Humming

My starting point for this piece was simply the idea to explore the textural possibilities of a group of people humming. The sound of the human voice humming has a unique timbral quality, and I could sense that there were many musical possibilities to be found in its employment in an ensemble setting. The task I had been set involved using a notation designed by Toshi Ichiyanagi for his 1962 composition *Sapporo*, and so the first stage in synthesising my two objectives was to reinterpret this notation. I found that many of Ichiyanagi's symbols and their associated performance directions suited my needs, but it was necessary for me to make a number of reassignments and additions. After drafting a number of lists and considering the implications of each symbol that I was able to come up with, I settled on the following index:

Symbol	Meaning
———	Stay at current dynamic level (ignore conductor)
⟋	Increase dynamic level at faster rate than conductor's instruction. Change is carried over to next stage
⟍	Decrease dynamic level at faster rate than conductor's instruction. Change is carried over to next stage
═══	Gradual, steady change of colour/timbre
⟋ (double)	Colour/timbre change and increase in dynamic level
⟍ (double)	Colour/timbre change and decrease in dynamic level
⌐‾⌐	Steady, regular upward bends of pitch of less than a semitone.
⌐_⌐	Steady, regular downward bends of pitch of less than a semitone.
⟨〰〰⟩•	Dynamic swells (loud, soft, loud soft...)
•	Slow on/off pulses
••	Faster, rapid pulses
⌢•	Pause
M	Match pitch of any other ensemble member
D	Match dynamic of any other ensemble member
S	Match pitch and dynamic level of any ensemble member

These symbols and their combinations would allow me to cultivate a great deal of textural variation among an ensemble.

Whilst developing the idea for the piece, I had envisioned a single chord swelling in volume before ceasing suddenly after a set time period, fixing the focus of the listener entirely on the aural quality of the chord. To achieve this, I sought a means of conducting an ensemble in terms of dynamic and duration with a single action. I found my answer in the technique employed by John Cage in the 1958 *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, whereby a conductor completes a full rotation of one arm in a clock-like motion to signify the duration of a section.[2] This visual representation of the temporal dimension of the piece allows events to be placed in time by performers without diverting mental resources from the reading of the score, and also gave me a clear means of directing the gradual dynamic increase that I had envisaged.

When it came to developing my actual score, I felt that Ichiyinagi's open score permitted more freedom than would have been effective for my aims, and worked on developing an alternative that would allow me to control the direction of the piece whilst allowing for the possibility for variation that I needed. A graphic score that I devised during my second year of composition studies made the mistake of providing too little detail, and I was keen to ensure that I achieved the right balance between detail and deliberate vagueness. I took inspiration from Paul Patterson's *Games* (1977), which contains a section in which a performer is free to choose the direction that they take through a network of symbols and performance directions. Patterson's score is circular and presupposes no fixed linear structure, which would make organising a fixed end point for my piece difficult, and so I settled instead on a 'branched' version. With each member of my ensemble beginning with the same performance direction and choosing their own way through the score, textural variation would be introduced gradually, and I was able to clearly indicate an end point.

During a workshop of an early version of the piece, it became clear that presentation of the score would be vital to its success during performance. I redrafted each of the four

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[2] James Pritchett, 'The Music of John Cage' (Cambridge: Cambridge Univesrity Press, 1993), p. 113.

pages on A3 paper, and designed the layout in a more precise and calculated manner. The group found that the eye was not immediately aware of the fact that the 'C' instruction was the most prevalent on each page, and as such I decided to box these symbols. This, I found, made it more visually apparent that all options other than 'C' are, in a sense, deviations from the simple and continuous basis of the piece. I discovered too that there are severe dynamic restrictions to the voice when humming, and for the piece as I had initially envisioned it to be a success, it would be necessary for it to be performed by a very large ensemble. I decided that there would instead be a point of transition from humming to voice, which would be indicated in the score. As each page is not the same size and each performer moves through it at their own pace, the transition would happen gradually, which would provide an added element of drama to the piece and allow for a greater dynamic range.

Bibliography

Ichiyinagi, Toshi (1963). *Sapporo*. New York: C.F. Peters, Edition Peters no. 6632.

Patterson, Paul (1977). 'Games', *Contemporary British Organ Music Volume 4: Paul Patterson* [CD]. (Sfz Music, 2012).

Pritchett, James. *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).