

X. Chorales

Perhaps no piece of Tenney's is easier to explain, yet whose aural effect is more difficult to describe than the Chorales for Orchestra. While its construction is childishly, or elegantly, simple, its musical and emotional impact is rather awesome. Though many of the pieces of this period have this same quality of being discovered rather than composed, Chorales is the most transparent. Once again, Tenney is exploring the ramifications of the octatonic scale, made up of the odd harmonics. Chorales is the one piece, however, where the melodic aspects (the diminished mode) of this scale are explored, and indeed the only piece since Monody where Tenney has shown a real interest in melody per se. Here, the harmonic series is built on A, and the scale of alternating half steps and whole steps can be seen in Example X.1, where the first half of the melody is transcribed.

Chorales for Orchestra is in four movements, each exactly the same in form but differing in instrumentation. The first is scored for strings, piccolo and contrabassoon; the second for brass, two vibraphones and harp; the third

Example X.1

Melody, measures 1-32, 1st trumpet, Chorales (II)

for woodwinds with harp; and the last (marked "tutti") for the whole orchestra, with a percussion section consisting of celeste, chimes, tam-tam and harp. Each movement is sixty-four measures long, with the last thirty-two more or less the mirror image of the first.

(I should note here in passing that several other versions of this piece exist, all realizations of the same harmonic/melodic idea for different instrumental combinations. I think that these are all more or less experiments, and though I have heard one or two performed, I have not seen a final score for any of them. One very beautiful version is for viola and piano, and this was performed by Tenney and Ann Holloway as part of *Maple Sugar* in Toronto).

Each movement is completely determined by two things: the melody (which is the same for each), and the initial voicing of the first chord. Each vertical chord in all four movements is an "inversion" of the first chord, composed of the eight notes in the scale, with doublings only in non-sectional instruments (like the vibraphones in the brass movement, and the piccolo and bassoon in the first movement). Given the first chord voicing, the set of "inverted" chords and the "leading voice" melody, the remainder of the piece is predetermined. It is a kind of extreme organum, but using (ideally) the properties of the harmonic series to bring about certain complex consonances, and, what Tenney expects, the feeling that we are really listening to the spectrum of one pitch, in two dimensions. The melody itself is simply a horizontal realization of any given vertical sonority, and so there exists a wonderful ambiguity between melody and harmony, movement and stasis.

The melody itself has certain shaping factors. As one can see from Example X.1, it winds slowly upward, stopping periodically to breathe, and with the four minor thirds of the diminished seventh chord as its preliminary goals before reaching the octave. Because it does not have any intervallic leaps, and because of pervasive inner repetition, it seems to ascend interminably, yet ever propulsive (like the glissandi in *For Ann (rising)*). The melody, listened to by itself, is quite beautiful and mysterious, and it must have taken Tenney some considerable care, effort and skill to work it out. In its shape and modal use, it reminds one a little of Lou Harrison's music, with which Tenney is quite familiar, and its gradual perceptual ascension bears more than a little resemblance to Ruggles.

The initial voicings for each movement are shown in Example X.2. Each represents a simple orchestrational concept. The strings are spread-voiced approximately in fifths, the brass are voiced in the closest possible cluster (with the vibes replicating this), and the woodwinds are more or less in thirds. In the final movement, the melody starting on A is played by the entire string section in octaves, second trombones, third horns, first trumpets, contrabassoon, bassoon, first clarinet, first piccolo, and the

Example X.2

The image shows three musical staves labeled I, II, and III. Staff I is labeled 'Initial voicing' and 'strings'. Staff II is labeled 'Brass' and 'Woodwinds'. Staff III is labeled 'strings', 'Perc.', and 'Woodwinds'. The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings on five-line staves.

percussion inner voices. The other pitches in the eight-part chord are divided among the remaining instruments so that higher harmonics tend to sound in the higher registers, with the greatest harmonic density in the middle register. The brass play in parallel dominant seventh chords, while the woodwinds sound the higher extensions in close voicing.

In the first movement, the melody on A is reinforced on both registral ends by the piccolo and contrabassoon, and in each of the other movements there is the added "dramatic" effect of a "punctuating" instrument about every four measures. In the second, the harp and tuba sound a low A, usually under the sustained pitches. In the third movement, which is in the key a tritone higher (for reasons of range, though it has the same harmonic construction, and in some sense is still in the same "key"), the contrabassoon and harp are the punctuating instruments. In the final movement the punctuations are made by the tuba, harp and tam-tam. In all movements, these become more frequent towards the midpoint of the piece, accompanying the melodic ascension and continual crescendo, and then less frequent from the midpoint (as everything is in retrograde). For some reason, it is the "unnecessary" aspect of this device which attracts me so much to this work, for these punctuations are in no way determined, as is the rest of the work, but are in every way consistent. It is such a straightforward and simple effect that it can only be seen as evidence of the composer's good will towards the listener!

One anomaly exists in the second movement. The initial chord has no G natural (or seventh harmonic) in it. This is the only incomplete chord in the piece, though of course, every chord in that movement has, consequently, one pitch missing (not always the seventh). This absence may be due to the particular cluster voicing of the brass, where the A is in the lead trumpet, so that the G below it would tend to obfuscate the direction of the melody. Because of this simplified harmony, the second movement is unique in that its seven voices move in complete parallel motion throughout.

Chorales for Orchestra, like Clang, has I believe seen only one performance, and only a mediocre homemade recording exists. Neither of these pieces is at all difficult to perform, and one has to wonder at the reluctance of orchestras to play truly contemporary music - music that completely transforms our notion of the ensemble itself.