

# les étoiles sont belles

for eight-part choir

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commentary

## 1. SUMMARY

Les étoiles sont belles is a piece for eight-part choir. The piece uses very simple harmony and rhythmic patterns which repeat and recombine to create each of the twenty eight fragments. It focuses on the experiential aspect of a performance and is based on interacting with and exposing the roles which are present during a performance but which we seem taken for granted – those of the performers singing *for* an audience, and an audience listening to the performance from a distance, hidden in the anonymity of low lights, un-named seats, and large numbers of audience members.

This is a composition which is meant to be performed by eight individual singers (as opposed to eight groups of singers) to a small audience (equal to or less than the numbers of singers). The audience is sitting in the middle of the singers, blindfolded, and the singers are position around them. There are no stands, so there are no barriers between the singers and the audience, and no “stage”.

This composition has been highly influenced by an exercise we performed during a “Creating and Communicating Music” session at the Joint Music Master's NAIP summer school in Skálholt, Iceland. During that session, Renee Jonker from the Koninklijk Conservatorium in the Hague, led a session where all twenty five students were arranged in a large circle, and three students were selected to stand in the middle, with their eyes closed. Then, Renee led the rest of the group to start singing (we could choose any pitch and couldn't change it until the exercise was over) at the people in the middle, and then perform various activities such as get louder or softer, move towards or away from the audience, move around the audience, and in the end walk out of the room. The second time we performed this exercise I had the chance to sit in the middle, and was overwhelmed by what was going on – it felt as if I was being washed with sound from all around, and because of the nature of the chord that was being sung (a very thick cluster) and the number of people (over twenty people), I had a really hard time understand what's going on, and this confusion made me very self-conscious of myself, as well as made me feel very insecure and exposed, standing there with my eyes closed while so many people were singing at me.

This experience stayed with me for a long time after the summer school, and became the basis for this composition. I have filtered this first experience to retain which aspects of it are very important to me, and refined other aspects which I felt were left to chance too much. I simplified many aspects of it, limited the piece in various ways so as I don't have to worry about all the things I can do with the ensemble available, but what I do with the materials I have available.

## 2. HARMONY

The composition occupies a very limited harmonic field. At its most fundamental level, it consists of three different chords, plus the final chord which is only stated once throughout the whole piece.

The image shows a musical score for four chords, labeled 1, i, a, and X, arranged in a two-staff system (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat).  
Chord 1: Treble clef has notes G4, B-flat4, D5, E-flat5; Bass clef has notes G2, B-flat2, D3, E-flat3.  
Chord i: Treble clef has notes G4, B-flat4, D5, E-flat5; Bass clef has notes G2, B-flat2, D3, E-flat3.  
Chord a: Treble clef has notes G4, B-flat4, D5, E-flat5; Bass clef has notes G2, B-flat2, D3, E-flat3.  
Chord X: Treble clef has notes G4, B-flat4, D5, E-flat5; Bass clef has notes G2, B-flat2, D3, E-flat3.

I then went on to arrange these chords and space them across the eight voices (although I was not using all the voices the whole time). I composed fourteen ( 1 - 14 ) such different spacings of the first chord; six ( i - vi ) spacings of the second chord; four (  $\alpha$  -  $\delta$  ) spacings of the third chord; and one ( X ) spacing of the last chord.

A musical score showing 14 different spacings of a chord across eight voices: Soprano 1, Soprano 2, Alto 1, Alto 2, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, Bass 1, and Bass 2. The notes are distributed across the staves for each spacing, with some voices being silent in certain spacings.

A musical score showing six different spacings of a chord across eight voices: S 1, S 2, A 1, A 2, T 1, T 2, B 1, and B 2. The notes are distributed across the staves for each spacing, with some voices being silent in certain spacings.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for an eight-part choir. The first system is divided into four measures, each labeled with a Greek letter: α, β, γ, and δ. The second system is labeled with the letter X. The parts are labeled S 1, S 2, A 1, A 2, T 1, T 2, B 1, and B 2. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one flat, and various note values and rests.

(see APPENDIX 1 for a demonstration of how these spacings of the chords were arranged to form the corpus of the piece)

## TEXT

The text comes from an online data-collection engine, called “WeFeelFine” (<http://www.wefeelfine.org>), developed by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar in 2005. On this website, there is an applet which automatically searches the Internet, harvesting human feelings from a large number of blogs. It scans blog posts for sentences containing the words “I feel” or “I am feeling”, it then extracts the sentence from its context and saves it in a database. Users of this applet can then browse through recent searches of “feelings” in various ways.

