

Akasha (2015) for string quartet [by Trevor Bača]

The inscription at the head of the score reads as follows:

Akasha is a music of invisibility, electricity and the open expanse of the sky. The title is the Sanskrit word for the æther, a concept once understood as an unseen force present in all things in motion in the world.

Written for string quartet in scordatura, *Akasha* suggests an elaborate blossoming-forth of different types of thinking — different ways of knowing — magically experienced all at the same time. Scored in a single movement lasting half an hour, the constellation of ways the music starts, stops, splinters and recombines suggests the shapes of thought. The title of the piece — sometimes additionally translated as *quintessence* or as some other unseen essential in the world — might also be understood as pointing to the vivid experience of indirect movement and motion that comes to us, somehow, in sound.

Alternating in brilliance and grit, the musical moments in *Akasha* derive from an inventory of just five materials. The starting forms of these materials — leggierissimo flurries of staccati played off-string; two-, three- and four-voice polyphony admixed with noise; broken ritardandi and accelerandi played with characteristic flautando; octavated harmonic fields reinforced below the thirteenth partial; and the white continuity of the bows' hair drawn directly across the wood of instruments' bridges — develop according to an eleven-part regime of transformations given four times in succession. The resulting series of forty-four material combinations supplies the midlevel structure of the music. This structure is then reinterpreted as a protracted succession of musical moves repartitioned into the seventy-one rest-delimited moments apparent in the piece.

Dramatic moments in the music insist on repetition in unanticipated ways. The pair of ferocious climaxes, or vortices, near the end, for example, endure unexpectedly long in their sixfold echoes of moments hidden earlier in the piece. These vortices neither depict experience nor metaphorize some aspect of external reality. The vortices stand instead in a relation to a one-pointedness of thought that considers itself. This thought that considers itself is a sensualized experience of time that discovers the electrified edges of its shapes amid an experience of its own duration. How we experience the effects of these shapes depends on who we are in the world at the moments of the shapes' arrival. In the ponticello-to-midpoint transitions of the climaxes — and perhaps at earlier moments, too — who we are as we listen is changed in an electrified waters of forgetfulness that covers who we may have been.

The many rests intercalated between *Akasha's* moments carry fermatas — short, medium, long, very long — that divide the music perceptually. The longer classes of fermata, in particular, ask the players for unusually protracted durations that are long enough to cause us to just barely begin to forget the course of the music in the middle of the course of the music. Doing this effectively requires a very good string quartet and an ability to think differently about the ways that both music and events in the world start and stop: the interpenetration of the music's silences perhaps provide us the opportunity to hear what sound at first like endings as events subsequently swept up in even larger currents of music hidden at first from view.

As moments of the music transform from shorter to longer — and as the music's mode of exposition coheres from disjointedness to insistence — it is possible to experience *Akasha* according to metaphors of space. But the pervasiveness of something like the garden metaphor ("I walk a garden; my paths crisscross; the same objects reappear from different points of view") might best be suspended here. The moments manifest in the music's flow are not conceived in the first instance as objects subject to points of view. The moments in *Akasha* are conceived instead as carriers freed from space in their role as bringers of the this-wordliness of our experience of thought.