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The sonorous object, built from the skin of three dead love songs, does not exist... [Original composition]

McCaulley, Robert Charles, M.M.

Rice University, 1989
RICE UNIVERSITY

THE SONOROUS OBJECT, BUILT FROM THE SKIN OF THREE DEAD LOVE SONGS, DOES NOT EXIST....

BY

ROBERT MCCAELEY

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTERS OF MUSIC

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Dr. Ellsworth Millburn, Professor of Music
Chairman

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Houston, Texas

May, 1989
Abstract

This one movement piece is divided into seven sections played continuously:

**Section 1**

Small ensembles and soloists drawn from the orchestra play short melodies prone to distortion. The full orchestra gradually emerges during a "Rossini crescendo". This music gradually darkens, becomes corrupted and finally collapses into...

**Love Song #1**

Trilling strings with bells accompany the singer in a setting of Shelley’s *To the Moon*, while the winds and brass dot the soundscape with short pitches. When the trilling stops we have arrived at...

**Section 2**

Against sustained chords, fragments of the main theme flow without order or logic, passed amongst all the members of the orchestra as solos. Eventually a melody forms, that in fact is....

**Love Song #2**

An unaccompanied piano solo states the main theme of the piece. As it repeats, other instruments of the orchestra join it to form a smaller ensemble against which the rest of the orchestra comments, echoing the original cells of the theme with the distorted versions that appeared in Section 1. The small ensemble loses control as the orchestra asserts more control over material and texture leading us to...

**Section 3**

The most dissonant material from Section 1 is developed as small groups and soloists from the orchestra jockey to be heard. Against this a harmonic fanfare is passed amongst bells, winds, strings, piano, and brass. Climaxing this section is a great swirl of sound consisting of a canon in the strings, a different canon in the winds, a brass fanfare, and continuous glissandi in the percussion, which is interrupted by....

**Love Song #3**

Edwin Denby’s aria text from an unpublished libretto entitled *The Sonntag Gang* is set in an appropriately theatrical style (it is worth noting the Edwin Denby was the librettist for an Aaron Copland opera). This dramatic interlude is eventually curtailed by...

**Section 4**

A new brass fanfare grows in strength as the strings, winds and percussion diminish and evolve new material. At the moment all the orchestra is synchronous, a reprise of all the major tonal themes in Section 1 begins, performed by smaller orchestras drawn from the full orchestra. These themes become shorter and shorter until we hear only flashes of orchestral color. The "Rossini crescendo" returns, and the coda lets us end as we began.

Evolution of the Title

a) In an article, I came across the French phrase "objet sonore". Originally I was going to use this phrase in the title, but instead I translated it into English as Sonorous Object. After I arrived at this phrase, I realized that there is an implied...
oxymoron in the phrase (imagine "bricks of sound particles") and although grammatically real, in some sense it is irrational.
b) In formulating the structure of this piece, I decided to use two songs I had written in 1974 and 1977. The first song was written for voice and piano on a poem by Shelley, and the second was a "song without words" for piano solo. Except for the orchestration, the songs remain as they were originally composed. A third song, with a text by poet Edwin Denby, was newly composed to symmetrically balance and yet contrast the first song. Each vocal piece is about unhappiness in love. The first song text deals abstractly and metaphorically with the inability to find a worthwhile love. The third song is a direct emotional expression of a woman being abandoned by her lover. The songs should be viewed as divergent facets of a related experience.
c) The first and third songs are interruptions to the symphonic argument, which is based on the second song. Located at the very center of the piece, this song is the theme from which all the other material in the composition is derived. Melodic "cells" (intervals and motives) extracted from this theme are transformed into radically different strands of "musics", and are the fundamental proponents for the symphonic process.

If you look at the title of my piece and are puzzled by it, realize that I have compressed the above three paragraphs into a single sentence. Certain words poetically refer to the more technical aspects described above.
Acknowledgement

I wish to thank my advisor Ellsworth Milburn, with whom I fought constantly but the result ultimately made the piece better, Honey Meconi, who has always told me the truth and will remain valuable to me for years into the future because of it, and Richard Lavenda, who mentally went with me in every outlandish direction I went. Finally, I dedicate this piece to Marty Merrit, whose colleguial friendship and support has enabled me to endure the hardships I have faced in this institution.