual transformation. Melodic fragments, varying in length between a single note and longer phrases of up to 13 notes, each with their own distinctive form and character, are sent across the six percussionists like waves - either from right to left or from left to right - sometimes very slowly, and sometimes very fast like ricochets.

Each of the three movements of *Cloud-Polyphonies* is scored for a completely different instrumentation and can be performed separately, or in any combination, as required. The first movement, *Starlings*, is written for six marimbas and woodblocks, the second, *Clouds*, for metal instruments and prepared piano, and the third, *Buffalo*, for drums, simantras and bull-roarers.

***I: Starlings***

The first movement of *Cloud-Polyphonies* concerns the extraordinary aerobatic displays of starlings, as they gather together before migration. At first just a few starlings gather on telegraph wires, nervously testing their aerobatic potential individually. As more and more starlings gather, these pre-migration test-flights become increasingly spectacular until finally several thousand birds form up together to perform an extended synchronised display. From this moment on, focus on any particular individual bird is lost, as one becomes mesmerized by the brilliantly synchronised aerobatics and shape-transformations of an enormous black cloud of several thousand starlings. Gradually, following some arcane signal, the cloud disappears and is gone for the winter.

***II: Clouds***

Just once in my life I have had the experience of going hot-air ballooning. It was a beautiful day in August, and for a couple of hours we glided silently over the Oxfordshire countryside. Never before have I been so conscious of the presence and activities of the clouds. As we drifted up to our cruising altitude, focus on these mystical, intangible and supernatural phenomena was intensified as we gradually became enveloped by an overwhelming sensation of deepest silence.

Our pilot explained how to 'read' the clouds - an essential skill for all hot-air balloonists. Active clouds (*cumulus,* or *cumulus congestus*) are those huge structures with sharply defined edges, which build from the powerful upward draught of a thermal within them - they are dangerous, and therefore avoided by balloonists. Passive clouds (*cirrus*) are generally at a much higher altitude, and have more of a wispy appearance - these are harmless, although should be watched, in case they develop into active clouds. In *Clouds*, passive clouds are represented by sounds produced by bowing, scraping or rubbing, and active clouds by sounds produced by striking. Between these two extremes come sounds sustained by tremolandi - these represent the clouds' transitional state, as they develop from passive into active.

***III: Buffalo***

The final movement of *Cloud-Polyphonies* invokes that quintessential American symbol, the North American Bison, or Buffalo. Here the continuously changing waves of sound which zigzag across the line of 66 drums recall the sound of herds of galloping buffalo - however the sound comes not from the animals, but from the earth itself - an ever-changing terrain of mud, stone, brush, pampas and water becomes the surface for a thousand pounding buffalo hooves, as the herd stampedes swiftly across the plains.

James Wood
March 2011

**Durations:**

| | |
|---|---|
| I:Starlings | c.8 minutes |
| II:Clouds | c.14 minutes |
| III:Buffalo | c.13 minutes |
| Total: | c.35 minutes |

***Cloud-Polyphonies*** was commissioned by a consortium of American and Canadian Universities, Conservatories and individuals, headed by Michael Rosen (Oberlin Conservatory of Music), in cooperation with Slagwerk Den Haag, Holland.

The North American consortium comprised the following institutions and individuals:

Oberlin Conservatory of Music - Michael Rosen
University of Akron - Larry Snider
Baylor University - Todd Meehan
Eastman School of Music - Michael Burritt
University of Kentucky - James Campbell
University of Massachusetts, Amherst - Ayano Kataoka
Matthew McClung
McGill University - Aiyun Huang
University of Michigan Percussion Ensemble
Michigan State University - Gwendolyn Burgett Thrasher
New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble - Frank Epstein
nief-norf Project - Andy Bliss, Kerry O'Brien, Erin Walker, Eric Willie, Mike Truesdell, Bill Sallak
Northern Illinois University Percussion Ensemble - Greg Beyer
University of North Carolina, Pembroke - Tracy Wiggins
Steven Schick - *in memory of Fred Cooper*
Yale University School of Music and Norfolk Chamber Music Festival - Robert Van Sice
Manhattan School of Music - Claire Heidrich