

Oreion (of mountains...)

In *Oreion*, completed in March 1989, James Wood has for the first time confronted his powerful and highly developed harmonic and rhythmic language with the instrumental possibilities of a symphony orchestra. He has used very large forces, including quadruple woodwind and brass, two soprano saxophones, two keyboard players, a substantial body of strings and no fewer than six percussionists playing a huge array of different instruments. A number of the percussion instruments have been specially made for this work, including massive pitched woodblocks of exotic hardwood (paurosa) and solid blocks of another hardwood (padauk), which are modelled on a Greek instrument, the simantra.

The title - *Oreion* (its meaning in Greek is 'of mountains. . .') - holds many clues to the composer's idea. Mountains confront us with the power and scale of nature in a way we can scarcely comprehend, let alone abuse (as we trample plants or poison streams). They are beautiful in different ways: in their varied proportions, for example, or in their rock formations, or for the effects of changing colour and light which may be seen from them. When we climb them they themselves seem to change as we become aware of ever greater and greater heights and distances. And in many cultures their peaks have come to be seen as places of metaphysical experience. Plato, for instance, in the *Phaedrus*, found 'communion' with the gods there, and in the Gospels the Evangelists placed the Transfiguration on 'an high mountain'.

The musical imagery and structure of *Oreion* is full of figurative connections with such experiences. There is a clear contrast, for example, between ideas which hardly change at all, and those that are in a state of continuous transformation. And the ideas themselves often evoke an awesome sense of great space and height. But the work's central metaphor is enshrined in its rhythmic discourse. Here eight different rhythmic layers - which we experience at first separately - are gradually brought together into different combinations suggesting ever wider and wider perspectives, until at the mighty climax all eight of them sound together. This is the point of arrival, the moment at which we see the whole range laid out before us.

These rhythmic layers are assigned to two great choirs of instruments, one of wind and brass, the other of percussion. Each is imagined like an SATB chorus. The soprano of the wind includes all the upper instruments, the alto such instruments as the horns and the cor anglais, the tenor the trombones, bassoons and bass clarinets, and the bass consists of the contrabass clarinet, the contrabassoon, the bass trombone and the tuba. The soprano line of the percussion consists of a virtuoso part for the keyboard glockenspiel, the cowbells and the piano, the alto of wooden instruments including the specially made simantras and woodblocks, the tenor of the skin instruments (the drums) and the bass of the gongs and tamtams.

In addition to these choruses and their eight layers of rhythm, there are a number of musical ideas that stand outside the rhythmic argument. Chief among these is a high span of melody, associated at first with the trumpets and later also with the saxophones. This theme, which the composer has said he associates with the image of the sun as source of heat and life, occurs at a number of important points in the work.

Oreion falls into four main sections followed by a coda. It opens with the 'sun' theme on a solo trumpet and centred around the note D. Gradually the wind instruments begin to surround this theme and introduce the eight different rhythmic layers of which the piece is built. The second section begins with an eruption in the brass, but the heart of the argument is again the presentation of the different rhythmic layers, this time on the percussion. The third section is almost a scherzo, in which the rhythms begin to appear in different combinations. For instance, it starts with a vigorous rhythmic counterpoint between the soprano percussion and the soprano woodwind. The fourth section, which opens with a great chorale in the lower brass and woodwind, reaches its climax when all the rhythms are finally brought together into an eight-voice dance in which the whole orchestra joins. In the coda that follows the music swiftly dissolves into its separate parts and ends once more with the 'sun' theme, now a single high A in the saxophones and trumpets.

The composer has pointed to four 'elements' or dimensions in terms of which the music is conceived. He has associated them with the traditional elements of earth, air, fire and water:

Air is the whole dimension of texture. Here the strings come into their own, prolonging the harmonic background with static chords or dissolving into shimmering uncertainty.

Fire is the dimension of motif. The motivic dimension is particularly audible in the brass eruption that opens the second section.

The element of water is imagined as a harmonic motif of a minor third. Such a shift occurs in the second section where along sustained chord in the strings is suddenly heard to move; or again in the fourth section where the change is marked by a prominent celesta part.

Earth is, of course, the fundamental element of rhythm. Everything else is built upon this and everything else depends on it. These 'elements', as their natural counterparts, may exist on their own or may touch and transform one another. Air and water, for example, may meet and become cloud, as their musical counterparts in *Oreion* meet and become the clouds of sound that swirl around the rock of rhythm on which we stand.

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