

Spirit Festival with Lamentations (1992)

for quartertone marimba and percussion quartet

It is often said that the very act of striking a percussion instrument constitutes a ritual. Indeed, most percussion instruments have become virtually synonymous with the rituals with which they have been associated for thousands of years.

In taking these instruments out of their own context, and placing them in a totally new one, I have always felt a strong sense of responsibility to respect their magical and mythological attributes. In acknowledging this responsibility, I have always found there to be sound physical foundations to their traditional, mystical functions and associations, and consequently that they are readily adaptable to new roles within other rituals, both traditional and imaginary.

Spirit Festival with Lamentations is a kind of ritual, in so far that it is a formal ceremony marking certain symbolic events and transformations - although possibly reminiscent of something specific (such as a Hindu funeral ceremony, for example), this ritual is purely imaginary - within it, each of the instruments has a specific role to play.

The work is in one continuous movement, but is made up of four sections (representing the four stages in the ritual) which are clearly defined both by their function in the overall form and by their individual rhythmic and textural character.

- I The work's basic rhythms are presented in a vocal litany between soloist (the celebrant in the ritual) and chorus. The basic phonemes are derived from those used by Kandyen drummers in teaching rhythms to their students¹⁾. These simple sounds later become greatly extended and developed into a rich and highly expressive language used by both soloist and chorus in their final incantations. The drums and other 'unpitched' instruments fulfil the intermediary role of taking the rhythms from the voices, and in turn passing them to the 'pitched' instruments.
- II The first 'pitched instrument' to become 'rhythmed' is a composite instrument composed of both marimba and prepared piano. Thus the marimba (principal instrument) appears first wrapped in a kind of cocoon. With the entry of the vibraphone towards the end of this section, the marimba begins to break out of its cocoon to become a free spirit.
- III The marimba has now achieved its status as the principal protagonist, and has gained the power to transform both the rhythms and the timbres around him. Throughout this central section the marimba is 'traced' by the ensemble who act as a constantly changing shadow - this shadow is made up exclusively of metal instruments whose function is to bring out, exaggerate and transform the marimba's timbre in terms of its two basic elements - the initial attack, or transient (outward form), and the underlying resonance (inner spirit) - set against a sliding scale of brightness/darkness.

The diagram below shows the allocation of metal instruments to the complex of roles that are required in this overall process.

It is towards the end of this section that the ritual approaches its climax - at the point when the marimba's outward form is at its most active, its destruction is now demanded by the entry of two non-metal instruments - the tuned wood-chimes, suggesting the 'splintering' of the marimba's attack (therefore representing the disintegration of its outward form), and the tuned clay rattles which bring out and transform the resonance (or breath sound) of the voice.

- IV This process, plus the soloist's final trance-like vocal incantation have now brought out the inner spirits of both marimba and voices which form the basis of an extended lamentation, amplified by the very darkest bell-sounds.

¹⁾ The use of onomatopoeic sounds such as these to learn even quite extended rhythmic sequences is common practice in nearly all ancient cultures of the world.

