

'Four Elements' - Commentary

Paul Sundt

The theme of this piece is based on a natural phenomenon as nature is a particular fascination of mine. The theme is that of a discovery made by Charles Darwin which involved four living things, flowers, bees, mice and cats which coexisted in balance with each other on a farm. Darwin realised that if one of the four elements (or life forms) were removed, then all would disappear as the life forms kept each other's populations going. The bees pollinated the flowers, the mice ate the bees and the cats ate the mice.

For my piece, each percussive instrument represents one of the four life forms. The foot stomp represents the flowers as they are not only on the ground, but also the root driving force for the other life forms. The bees are represented by empty glass bottles being hit with tea spoons. This produces a high-pitched sound that can be played fast giving a kind of hi hat feel to the piece. The mice are represented by claps because they have the potential for a fast execution and the cats are represented by a biscuit tin being hit as this is a very sudden and unexpected sound which gives the piece a snare drum effect.

The first section lasts for 24 bars and introduces the four elements one by one, each with their own unique rhythm. This gives the feeling of evolution as each element gives rise to the next. The piece begins in 4/4 time, however none of the elements really abide by this. The foot stomp occurs every three beats, and after four occurrences is accompanied by the glass bottles. The glass bottles occur every five beats and after four occurrences are accompanied by the claps. These occur every seven beats and are finally accompanied by the biscuit tin which occurs every nine beats. This has the effect of randomness as each bar results in a different configuration of rhythms. This I felt helped to evoke the idea of chaos in nature where things haven't quite found stability yet.

I then contrast with this in the second section beginning in bar 25. Here the piece changes to 12/8 time and the elements are re-introduced but now in an orderly pattern or groove which slowly develops through the use of gradual addition of notes. In bar 30 the groove (rhythm) is complete and repeats four times. This groove represents a well-established relationship between the four elements.

Then in bar 32 comes the third section where various transformations start to occur. The piece starts to alternate from the groove just established to the themes of each element. I continue this trend of alternating until bar 39 as I like how the listener is forced to compare an orderly pattern of rhythms as a groove with the individual elements that make up the groove. After this, the groove (rhythm) slowly increases in intensity until the piece comes to a climax in bar 45.