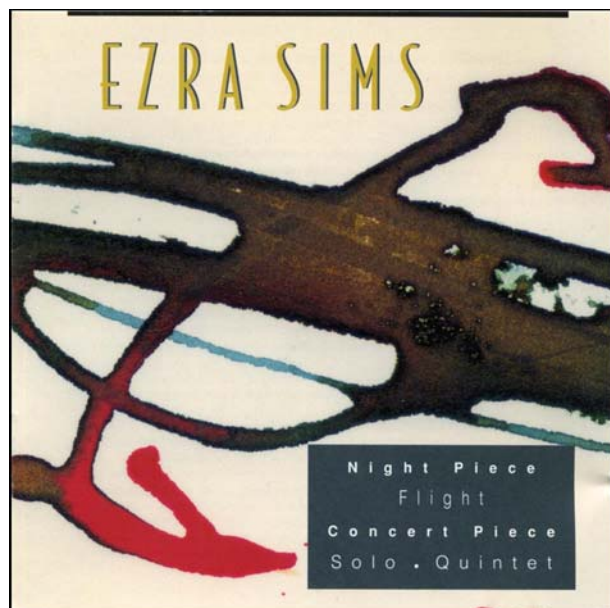


NWCR643

Ezra Sims

The Microtonal Music of Ezra Sims



Ezra Sims (b 1928)

- Quintet (1987) (16:31)
1. I Headlong (3:22)
 2. II Placid & Meditative (5:46)
 3. III Hell for leather (3:13)
 4. IV Solid—sustained and floating (4:01)
- Members of Dinosaur Annex: Ian Greitzer, clarinet; Cynthia Cummings, violin; Sandra

Lechner Kott, violin; Anne Black, viola;
Michael Curry, cello

5. *Night Piece: In girum imus nocte et
consumiur igni* (1989) (16:58)
Members of Dinosaur Annex: Suellen Hershman,
flute; Katherine V. Matasy, clarinet; Anne Black,
viola; Michael Curry, cello; Cynthia Cummings,
computer/conductor
- Solo In Four Movements* (1987) (14:40)
6. I Introduction (3:20)
 7. II Oration (2:50)
 8. III Meditation (5:11)
 9. IV Conclusion (3:19)
Theodore Mook, cello
10. *Flight* (1989) (6:17)
Hanneke Provily, flute
- Concert Piece* (1990) (17:16)
11. Buoyant and insouciant (5:15)
 12. Still and timeless (nocturnal) (5:37)
 13. Intensely inward (3:59)
 14. Excited (2:22)
Anne Black, viola; with Suellen Hershman,
flute; Ian Greitzer, clarinet; Beth Pearson, cello
and members of Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of
Boston; Gisèle Ben-Dor, conductor

Total playing time: 72:11

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Notes

For the last thirty-two years, I have been writing microtonal music. For the intervals—hitherto uncanonical in Western concert music—in those reaches of the harmonic series one and two octaves higher than the ones in which the classical tonal music of the seventeenth-to-nineteenth centuries was founded.

Between 1963 and 1973, because there were almost no instrumentalists who I could interest in my music, I wrote very little instrumental music, contenting myself with making taped pieces, often for dancers. Since then I have been fortunate enough to find players for whom to write. At the same time, I have seen developing in my music what I think is really a revolutionary system of tonality. It is a system with all the structural, rhetorical and affective capabilities of classical tonality, but without the dependence on the triad. It can, however, accommodate itself to and appropriate itself the materials and usages of traditional tonal practice just as tonal music can make use of the materials and ways of modal counterpoint. It uses a twenty-four-note scale, which, like the diatonic, is both asymmetrical in shape, and transposable, so as to begin on any step as an equally spaced chromatic (in this case, the seventy-two notes mentioned above). I have published descriptions of it in *Computer Music Journal*, vol. 12, no. 4, and *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 29, no. 1 for those interested in knowing more.

