

COM 466
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Response to “Incantation” and “Concrete PH”

These two pieces tell entirely different stories. The first evidence of this is that the ending of “Concrete PH” is largely unchanged from the beginning of the piece. I do not mean that there was an ABA form to the piece, but that there seemed to be a constant tone throughout the piece that would not change. The image is akin to each major “character” in the piece stepping forward and taking a bow while the others stand back and watch. In contrast, “Incantation” is a slightly unnerved piece that builds over time until, after the apex, the piece settles, but is even more settled than at the beginning.

It seems that “Concrete PH” relies on more rudimentary ways of expressing itself than “Incantation” as if its motifs are being thrust into your face. A great deal of panning is used and the more I listen to it the more I feel like the composer wanted the listener to feel uneasy about the way the panning was implemented. “Incantation” instead draws you into its uneasiness by gradually increasing its “busyness.”

Both pieces immediately establish a space or environment for the music or sounds in which to live and in similar ways as well. “Incantation” uses that low rumble that is constant for most of the piece that allows for featuring other parts of the piece. “Concrete PH” also has a constant background sound for most of the composition but it is instead a loop-like sound effect that occupies the complete opposite of the frequency spectrum.

In terms of overall the sounds used to compose each piece, there are a few similarities, but even more differences. It is never entirely clear, but there does seem to be a distinct recorded voice part in “Incantation.” It is used sparingly, however, and is

not the focus of the piece like in “Idle Chatter.” There is also a recorded effect of what sounded like breaking glass in “Concrete PH” which explains the natural and textural title of the piece. This sound, though, felt like it used its own reverb from the original recording unlike “Incantation.” I also noticed that further through the piece, the glass breaking effect seemed more prominent and also slightly pitch shifted. This led me to wonder whether the entire piece was composed from one sound effect that had versions that were greatly pitch shifted and others that were only minutely changed. Also, in “Incantation,” a bell appears infrequently as if the composer felt though the piece needed a distinct sound that the listener could use to ground themselves and identify motif transitions.

Upon doing further research, I found that Iannis Xenakis was heavily into conveying the mathematical side of music. There is something distinctly organized and constrained about “Concrete PH” and I would attribute that to the patterns Xenakis created. While I feel that this piece would be hard to replicate in Metasynth, or UPIC in Xenakis’ case, it would not be out of the ordinary to hear a piece very similar to this composed in Metasynth today.

The feel of “Incantation” in contrast to “Concrete PH” is more electronic sounding. Chirps and beeps are apparent that would be out of place in “Concrete PH” and the use of time altered sounds is largely perceived as a way to change the overall environment. It seems that a composition like this, that is so well mixed, would be hard to compose in 1953, but Luening and Ussachevsky found a way to do it.

At a glance, both pieces feel like they are through-composed, however they can be analyzed further. “Incantation” feels gradual and unending until the last 20 seconds.

This is where the sound drops away to reveal a slightly altered version of the initial motif. I would classify the piece as ABA' for this reason. "Concrete PH" is more like a child's fairy tale with the presence of simple sounds as you leave "home". Mechanically, the listener initially hears monotone sounds in the background with more musical tones in the foreground. The reverse is heard later on in the piece with accentuate volume changes and panning for the monotone sounds. Metaphorically, the listener gets surrounded by bigger and more complex sounds and is then taken "through the woods" of multiple effect changes. Eventually the listener is led back to the original place he or she started but, as with many children's stories, this ending occurs rather abruptly.