

Sandeep Bhagwati: Alien Lands – monochrom – Nil Nisi Nive

The three compositions presented on this evening are all variations on the theme of the monochrome. I became interested in the monochrome many years ago. I was tired of the luxuriant, mannerist decadence of much new music, with its refined sounds and impenetrable forms. I yearned for simplicity, but I do not experience the world as simple – and I could not fathom how to make simple music that would not feel simplistic to me. A year ago I visited the grand retrospective of works by Pierre Soulages at the Centre Pompidou – and was immediately convinced by his monochrome approach to simplicity. The black in Soulages works, the colour in the works of Mark Rothko: both use very little ostensible refinement in the way they "compose" the work – no flashy virtuosity, no overbearing concepts, none of the show-and-tell attitude that characterizes so much of contemporary art and music – "look what I have found and what I can do with it, look how brilliant I am, look how socially conscious, how punky, how in tune with my time I am, look how elegant my transitions are, look how I can do what no one has done before, in brief: look at me (through my work)!"

The aesthetic riches of Soulages and Rothko's work lie not in what they show off: their deeply layered explorations of the monochrome do not point anywhere but inwards, they draw us in, and demonstrate to us how wonderfully subtle our perception can be. Of course, how to translate such an approach from paintings - that like all static things so well defend their silent mysteries – into performed music was not obvious either. This concert is therefore only a first step towards a new sonic aesthetic of the monochrome: a monochrome that does not have to be passive and slow, featureless and strenuous, without melody and rhythm – listening to a lively market is a monochrome event as much as listening to dripping icicles in spring...

Each of the 4 movements of *Alien Lands* for percussion quartet uses a very limited number of instruments that carry the work, each uses one overall sound, one type of movement, one formal structure – and yet the listener can discover riches in its very limitations. All 4 movements are based on a lipogram poem (using only 9 letters of the alphabet) that I wrote in 2001, a poem that has fueled a series of large scale works since then (see page [?X?](#)). In all these works, the sequence of the letters in the poem indicates the formal structure – but the way they are interpreted is different each time. In ATAVIST, the letters govern the distribution of rhythms in space. In DIVIDE, they change the colours of sound in an almost white noise field. In NESTED, they are transformed into Indian percussion syllables. In SENTIENT they steer the evolution of tempi and sounds in space.

The 4 movements of the *monochrom* string quartet are in reality only four different settings of the same underlying interactive score. The *monochrom* score is a partly graphic, partly traditional improvisation score that tells musicians when to play, for how long and inspires their improvisation by pictures, poetic texts and instructions. It listens to the musicians and re-configures itself to generate the pages during the concert: neither musicians nor composers know exactly what to expect. One main instruction however remains the same: as long as one page is valid, each musician must play one kind of music only – creating a monochrome field of sound. Over the 4 movements, the settings of the score change step by step: while in the first movement the musicians all see an identical screen at the same time, in the last movement they decide for themselves when to turn to the next page, and can do so independently of each other – thus creating

a layered improvisation of monochrome musical colours, moving both through the real space of the concert and our inner, imaginary space.

Nil Nisi Nive (three latin logical terms: *nothing - if not - nor*), finally, is a reflection on Indian melodic construction and on the beauty of heterophony: a meditation on how melodies flow from each other and over percussion sounds to create rich webs of memory. And how *nothing* happens *if not* desired - *nor* imagined...

A final word: as all major efforts, this work is not only my own. At **matralab** [Concordia University], which I direct and which has produced this event, I was blessed to have a number of principal musical assistants who helped bring my vision of an interactive score into reality. Michal Seta developed most of the score (in close collaboration with Dominique Fober of GRAME Lyon). Mathieu Marcoux, Navid Navab, Adam Basanta, Max & Julian Stein contributed significant elements of the software as well as logistical support. Jane Tingley coordinated the production together with Barbara Scales and Latitude45. My collaboration on the light installation with Jean Gervais and Nancy de Bussièeres was always inspiring and enriching. And finally, the musicians of the Bozzini Quartet and Aiyun Huang of Bye Bye Butterfly provided valuable input and suggestions in the research and development phase (apart from learning these non-standard works). I owe an immense thanks to all their efforts and goodwill. And I thank Concordia University's Office of Research, the Concordia Faculty of Fine Arts, the Canada Research Chairs Program, the FQRSC and the CALQ, and last but not least, the SMCQ, for very generously financing the research and production of this work. It would have never happened without their funding and moral support.

SANDEEP BHAGWATI SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Sandeep Bhagwati is an multiple award-winning composer, theatre director and media artist. He studied at Mozarteum Salzburg (Austria), Institut de Coordination Acoustique/Musique IRCAM Paris (France) and graduated with a Diplom in Composition from Hochschule für Musik und Theater München (Germany) His compositions and improvisations in all genres (including 6 operas) have been performed by leading performers at leading venues and festivals worldwide. He has directed international music festivals and intercultural exchange projects with Indian and Chinese musicians and leading new music ensembles. He was a Professor of Composition at Karlsruhe Music University, and Composer-in-Residence at the IRCAM Paris, ZKM Center for Arts and Media Karlsruhe, Beethoven Orchestra Bonn, Institute for Electronic Music Graz, CalArts Los Angeles, Heidelberg University and Tchaikovsky Conservatory Moscow. He also was a guest professor at Heidelberg University in 2009.

As Canada Research Chair for Inter-X Arts at Concordia University Montréal since 2006 he currently directs **matralab**, a research/creation center for intercultural and interdisciplinary arts. His current work centers on improvisation, inter-traditional aesthetics, the aesthetics of interdisciplinarity, gestural theatre, sonic theatre and interactive visual and non-visual scores. Since 2010, he also is the director of Hexagram Concordia, a centre for research-creation in media arts with a faculty of 45 artist-researchers and extensive state-of-the-art facilities.

Alien Lands

Composition and artistic direction	Sandeep Bhagwati
String Quartet	Quatuor Bozzini Clemens Merkel Charles-Étienne Marchand Stéphanie Bozzini Isabelle Bozzini
Percussion Quartet	Bye Bye Butterfly Aiyun Huang Sandra Joseph Ayano Kataoka Corinne René
Interactive Scores	Michal Seta

Sound Design	Navid Navab
Light Design	Jean Gervais
Technical Coordination	Mathieu Marcoux
Production Management	Sandeep Bhagwati Barbara Scales Jane Tingley
Video Documentation	Karen Zalamea
Audio Documentation	Daniel Courville
Photo Documentation	Jérôme Delapierre
Software and Production Development	Michal Seta Mathieu Marcoux Navid Navab Adam Basanta Julian Stein Max Stein Claudine Jacques