

Séance (1996)

In many ancient cultures, music is considered to possess the power of magic - certain musical instruments are endowed with the power to heal, to defend against evil spirits or to bring rain for the growing of crops. In Indonesia, for example, music is also used to induce a state of trance, whereby the limitations of human frailty can be overcome by spiritual strength and knowledge. (For example it is traditional for the Balinese Ketchak Dance to end with a Fire Dance in which the dancer enters a state of trance and then dances barefoot on burning coconut husks).

In the West, music's role in spiritualism seems traditionally far more peripheral. They do however share one important fundamental element, and that is Number. Pythagoras' tenet that "music is Number made audible" is clear in music ranging from Ockeghem to Xenakis, whilst occultism and Séances have always been bound up with numerology, magic squares and number symbolism.

As the ideas for *Séance* began to form in my mind, I became intrigued by the idea of bringing together music and Séance through their common denominator of Number.

Séance consists of five movements which are linked together to form a continuous work of around 35 minutes. Each movement explores the symbolism of a certain number - each number adds to its predecessor to form its successor (1, 2, 3, 5, 8) giving the first five numbers of the Fibonacci series, in turn symbolising Creation and Procreation.

After the opening *Invocation* (dedicated to the memory of Toru Takemitsu), each movement draws a group of soloists from the choir to represent the "children" of the souls they wish to contact. Thus each of these movements takes the form of "questions" from the "children", "interpretation" by the "medium" (soprano and MIDI vibraphone) and "responses" from both the "semi-real spirits" (male and female chorus) and the "surreal spirits" (electronically treated voices). The spatialisation of the chorus and electronically treated voices is also designed according to the geometrical shape of the number explored in each movement.

The interludes consist of fragments of various texts pertinent to each of the five Numbers, the final Coda taking the Latin text, *In paradisum*.

Séance was the result of receiving the 1995 Arts Foundation Fellowship for electroacoustic composition.

Notes about the individual movements

Invocation

1. ONE: Unity and Genesis

The soprano offers an invocation to the spirits - a single temple bell (with all its traditional associations with meditation) represents "the Beginning".

Interlude 1: based on a text from *The Wisdom of the Brahmin*, Rückert

2: TWO: Polarity and Division

Two is treated here as the first male number (traditionally female) - two male soloists intone the questions - the male chorus responds. Spatialisation mainly left-right.

Interlude 2: based on a text from the *Hymn of Man, Rig Veda*

3. THREE: Trinity

Three is treated as the first female number (traditionally male) - three female soloists intone the questions - the responses come primarily from the female chorus. There are allusions to several different sacred Trinities, and the character of ONE is therefore never far away. The music is underpinned by the singing of the *Kyrie eleison*. Spatialisation in a triangle.

Interlude 3: based on texts from Schiller, Huai Nan Tzu and Plato

4: FIVE: Life and Love

The joining together of the first male and female numbers. A quintet of three female and two male soloists intone the questions - both choruses respond. Spatialisation in a pentagram.

Interlude 4: based on texts from St Ambrose and St Peter

5: EIGHT: Auspiciousness

A massive octagon of sound represents the baptismal font - (octagonal fonts and baptistries are a mystical reference to the eighth day of creation, the day of Christ's resurrection and of regeneration by the Spirit). The 'saving of eight souls by water' (1. Peter 3), leads to the hope of eternal life and paradise, in a sense completing the creation cycle. Four female and four male soloists intone the questions, and for the first time the male and female choruses are united.

Coda: *In paradisum*

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