

Maenad

Instructions for a musical improvisation after Sylvia Plath's "Poem for a Birthday"¹—
for female speaker and very small ensemble of unspecified instrumentalists

1. Who

Instructions to each musician individually:

Extract a prime motive from the pitch class set {0,1,4}.² Let this motive appear in 33 musical iterations, or phrases, in which the motive is perpetually varied and developed and metamorphosed. Within a single iteration, it may be extended beyond the length of a three-note phrase; likewise, it may be contracted to one or two notes. Articulation within each iteration or phrase need not be legato followed by a breath, but there should be a definite distinction made between one iteration and the next. Intonation is flexible and need not be confined to the equidistant dodecaphonic universe. Microtones are encouraged. Instrumentalists may use their voices. Instrumentalists may include non-pitched variations of the prime motive among the 33, including silent variations.

You are responsible individually for measuring out your phrased iterations and counting to 33 then stopping. It is most likely that you will lose your way within the burgeoning musical creative process, losing count of your iterations: the rhythmicity of your musical breathing and phrasing as you improvise will suppress your capacity for banal counting, and it is most likely that you will not know when and whether you have reached the number 33. That is how it should be. But this does not relieve you of the responsibility for measuring out your phrased iterations and counting to 33 then stopping.

When you have stopped, hearken toward the ensuing silence as it grows.

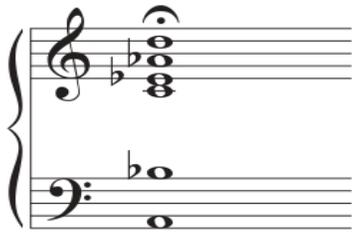
Instructions to the musicians collectively:

Listen to each other. Allow a free contrapuntal texture to emerge between you. There should be a sense of searching and unease in this musical conversation. The overall texture should be lushly vegetative yet confined and somewhat musty in character.

After the 33 motivic iterations, when the silence has grown dense and tangible, let a bulb of musical light infiltrate and overwhelm the space for an extended moment—short enough for it to have the character of a puncture or fracture in the stream of undifferentiated time, yet long enough for it to convey the amplified sense of time that might accompany receiving a severe psychological shock. The pitch structure of the bulb of musical light would be notated as follows:

¹ Sylvia Plath, "Poem for a Birthday," *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 131–137. Plath's "Poem for a Birthday" is in seven parts: "Who"; "Dark House"; "Maenad"; "The Beast"; "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond"; "Witch Burning"; and "The Stones." Each of the seven episodes comprising these instructions for a musical improvisation is named, in sequence, after one of the parts of Plath's poem. The title of the improvisation as a whole—Maenad—takes its name from the third poem in Plath's sequence, which the female speaker is instructed to declaim in its entirety within the improvisation's corresponding episode.

² For an introductory elucidation of pitch class set theory, see Allen Forte, *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). The pitch class set is both abstract and specific—its content cannot be better represented in some other more concrete way. However, as a guide for musicians unfamiliar with pitch class set theory, the constellation of tones C–C sharp–E gives a straightforward example of a three-tone series drawn from the pitch class set {0, 1, 4}.



*Let a bulb of musical light infiltrate and overwhelm the space
for an extended moment—*

However, this pitch structure, which is a presentation of the pitch class set {0,1,2,4,6,7}, need not be sounded as one vertical simultaneity; nor need it be restricted to the register in which it is notated. Interpretation is free.

Any one musician may take the initiative to begin sounding the bulb of light. Other musicians should join immediately to the sounding. The end of the sounding should be incisive, if a little ragged; that is, the performers need not finish precisely together, but any sense of melting away should be avoided.

Return to silence.

Instructions to female speaker:

You might belong to the very small ensemble of instrumentalists, performing the role of female speaker in addition to following the instructions to the musicians; or you might be a singer. In either of those cases, you are asked to participate in the musical improvisation outlined in the instructions given to the musicians. If you are neither professional singer nor instrumentalist, you are invited nonetheless to offer your songful, soulful vocalisations—whether occasionally or sustained—in response to the musicians’ activity; or you may offer, as a vessel for their musical lifeblood, your profound listening silence.

