

Phainomena (1992)

Phainomena was composed in 1991/2 on an Arts Council Bursary. It was first performed by Critical Band (or the Ensemble of the Centre for Microtonal Music, as it was then), the New London Chamber Choir at London's first Weekend of Microtonal Music at the Barbican Centre. It was later substantially revised for the groups' Arts Council Contemporary Music Tour in November 1993.

There are four movements which fall into two main parts - the first part contains the first movement alone, and the second part contains the second, third and fourth movements which follow one another without a break.

The instrumentation is divided into three main groups - Group 1 consists principally of sustaining (melodic) instruments - two flutes, oboe, clarinet, violin, viola, trumpet, trombone, bass trombone and percussion, and Group 2 of non-sustaining (harmonic) instruments- quartertone glockenspiel/bells, quartertone metallophone/bells, two electronic keyboards, cimbalom and two harps. The third group (Chorus group) consists of the eighteen solo voices and tape.

Like my earlier *Stoicheia* (1988), *Phainomena* concerns man's age-old fascination with the constellations of the Zodiac. In both these works the musical material originates from two very different sources - 'Earth Music', which is formed from (man-made) rhythmic cells, and provides the work's structural and rhythmic framework, and 'Constellation Music', formed from a process of transcription and transformation of the star-patterns of the twelve constellations of the Zodiac.

In a similar way to the four seasons, each of the four movements presents a different segment of the six or seven constellations from the Zodiacal cycle. Within each movement (or season), each constellation is represented by a different pair of instruments, one from Group 1 (melodic) and one from Group 2 (harmonic). The diagram below shows the succession of instrumental pairings as they relate to the cycle of constellations and their associated harmonies.

The performance of the Constellation Music arises out of a kind of musical game, played at the end of movement 1 and throughout movement 4; a Signal (consisting of the calling out of the Greek name of one of the constellations) is given out by one of the chorus - this is answered immediately by the first Response (Group 1 instrument) and then by the second Response (Group 2 instrument). Each Response will consist of a different (single) version of the music of the constellation that has been called out. The manner in which these Signals and Responses are performed is determined by a set of Options (from a further 'cycle of characters'), decided upon in advance, and carrying a complex set of rules governing all parameters of performance such as tempo, dynamic, phrasing, ornaments, tone-colour, etc. The possibilities thrown up by this process, and in particular the relationship between the melodic instruments in Group 1 and the harmonic instruments in Group 2, are then further explored and developed throughout the substantial and fully notated, central movements of the work.

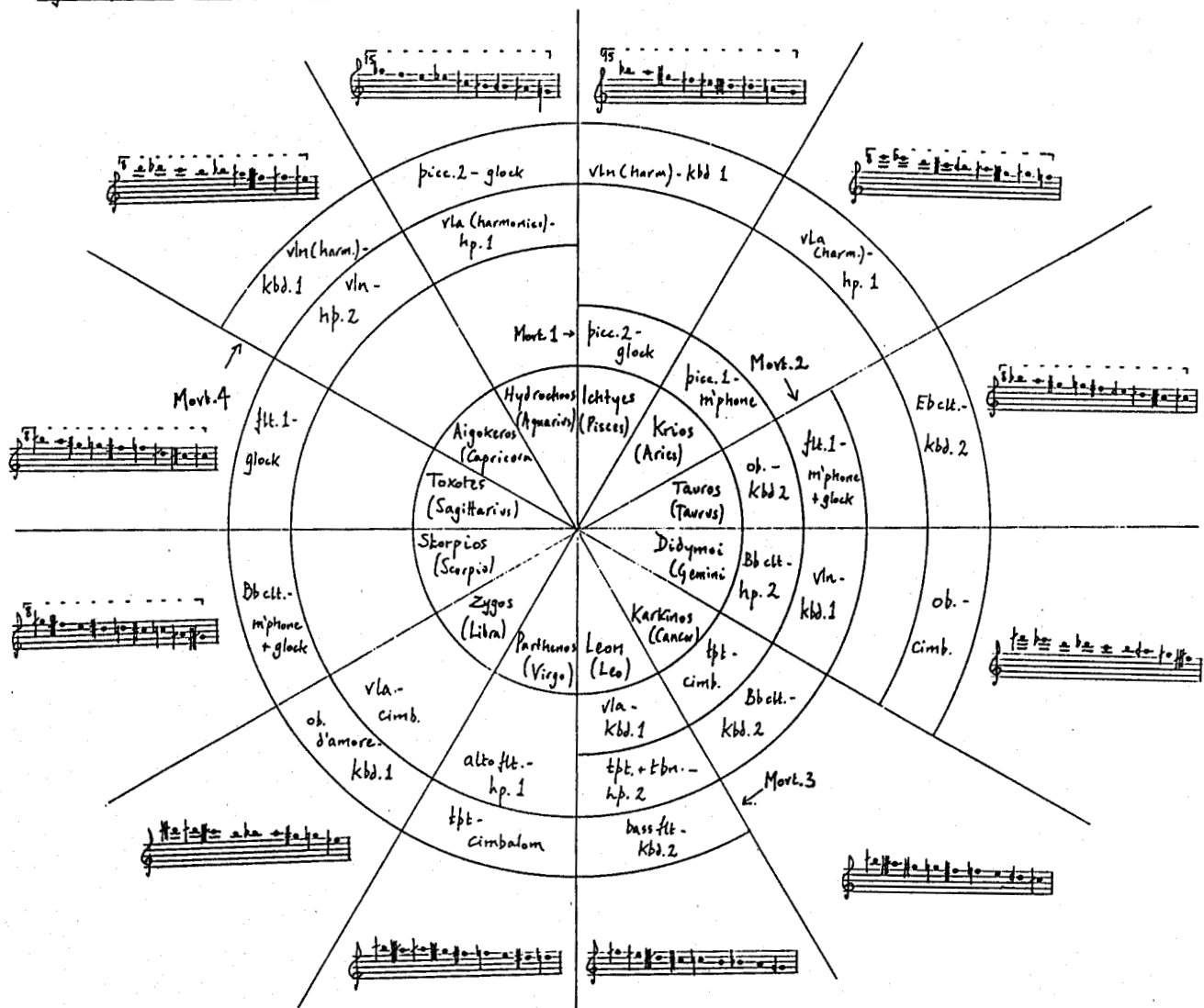
The relationship between Earth and Constellation Music is underlined still further by the text - this is an invented language based on the phonemes of the Greek Zodiac (see diagram below).

Phainomena (Ancient Greek form of the word Phenomena) is the title of a didactic poem by Aratus (3rd century BC), and means literally, "the things that appear", or "things that are clear to see" - the following is a rough translation of its introductory invocation:

From Zeus let us begin...For we are his offspring; and he in his kindness unto men giveth favourable signs and wakeneth the people to work, reminding them of their livelihood. He tells what time the soil is best for the labour of the ox and for the mattock, and what time the seasons are favourable both for the planting of trees and for casting all manner of seeds. For himself it was who set the signs in heaven, and marked out the constellations, and for the year devised what stars chiefly should give to men right signs of the seasons, to the end that all things might grow unfailingly.

James Wood

Cycle of Constellations, and associated instrumentalations and harmonies



Note: The scales shown here represent the upper 9-note octave of possible 24-note scales for Group 1, (melodic), 36-note scales for Group 2 (harmonic), and 12- or 4-8-note scales for the tape (also harmonic).