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Venetian Sky
(2018)

for a large number of performers, singing or playing

University of York Music Press

ISMN M 57036 820 4



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Venetian Sky

Apotheosis after Tiepolo

for a large number of performers, singing or playing

Duration: 5'00

Introduction

Venetian Sky is a work for any performers – singers, instrumentalists of any type – and requires large numbers (minimum 40) including at least one timpanist.

The imagery of the piece is taken from the ceiling frescoes of the Venetian painter Tiepolo, such as the celebrated example above the staircase of the Würzburg Residence, which present various mythological or symbolic figures in states of Apotheosis or Triumph, rising up into a blue infinity of sky through clouds and sunbeams. *Venetian Sky* is a musical Apotheosis, similarly evoking the euphoria, exhilaration and disorientation of Tiepolo's vision as well as the purity, emptiness and remoteness of the upper regions of the air.

Set-up

Venetian Sky was designed to work as a pop-up performance within a large, multi-level public space with ample balcony room for participants. It could also be performed in a large church with balconies. A reasonably spacious acoustic (not dry) is advisable. Most or all of the performers should be above the public, possibly a considerable way above them, on several levels. They should stand unless impossible. The performers themselves should be spread as far around the space as acoustically and visually practical (the piece can work in surround-sound) but should not be so spaced apart as to be musically isolated. The moments of Ascent (see below) should gel into a *tutti*, but the Elation motifs (see below) should be far enough apart to suggest considerable distance.

Performers should not stand next to another of the same instrument or voice.

The performance is directed by a Conductor, placed in a central location at whatever level is practicable. The Conductor indicates the progress of the piece from beginning to end using a coloured flag (see Structure, below). Otherwise, all performers work independently of each other.

Materials

The piece is divided into four types of materials: ASCENT, AETHER, ELATION, EXCLAMATION.

Their arrangement within the piece is given in the Structure section below.

1. ASCENT (ALL PERFORMERS)

At a signal from the conductor, all performers begin on any note of the following chord (concert pitch):



Instruments

- Pick any note from the chord, play it *ff* and then move off it, upwards, any time **within the first 2 secs.**
- Move upwards:
 - o by *glissando* (sliding instruments): medium or fast speed, at least an 8ve in total; strings *glissando* up one string only (don't cross strings)
 - o by chromatic scale, *legatissimo* (non-sliding instruments), fast, very fast or as fast as possible
 - o by D-mixolydian scale (D-E-F#-G-A-B-C), fast, very fast or as fast as possible
- *Diminuendo* smoothly to *niente* as you rise (as if becoming more distant). Don't slow down.
- Finish ascending **within 8 secs** of the initial attack (Violins and Violas: **within 12 secs**). There is no specific ending pitch. Wind players should complete their ascent in one breath.
- **Timpani:** the timpanist should use a single drum tuned to D. For this initial Ascent, s/he should strongly accent the downbeat and then perform a roll with *glissando* upwards as far as possible, making a *diminuendo* to *niente* **within the first 8 secs.**

Voices

- Pick any note from the chord, sing it *ff* to the syllable 'Su-' (of the word 'Sun', emphasising the sibilant 'S'), and then move off it upwards any time **within the first 2 secs.**
- Move upwards by *glissando*.
- *Diminuendo* smoothly to *niente* as you rise (as if becoming more distant). Don't slow down.
- Finish ascending **within 8 secs** of the initial attack. There is no specific ending pitch. Complete the ascent in one breath.

All performers move straight to the AETHER section independently as soon as they have completed their individual Ascent.

2. AETHER (ALL PERFORMERS)

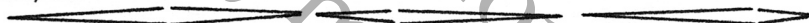
In AETHER sections, each performer moves between air sounds, whistling and false harmonics (as appropriate to their instrument) *ad lib*.

Whistling (ALL PERFORMERS)

- Starting on any pitch, whistle a **slow**, upward *glissando* (between a 3rd and a 5th in range) in a single breath (8-10 secs).
- Rest, then repeat, beginning on a slightly higher pitch than previously.
- Each note begins and ends softly, with a *crescendo* and *diminuendo* in the middle. The amount of *crescendo* can be varied from note to note, but overall the whistling should remain quite gentle.
- Occasionally instead of whistling an upward *glissando*, a note can be held on its starting pitch (with the *cresc.* and *dim.* as above).
- Whistle tone should be somewhat breathy, not completely clear (vary the amount of breath each time).

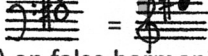
Air Sounds (HIGH WIND AND BRASS INSTRUMENTS)

- Play air/wind sounds in a single breath (8-10 secs).
- After each note, rest, then repeat.
- Each note begins and ends *niente*, with a *crescendo* and *diminuendo* in the middle. The amount of *crescendo* can be varied from note to note, sometimes only reaching *p-mp*, other times *mf-f*. The speed and relative lengths of *cresc.* and *dim.* can be varied, i.e.



- Occasionally a note may begin loud (*ff*) and *diminuendo* to *niente*.
- Occasionally a sound may be fluttertongued.
- The tone should be as unpitched as possible – just air. For instruments (e.g. flute) where this is not entirely possible, finger any pitch above C5 (including microtones), moving to a higher pitch with each successive note.

False harmonics (STRINGS)

- Starting on any pitch (but not lower than ) execute a **slow** upward *glissando* (between a 3rd and a 5th) on false harmonics, *p*, over 8-10 secs.
- Rest, then repeat, beginning on a slightly higher pitch than previously.
- Each note begins and ends softly, with a *crescendo* and *diminuendo* in the middle. The amount of *crescendo* can be varied from note to note, but overall the sound should remain quite gentle.
- Occasionally instead of playing an upward *glissando*, a note can be held on its starting pitch (with the *cresc.* and *dim.* as above).
- Aim to blend the sound into the whistling – quite breathy/airy in tone. If the harmonic fails, continue upwards regardless.