Symbolism of the number 33:

In its sequence of seven poetic episodes, Plath’s “Poem for a Birthday” traces a process of mystical death and resurrection. It draws on Plath’s biographical experience of surviving a suicide attempt, which involved her lying three days unconscious in a cellar, as though entombed, before she was discovered and brought like Lazarus back into the realm of the living.³ “Who,” the opening poetic episode in Plath’s sequence, contains 33 lines, which might be symbolic of Christ, who is said to have been aged 33 when he raised Lazarus and was crucified shortly thereafter. Plath’s association of the biblical story of Lazarus with the pivotal near-death experience in her own biography is famously articulated in her 1962 poem “Lady Lazarus.”⁴

2. Dark House

Instructions to all performers:

Be very still in your bodies, as if frozen. Let silence keep growing darkly.

Experience the yearning to speak or to cry. Repress it.

After a little while, consider yourselves adjusted to the silence and the darkness. Let yourselves melt into it; let your muscles thaw. Subtly, then in ever bigger motions, let your limbs begin to move toward expressive movement, toward singing with your arms and dancing with your feet, but always receding again into stillness. You may interact with your instruments in this process, but do not sound them. A series of three waves should arise in the silence through these movements, which are as-if-audible musical phrases. Each time you recede into darkness and stillness, feel

³ Plath’s suicide attempt in August 1953 is well documented. See John 11 for the biblical account of the raising of Lazarus.

⁴ Plath, *Collected Poems*, 244–247.

yourself warmer and cosier (you may hug yourselves). Learn to trust the darkness that represses your voice. Learn to feel safe when you are denied your freedom. Imagine you have Stockholm Syndrome.

After the three waves, a brisk, friendly conversation is to arise between the performers. The following lines, drawn from Plath's poem (and slightly misquoted), are to be spoken between them:

“It is warm and tolerable in the bowel of the root.”

“My belly moves. I must make more maps.”

“All-mouth's to blame. He's a fat sort.”

“I made it myself—whistling, wiggling my ears, thinking of something else.”⁵

After the conversation, there should be one more wave of as-if-audible limb-music.

Then, one musician should play or sing a descending scale of seven notes, in any intonation.

3. Maenad

Instructions to female speaker:

Declaim “Maenad” from Sylvia Plath's “Poem for a Birthday.” (To speak all of these words out loud in front of an audience requires permission from the Estate of Sylvia Plath. Ask for it.)

Instructions to the musicians:

Listen and watch.

Breathe with the spoken poetry.

If you are inspired to join your tone to words, or to the spaces between words, the words will welcome you, as long as you do not turn their clear and hard-forged speech into a song.

Let silence be your queen.

4. The Beast

Instructions to female speaker:

Think of the word “mumblepaws”⁶ until you say it out loud, laughing.

Instructions to the musicians:

Make up a merry wedding dance in triple time for a beast and his bride. Veer towards major and augmented harmonies. Exaggerate rubatos. Laugh at the word mumblepaws.

The beast is a good fellow. His heaviness and his hairiness are attended by “little invisibles”⁷ of an airy, sunlit, disinfectant character. High harmonics would not go astray in counterbalance to thicker, more awkward, bass motives.

This episode is brief.

⁵ More exactly quoted, as would be required in a scholarly essay, these lines would read: “It is warm and tolerable / In the bowel of the root”; “My belly moves / I must make more maps”; “[All-mouth's] to blame. / He's a fat sort”; “I made it myself, / ... / Whistling, wiggling my ears / Thinking of something else.” Plath, “Poem for a Birthday,” 132-133.

⁶ Plath, “Poem for a Birthday,” 134.

⁷ Ibid.

5. Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond

Instructions to the musicians:

An atmosphere of coldness and stillness prevails. No stars are reflected in the surface of your dull, despairing, slow-drawn tones, which do reflect each other. Listen for undines drowning beneath the surface of your sound, drowning into each other's reflections. Because they have lost the stars the undines are headless. They are looking for the head and lyre of Orpheus.

After a while, one musician should play or sing an ascending scale of seven gold-shining notes, in any intonation, as if the lyre of Orpheus had been found.

Silence.

Someone should sing something. High up. Lamenting but flying. A flute or a violin would do for this.

Silence again.

Instructions to female speaker:

Let the spirit PAN inform you.⁸ Offer your songful, soulless vocalisations to the sculpted dark water made by the musicians. Conjure in their reflections the whorled memory of a "plaintive German song Mother used to play and sing ... beginning '*Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten ...*' From "the tip of a reed" wrap the world memory in "golgotha."¹⁰

6. Witch Burning

Female speaker:

"In the month of red leaves I climb to a bed of fire."¹¹

Instructions to the musicians:

Descending and ascending, in wild intonations, dementedly overlapping like flames shooting from each player's instrument, becoming faster and faster and louder and louder and darker and brighter: scales in seven notes, nine notes, eleven notes. I once heard tell that in the time of the great Pythagoras (who, referring back to the music and to the initiation of the great Orpheus with his Eurydice and with his lyre, taught the Greek people the arithmetic of scales), knowledge of the octave was a mystery, and that the mystery's betrayal was punishable by death. Beware, then, of the octave and of even numbers as you flame forth your scales while imagining the crowd of maenads who destroyed Orpheus, tore him from limb to limb. Imagine, too, the crowd around Christ crying "Crucify him!" Your scales are red flames, which are the red blood of the flames' victim.

⁸ Plath records in her journal entry for 4 July 1958 how on the previous night she and her husband Ted Hughes consulted "PAN [via a ouija board] for the first time in America ... Among other penetrating observations, Pan said I should write on the poem subject 'Lorelei' because they are my 'Own Kin.' So today for fun I did so," Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 400-401. See Plath, *Collected Poems*, 94-95, for Plath's finished poem "Lorelei," which addresses a sisterhood of singing river nymphs and their stone the Lorelei (in the River Rhine). Although "Lorelei" has little directly to do with "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond," it is invoked by the appearance of undines in the musicians' sonorous reflections, and by association with the nature god Pan, who bears a flute and is a companion of nymphs.

⁹ Ibid. 401. The song is a setting of Heine's poem "Lorelei." Plath's mother probably sang Friedrich Silcher's setting, which for a time enjoyed considerable popularity. However, I would encourage the female speaker to instead have in mind the less well-known 1834 setting by Clara Schumann, whose husband Robert attempted suicide in February 1854 by throwing himself off a bridge into the Rhine.

¹⁰ Plath, "Poem for a Birthday," 135.

¹¹ Ibid.

Stop abruptly.

Female speaker:

“What large eyes the dead have!

I am intimate with a hairy spirit.”¹²

Instructions to the musicians:

Cleanse the speaker of the hairy spirit. Growl at her with fierce tones. Scourge her. Lead her into brightness. Resound the bulb of light from the first episode, “Who,” and sustain it (with free variation) until the speaker intervenes.

Female speaker:

“I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.”¹³

7. The Stones

Instructions to the musicians:

Imagine being reborn as a shop mannequin. Plath’s image of being put back together again and reborn in “The Stones” is animated by mistrust, helplessness and horror as the poem’s speaker watches from a dissociated distance the operations of “the city where men are mended.”¹⁴

Prompt (unspoken): “This is the after-hell: I see the light.”¹⁵

Use percussive sounds to beat out the rhythms of a plastic heart. Use cloyingly gentle, lyrical motives to swaddle limbs made of rubber. Keep it short. None of this is very believable.

Female speaker:

“Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.”¹⁶

Those words intervene to mark the end of the improvisation. The musicians should now form their chosen final gestures, either in sound or in movement.

Hold.

Break the spell. The end.

Bibliography

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—. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber & Faber, 2000.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 137.



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