

Spurl

Spurl is the first single-line composition I have ever created. It proved to be quite a challenge for me to create something that didn't feel like someone playing a solo that's supposed to go along with a "Music Minus One" recording without the recording. So, in the spirit of compositions like Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita in A Minor for solo flute, *Spurl* attempts to convey both a melodic and harmonic progression through a monophonic texture. In order to do that, the music needs to move quite quickly. *Spurl* is relentless: in its entire 127 measures there isn't a single rest. Ideally it requires circular breathing, but it is also possible to create an extremely effective performance by pre-recording alternate measures and playing along with the recording.

I have long wondered about the musical possibilities of an eight-note scale consisting of the 8th through 15th partials of the overtone series, a scale that Baroque valve-less brass players would have "corrected" in order to play a diatonic scale. What happens if this "natural scale" is allowed to have free reign instead? *Spurl* is the first piece I've composed using such a scale. (Since then I have also used this scale in *(not) knowing the answer* for six unaccompanied voices and *Crossing a Bridge to Nowhere* for brass quintet.) Over the course of five and a half minutes, *Spurl* systematically explores all possible hexachords within this octatonic aggregate. This compositional conceit is clearly indebted to serial procedures. The rhythmic shifts are also inspired by Elliott Carter's metric modulations. The resultant music, however, sounds minimalist and is obstinately tonal as a result of the clearly audible harmonic implications of the intervallic relationships between these eight pitches.

Though commissioned for saxophonist Brian Sacawa by the Boston Microtonal Society (to perform during their 10th anniversary celebration concert at Boston's Cathedral Church of St. Paul on May 10, 2009), *Spurl* can be effectively performed on any wind instrument capable of producing these eight 13-limit just intonation pitches. Therefore a version for solo *Bb* clarinet, which was created for a performance by Michiyo Suzuki on April 25, 2013 at the Turtle Bay Music School in New York City presented under the auspices of Composers Concordance, is equally definitive. Five years after that, in 2018, *Spurl* received UnTwelve's Micro-Cosmos (Mikrokosmos) Microtonal Pedagogy Award.

In Roald Dahl's fascinating 1949 short story, "The Sound Machine," a man is driven mad by a contraption he builds that enables him to hear sounds that occur in nature which had heretofore been impossible to perceive. While there is no direct programmatic reference in *Spurl* to Dahl's "The Sound Machine," the following passage from the story was on my mind throughout the compositional process:

A flower probably didn't feel pain. It felt something else which we didn't know about—something called toin or spurl or plinuckment, or anything you like.

—Frank J. Oteri