During most of the time that I have been writing in the current form of this technique, it has been my very good luck to be associated with the Boston based new music ensemble, Dinosaur Annex; most of my music has been written for and admirably performed by them. I doubt I could have done it without them—I certainly couldn't have moved so far so fast had I not been able to give them a new piece or two almost every year.

The Quintet for clarinet and string quartet was written at the suggestion of clarinetist Ian Greitzer, who first played it with Dinosaur Annex in March 1988. It took its character from the cool elegance of his playing—the first aural image I had of the piece was his sleek sound sailing out over bustling strings. Its four movements are played without pause (the third and fourth are connected by a measured silence). Each of the first three movements, after having achieved its climax, is diverted into the next movement until the last, after a sort of pause for reflection, provides a serene conclusion, for the whole. The fundamental material for the whole work is a sequence of keys relating as harmonies 1, 3, 15, 7, 9, and 11, which are presented in the first eight measures and variously developed thereafter. The piece's sectional structure is, I think, sufficiently clear that I need not take up space describing it here. And its emotional qualities are, I hope, sufficiently compelling that I need not

attempt the impossible task of translating them into the inappropriate medium of words.

“In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni”

When I was writing *Night Piece*, there was continually in my mind the image of someone wandering thoughtfully through a lush, nocturnal, creature-haunted landscape—the instruments standing for the conscious human mind; the electronics for the landscape and the unconscious in general. In concert performance, the loudspeakers surround the audience, and in the middle section the instruments are amplified, taken up into the wildness of the night, then returned to normality at the last. As the subtitle would suggest, the piece is also a palindrome. But not a strict retrograde form, like “Able was I ere I saw Elba,” it often breaks up the original phrases into new structures, the better to make proper sense, like “Madam, I’m Adam.” The pivot is at the climax of the fast middle section, during the high pedal in the winds.

Night Piece is dedicated to Dinosaur Annex: the extensive use of octaves and the electronic confirmation of the instruments’ notes is my testimony to the almost casual skill the players of Dinosaur Annex have gained in the performance of my music and to the absolute trust I place in them. The computer part uses David Rayna’s TRMPII programming language and an associated additive synthesizer, which I chose because it, in the double precision version that I bought, provides me with far more accurately tuned microtones than I can get from slicker-sounding commercial samplers. This performance was recorded in a public recital, part of the Fourth International Symposium on Microtones at the Mozarteum, Salzburg. As a live recording, I think it demonstrates that this dauntingly difficult looking music doesn’t need the luxury of multiple recording takes to achieve an impressive performance.

Almost as soon as it was begun, the *Solo in Four Movements* for cello embodied the idea of speech: public, private, internal. The first movement does what its title says: it introduces the material. The second makes great show of it, in something like an old-fashioned, jingoistic, 4th of July hoorah. The third meditates on it, coming to some sort of passionate conclusion about it all.

The last considers, so to speak, the state of things, and brings it all to a grand assurance. The four movements are played without pause. It was written at cellist Ted Mook’s request, and was first performed by him in CAMI Hall, New York, May 1988.

Flight for solo flute is the only piece I’ve written that took its impulse from a visual experience: the sight of marsh harriers’ flickering flight over the edges of Edgartown Great Pond in Martha’s Vineyard, and of gulls and ospreys circling in updrafts of air, rising to great heights and finally traveling with them out of sight (it doesn’t, of course, try anything so gross as to mimic those flights.) Structurally, it is a sort of chaconne, but instead of a chordal ostinato, there is one of keys, which change with each measure—though in the inner sections, it will, at certain points, poise for a while in one key before continuing its rotation. It was written for flutist Hanneke Provily and premiered by her at the Teyler Stichting, Haarlem, in May 1989.

