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Escalas

Program note

Escalas, for orchestra (2001), was commissioned by the Bayerischer Rundfunk / Musica Viva. It will soon appear on a CD by Musica Viva.

I have long been interested in the elaboration of sound and the renewal of musical vocabulary, rather than in the development of new grammars with traditional material. I have spent time exploring the potential resources of computer synthesis and doing research to develop new possibilities to sculpt sounds, to mould them, to exert micro-compositional control - to compose the sound itself, rather than merely composing with sounds. I illustrated these possibilities in works such as *Mutations*, *Inharmonique*, *Songes*, *Sud*, *Elementa*. Indeed certain composers, among which those of the French current of "spectral" music, have been influenced by the experience of electroacoustic and computer music, which has extended the notion of musical time: striking examples of innovating writing for the orchestra mirror this experience.

However *Escalas* is deliberately *not* a "spectral" work.

Instruments have strong identities and specific possibilities - whereas synthesis offers material which is so ductile that it is devoid of a genuine personality. Working with synthesis, the composer is responsible for injecting life, performance nuances and expressivity into his or her work - while instrumental performers bring a lot through their long-learned skills to master constraints and turn mastery into musicality. I am interested in staging encounters between the world of the instruments - which can be seen and touched - and that of synthetic sounds, which are not the sound image of material entities. But, just as *Phases* and *Triptyque*, my other works involving the orchestra, *Escalas* does not mix orchestral sounds with synthetic sounds.

A symphonic ensemble such as the Bavarian Radio Orchestra, with its glorious past, carries strong memories and connotations. I can never forget to what extent tradition is alive within the large orchestra, so rich and human a resource. In such a context, I am reluctant to mask instrumental origins or to impose novel, and often crude, performance techniques: I rather feel like relating my work to tradition - perhaps a dangerous temptation. The work here and there refers to orchestral works, although briefly and in a covert way.

Escalas explores the attribute of pitch rather than that of timbre - it plays with scales and chords rather than sound objects and textures. Now Schoenberg observed in his harmony treatise that pitch is part of timbre: it corresponds to timbre measured along one dimension - the focalized aspect of timbre, rather than its distributed aspect. Thus, at times, I do blur the voices to turn polyphonies into textures, and I relate the parts so as to cause certain voices to merge and fuse* - for instance at the end, to produce paradoxical pitch behaviours.

I think that refined music should imply some elaboration of pitch and harmony. I consider that harmony is a bit sacrificed in the serial system, because there is arbitrariness in the subordination of harmony to melodically-defined relations: harmony has its own inescapable constraints - which is not to say that tonality is *the* legitimate system**. The serial system also essentially prohibits going up and down a scale, even though this seems very natural. And electroacoustic music often dismisses the control of pitch, which I find a strong limitation. In fact I was specifically interested in synthesis of sound because it permits to imprint harmonies into sounds, to introduce a harmonic dimension inside timbre.

Messiaen liked to say : "la musique, toujours, monte et descend". Music goes up and down along scales; it also rests and pauses. *Escalas* does not refer to Spain : I choose the title because this Spanish word means scales but also stops, ports of call - so does the French word "échelles" in the expression "Les échelles du Levant", referring to the Eastern harbours, but in other contexts "échelles" has lost this double meaning. The piece is like a journey exploring a land with steep soundscapes and valleys: motions up and down different scales alternate with occasional stasis.

Usually a specific pitch scale is part of the "out-of-time" structure of a given work, but *Escalas* resorts in turn to a number of different pitch scales : linear scales in frequency (hence not equally-tempered), various modes - some of them non-octaviating, occasionally chromatic or continuous progressions. It presents a number of figures - harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, timbral, and possibly implying several of the previous modalities***. The figures allow the scales to appear, sometimes obviously, other times in filigree. Toward the end of the piece, the journey takes the listener into utopia - the land of nowhere, or rather our interior word of perception, where pitch is cyclical, as indicated by the successive note names, A B C D E F G A B C D E F G ... : thus scales can ascend and descend indefinitely, or go up and down at the same time.

To call for such a variety of scales, used mostly in the context of specific languages or styles, bring the danger of eclecticism. I did not try to completely avoid the evocation of musical idioms: but heterogenous musical materials can be weaved into fabrics that are not merely derivative. At the end of the Second World War, creators were obsessed with the refusal of the heritage and the desire of a pure and utterly novel style. But our time is one of great complexity - it evidences the danger of amnesia, it discredits authoritarian revolutions, and it merges to an unprecedented degree many layers of the past: creation can also reflect that.

The form unfolds in relation to the blooming of the successive scales and figures. Rhythm does not necessarily bear much relation to the indicated metronomic tempos: beats are indicators for the performers, but rhythm rather results from the interplay of different levels within figures. Similarly, the time proportions between the successive episodes are not evaluated in purely objective terms, but as a function of their content, although I did try to come close to a grid of chronometric durations. (*Escalas* lasts approximately 17 mn).

* I envision future pieces making use more thoroughly of some of the varied material and figures that appear in *Escalas*. Certain motions could be frozen into long "stasis", turning fermatas into slow episodes with subtle interiority - like stopping a moving image and exploring its content.

** I am not fond of the "new tonality". But, instead of restoring the past, music can resort to novel material to renovate the notion of harmony and the dialectics of tension-release, rather than merely throwing them overboard.

*** For instance, the beginning scans the successive harmonics of the different notes of a chord at different rates, as though a spectral window were moving down or up; microtonal deviations affect a melodic line; a complex chord sustained by the strings insidiously changes, one voice at a time; a melody is prolonged by its implied harmony, with a gradual amplification in pitch and timbre range; chords are echoed by variants with a different orchestration, or with a similar timbre but a different spatial distribution ; arpeggios are repeated and "tiled" (like tiles on a roof) so as to infer a slightly hypnotic feeling of gyration ; specially designed non-octaviating scales are swept across so that the interval of periodicity is no longer one octave, but for instance 13 semi-tones, thereby conveying the effect of non-tempered scales while only using figures of the chromatic scales; toward the end, a number of voices are kept octaves apart : such a "fractal" structure, whereby the pitch motions look the same in different octaves, permits to give the paradoxical impression of endless ascents, descents, or both ascent and descent at the same time, which evidences the helical structure of musical pitch.

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