

BEN JOHNSTON

KNOCKING PIECE

NOTES OF GENERAL INTEREST

The rhythmic structure of KNOCKING PIECE is derived from the harmonic inter-vallic structure of Johnston's composition A SEA DIRGE (written in just intonation). Johnston 'transposes' the ratios of the harmonic intervals of A SEA DIRGE into the realm of rhythm. In other words, the harmonic intervals are 'slowed down' so that they are perceived as rhythm. As an illustration, the first harmonic interval in A SEA DIRGE is a perfect fifth, which is 'transposed' to the rhythm of 3:2 in KNOCKING PIECE. In this way, Johnston demonstrates a wholistic view in which melody, harmony, and rhythm are based on the same proportions.

Both A SEA DIRGE and KNOCKING PIECE were originally intended to accompany a theatrical performance which, for various reasons, never came to fruition. In the theatrical work, KNOCKING PIECE was to accompany a film of a soldier returning from war to his bombed-out home town. When he arrives, the only house left standing is his. He frantically tries to get into his house, climbing all over it, knocking to get in, but to no avail. It's boarded up. In the context of the film, KNOCKING PIECE is the demonic transformation of A SEA DIRGE — the other side of the coin; a hell image.

KNOCKING PIECE can also be viewed as an attack on the symbol of Western musical culture — the piano. In Johnston's own words:

"You see these two performers approach the piano and take the top off it and go to work. They look like surgeons because they have to concentrate so hard. You have the feeling that some sort of black operation is taking place, that the piano will never be the same again. People do indeed get very upset. It is a work that implies violence, even vandalism. As such, it is a disturbing work. If it is played properly it will do no harm (to the piano). It won't even scar the instrument; you're not supposed to hit it in places that would. There is no reason, if the strings are in good condition, why any damage should be done whatsoever."

PERFORMANCE NOTES

The sustaining pedal can and should be used, ad lib. Pitch should be used only as color, if at all. Typical piano sounds should be avoided. The same sound should be used for successive notes which have the same speed, but contrasting sounds (to varying degrees) should enter with each change of note speed. The equal marks across bar lines mean that the same note speed should be maintained in spite of a change in notation. In general, specific kinds of sounds should predominate within a given phrase. All sounds should relate to knocking. A general dynamic level is given for each phrase (within boxes, at phrase beginnings). Changes of dynamic level are also indicated. The tempo of the opening is at the performers' discretion; it is strict thereafter. Not all the notes must be played. Rests are permitted if rhythmic patterns are clear.

If the unity and simplicity of the knocking sounds are overemphasized, the realization will be monotonous. If the rationally controlled shifting of tempi are not mastered, the realization will deteriorate into feigned vandalism. If the marathon ensemble cooperation and concentration required fail, the performance will be impossible to execute. A spirit of competitiveness between the performers will destroy the piece. The players must be friends; in quick alternation each must support the other.

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A SEA DIRGE

TEXT BY SHAKESPEARE for Jantina BEN JOHNSTON

Example 2. Beginning measures of A Sea Dirge. Copyright 1974 by Smith Publications. Used with permission.

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two percussionists on piano interior and exterior

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