

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 Haaj.

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, 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.

1: 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

