

Akasha
(2015)
for string quartet

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 a concept once understood as an unseen force present in all things in motion in the world.

Written for string quartet 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 — variously translated *aether* or *quintessence* — might also be understood as pointing to the vivid experience of indirect motion that comes to us in music when we experience it with both intensity and joy.

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 music's middle structure. 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 endure unexpectedly long in their sixfold echoes of moments hidden earlier in the piece. These vortices neither depict experience nor metaphorize 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 perhaps changed: an electrified waters of forgetfulness that covers who we thought 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 provides us the opportunity to hear stops not as endings but as events swept up in currents that carry away starts and stops alike.

As moments of the music transform from shorter to longer — and from disjointed to insistent — it is possible to experience the music according to a metaphor of space. But the pervasiveness of something like the garden metaphor ("I am walking in a garden; I recross my paths; 'objects' reappear according to different points of view") might best be suspended here. The moments manifest in *Akasha's* flow are not conceived in the first instance as objects subject to a point of view. The moments in this music aspire to the movement of carriers freed from space in their role as bringers of this-wordliness in our experience of thought.

— Trevor Bača