Concert Piece

I’ve written almost no orchestral music because there have been almost no orchestras for which to write, and I am not much inclined to shout into a vacuum. Indeed, my only other piece of seventy-two-note orchestral music was written in 1983, at the request of Jim Berguin, then conductor of the New England Conservatory’s Junior Youth Chamber Orchestra. (They did quite a respectable job on it, too.) So, when I finally realized how many members of Pro Arte were “Dinosaurs,” or had played with us in my chamber music, and then found that

they could interest the orchestra—bless their adventurous hearts—in doing a piece of mine, I was of course delighted. After all, my music, with its probably unique and radical application of microtonal techniques to the whole body of orchestra instruments, requires an enlargement of instrumental technique that not every individual, and almost no orchestra, is brave enough to undertake. But then, I find Boston freelancers wonderfully intrepid in general—more so, it would seem, than their counterparts most anywhere else.

The piece turned out to be a concerto with a differentiated group of soloists. The viola is the main soloist, being the only one to have untrammelled solo material; the flute, clarinet and cello are the assisting soloists. The solo group, designed to be played by old friends, has the most active music, while the orchestra members, most of whom would be attempting this sort of thing for the first time, have much less demanding material. The orchestra is the orchestral wind section, less trumpets, tubas and one oboe and with lower strings (celli and basses) only, plus an incidental computer part, a sort of continuo to help tune various chords.

The piece is in three movements—fast, slow, fast—played without pause. An unaccompanied quartet for the soloists (a sort of quietly passionate colloquy among friends) is interpolated between the second and third movements. The musical material is presented in the first two major sections of the first movement and then variously developed and recapitulated in the course of things.

The piece’s rhythmic procedure deserves some attention. Unusually, for my music, the orchestra keeps a strict tick, clearly expressed throughout the piece. However, in a device not unlike what happens in a lot of jazz, the soloists play a rubato (in this case, strictly notated) that makes their downbeats not always match those of the orchestra, (or of each other, for that matter). It can even happen that the soloists play in effect a different number of measures from the orchestra, since the rubato may cause them, for example, to stretch a four-measure phrase over the time the orchestra takes to play five of its measures. Thus, as the notes unfold their structure of feeling and sensation, the orchestra displays the regularity of clock time, and the soloist, the fluctuations of the ontological.

—Ezra Sims

Dinosaur Annex is a chamber ensemble dedicated to music of the twentieth century, especially new works and works by composers from the Boston area. The group was founded, in association with The Annex Players in 1975–76, as a concert-giving wing of New England Dinosaur Dance Theater—thus the unusual name. Dinosaur Annex has been independently incorporated since 1977. Dinosaur Annex is a cooperative ensemble: the group of performers work with the artistic director to create an outlet for important music that is not heard elsewhere. The group has no fixed aesthetic agenda, but it has gained a reputation for lively and serious work, as well as for imaginative and listenable concert presentation.

Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston is one of the few cooperatively managed orchestras in the country. Founded in 1978 by a group of prominent Boston musicians and late music director Larry Hill, it has been prized by audiences and critics alike for its adventurous programming, unique spirit, and exceptional artistry. Gisèle Ben-Dor joined Pro Arte as music director in 1991. Gunther Schuller holds the position of conductor laureate. Committed to both commissioning and performing new compositions, Pro Arte has presented over fifty works by living composers, including thirty-eight world premieres. The orchestra also presents traditional repertoire, often alongside rarely heard historic gems.

Production Notes

Produced by Ezra Sims

Recording venues and personnel:

Quintet and Solo: Recorded at St. George's Church, Methuen, September 14, 1991. Frank Cunningham, recording engineer.

Night Piece: Recorded at Leopold-Mozart-Saal, Hochschule für Musik und darstellende Kunst "Mozarteum," Salzburg May 4, 1991. Wolfgang Danzmayr, recording engineer.

Flight: Recorded at Studio van Schuppen, Veenendaal June 10, 1990. D. van Schuppen, recording engineer.

Concert Piece: Recorded at Sanders Theatre, Cambridge, March 1, 1992. Frank Cunningham, recording engineer.

All editing and postproduction: Frank Cunningham, using the Lexicon Opus.

All works published by ACA (BMI).

Mastered by Ellen Fitten, engineer at Sony Classical Productions, Inc. NYC.