Distant Thunder (TIMPANI)

- Occasionally perform a soft roll with a small *crescendo* and *diminuendo* and upward/downward *glissando*. Vary the amount of *crescendo* each time.

3. ELATION (HIGH INSTRUMENTS; SOPRANOS*)

Sunbeams, gleams, flashes.

- From time to time (see Structure) play one of the following figures using the pitch gamut below.
- Choose any note from the gamut as a starting note. If the figure goes upwards, follow it up in a D-mixolydian scale (D-E-F#-G-A-B-C).
- Tuning: all one-note figures (i.e. that don't involve a scale) should rise or fall a short distance (a shallow *glissando*, no more than a tone, a little like a Doppler effect) towards the end of the figure.
- The tempo should be fast, and the semiquavers and triplet quavers played with great energy and brilliance, well articulated.

* Sopranos should only attempt the figures marked with a *

The image displays a collection of musical notation for high instruments and sopranos. It includes several rhythmic patterns, many marked with *ff* (fortissimo). The patterns are organized into rows:

- Row 1: Three patterns of semiquaver runs, each with a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 2: Four patterns of semiquaver runs, each with a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 3: Three patterns of triplet semiquaver runs, each marked with a '3' and 'sim.' (sostenuto), and a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 4: Two patterns of triplet semiquaver runs, each marked with a '3' and 'sim.', and a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 5: Two patterns of semiquaver runs starting with a glissando (indicated by a curved line), each with a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 6: Two patterns of triplet semiquaver runs starting with a glissando, each marked with a '3' and 'sim.', and a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 7: Two patterns marked with an asterisk (*) and a glissando, each with a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 8: Three patterns of semiquaver runs starting with a glissando, each marked with 'fl./brem.' (flourish/breath) and a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 9: Three patterns of semiquaver runs starting with a glissando, each with a *ff* dynamic marking.
- Row 10: Three patterns of triplet semiquaver runs starting with a glissando, each with a *ff* dynamic marking.

A 'GAMUT' is shown on the right side, consisting of a five-line staff with notes D, E, F#, G, A, B, C. The notes are marked with dots and a sharp sign is placed under the F# note. The word 'etc.' follows the gamut.

4. EXCLAMATION (VOICES, LOW INSTRUMENTS)

- From time to time (see Structure) shout or whisper loudly (unvoiced) one of the exclamations below (from Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*).
- To ensure variety, choose a phrase that you have not heard just prior.
- Shout or whisper loudly and clearly, with excitement, euphoria, exhilaration.

the sun

loose clouds

Angels of rain and lightning

blue surface of thine aëry surge

bright hair uplifted

the zenith's height

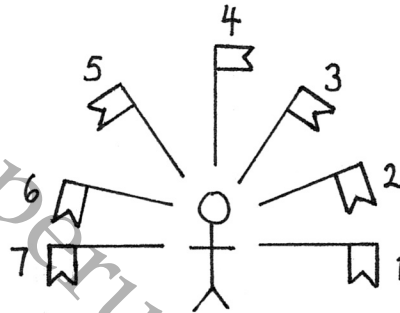
tumult of mighty harmonies

oh hear!

trumpet of a prophecy!

Structure

After the initial Ascent, the structure follows a simple form, beginning with empty Aether, gradually filling up with Elation and Exclamation figures and then emptying again to finish. The conductor indicates the structure by moving a sky-blue flag in an arc from one side of his/her body to the other across the course of the piece. There are 7 discrete positions, thus:



- **Beginning (ASCENT):** starting with the flag held vertically upwards (Position 4) and giving two upbeats with the other hand, the conductor brings the flag down vertically downwards to commence the Ascent, then moves slowly to Position 1 as the Ascent fades out.
- **Position 1:** all musicians perform Aether material. This can last quite a long time, to establish a sense of space and emptiness and accustom listeners to the sound.
- **Position 2:** a few occasional Elations and whispered Exclamations while the Aether continues – quite sparsely populated. Elations and Exclamations should always be performed with complete commitment.
- **Position 3:** much more Elations and a mixture of whispered and shouted Exclamations while the Aether continues. The timpanist should perform the first thunderclap (see below).
- **Position 4:** predominantly Elations and Exclamations reaching considerable density (the Aether is inaudible underneath). The timpanist should perform the second thunderclap (see below).
- **Position 5:** as Position 3.
- **Position 6:** as Position 2.
- **Position 7:** as Position 1.

Notes

- Elation and Exclamation figures take place within AETHER sections. Performers choose independently when to move across from Aether material to Elation or Exclamation material and back again.
- The structure can be weighted in terms of timing towards the Aether-only sections (Positions 1 and 7) in order to increase the dramatic impact of Position 4. The conductor should judge in the moment when to move (instantly, not gradually) from one position to another.
- Care should be taken not to overwhelm the sound with shouted Exclamations until Position 4.
- **Timpani:** throughout the AETHER sections the timpanist plays occasional rolls of Distant Thunder (see above). As the conductor moves to Positions 3 and 4 the thunder gets louder, and two longer 'thunderclaps', one in each of Positions 3 and 4, should be played: a long hairpin (10-20s) peaking at *ff* and *fff possibile* respectively.

Venetian Sky was commissioned by Sage Gateshead. It was written for the second CoMA Festival of Contemporary Music for All and first performed by all-comer workshop participants, alongside members of Royal Northern Sinfonia and Chorus and the New Tyneside Orchestra, at Sage Gateshead on 3rd and 4th March 2018.

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