The text which is **spoken** all comes (unaltered) from the database. The text which is **sung** is written by me in response to (and inspired by) this project, using some of the statistics applets available on their website (e.g. seeing which “feelings” are most popular around the world at any one moment etc.) The reason why I found this text fascinating is because they are feelings which were written by a specific person, at a specific moment, in a specific place in the world, but at the same time they are feelings we have all felt at some point in our lives. With the anonymity of the internet, this text becomes text written by everyone in general, but by no one in particular, It touches upon the personal and universal, the individual and the communal, “me” vs “them.” This draws on my long-term interest on the self and personal identity, which I now had a chance to express in my music.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In particular books such as Alan Watt’s “The Book – the taboo against knowing who you really are” and William Earle’s “The Autobiographical Consciousness – A Philosophical Inquiry into Existence” have been very influential in

Here is an interesting (and relevant) quotation by Bill Watterson (author of Calvin and Hobbes):

*“Oddly, the more personal something is, the more universal it is as well. When we dig deeper to truthful experiences, that’s the work that really touches people and connects us all.”<sup>2</sup>*

## SINGING:

Voice is the only 'instrument' (if it can be called that) which can communicate meaning explicitly. I passionately dislike any vocal compositions in which the lyrics cannot be discerned and/or comprehended. For all I care, such compositions could have been written in an invented language with similar phonemes in a similar arrangement, and it would have made absolutely no difference. If a composer is going to use the voice to communicate lingual meaning, then she should do it clearly, unless there is a conceptual reason behind making it unintelligible, in which case not understanding the text is the focus of the composition.

In my attempt to make it as intelligible as possible, I arranged the text in such a manner where each word is clearly heard by the audience, and enough space is given between the words to let them be internalised and assimilated by the audience, who in turn may (or may not) create their own interpretations of the text, and the composition in general.

The fact that I was writing for voice, and all the particularities that vocal writing has played an important role in choosing and arranging the material for the composition (inevitably). However, for this particular composition I was more interested in the voice as primarily an instrument which has the ability to carries clear, communicative lingual meaning, rather than just an instrument purely for its acoustic qualities and timbres.

## RHYTHMS

There are four different rhythmic patterns used in the piece, A, B, C (see below) and unison. There is a very simple correlation between the rhythms and the pitches: each rhythmic cell of the three rhythmic patterns goes together with a pitch. Therefore, the first voice to sing will always be singing on the first beat, and will always be singing an A-flat. What changes is which voice is singing the A-flat, thus “moving” the note around the ensemble which is surrounding the audience.

Rhythms **A** and **B** are only applied to arrangements 1-14 of the first chord. (see HARMONY)

Rhythm **C** always goes together with arrangements i-vi of the second chord.

**Unison** always goes together with arrangements  $\alpha$  - $\delta$  of the third chord, and X of the final chord.

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choosing to work on this topic, as they were both books I happened to be reading prior to and while composing the piece.

2 As quoted in Sankey, Jay. “Zen and the art of stand-up comedy” Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1998.

## SPATIAL MUSIC

The singers are arranged in a circle, in a non-symmetrical manner. Symmetry is not relevant in this composition, and in fact it would make it easier for the audience to anticipate where each sound will be coming from. Asymmetry in the seating arrangement, therefore, aids the piece in achieving its goal, rather than hinder it.

This spatial aspect of the composition is the focus of the music of this composition. This is the reason why the harmonic and rhythmic material is so limited – to allow these spatial effects to be clearly perceived and understood by the audience. It helps make very transparent what is happening during the performance, as the harmonic material is very similar, the rhythmic material is very similar, but the literal “spacing” of the chord changes. The sung dynamics are identical for all the singers within each fragment, but the acoustic dynamics change as the singers move towards or away from the audience.

I am very interested in reconsidering elements/aspects of composition which I usually take for granted. For many compositions this has focused on notation (Does traditional western notation best serve my purposes? What kind of notation would better demonstrate/communicate what I want to achieve in my music), but for this composition I was interested in dynamics. It seems that in classical music (including contemporary music) *dynamics* are thought of “as a measure of **effort** than of loudness or power.”<sup>3</sup> Because of my increased fascination with electronic music the past few months, I was very interested in contrasting the two: *amplitude* (loudness or power) and *dynamics* (measure of effort). In this piece, the dynamics remain identical throughout the singers, but the amplitude of each singer's voice is perceived differently, depending on how close or how far away from the audience they are located.

I created some rules to control the sonic result of the movements of the players: One step (forward or backward) counted as one **move**. I allowed myself to compose up to a maximum of **three moves** from one fragment to the other. The other rule was “off-side”: At any moment, no one singer is allowed to be

3 Puckette, Miller. "The Theory and Technique of Electronic Music" (DRAFT: December 30, 2006), World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd. (<<http://crca.ucsd.edu/~msp/techniques.htm>>), p.6

more than three steps further ahead than the next closest singer (in terms of how close they are to the audience). The singers start singing at a distance of five large steps away from the audience.

The reason for these limitations is because I wanted to be in control of the effect these moves would have on the rest of the piece. I wanted the changes in amplitude to be perceivable, yet subtle, and I wanted to avoid extremities. (For example, the effect of having one singer right next to the audience with everyone else as far away from the audience as possible is a very different kind of effect which I wasn't keen on exploring in this composition, as the duration of the whole piece had to be around five minutes.)

## STRUCTURE

The beginning section with the speaking is a sort of exposition, but of the audience not of the musical material. As the audience is sitting/standing blindfolded in the centre, their first encounter with the choir is the choir shouting at the audience "I don't express my feelings very well." After this, the singers read out some text which refers to feelings/emotions which have been said by someone in particular on the internet, but we can all identify with (see TEXT). The text in this section is primarily in the first person, and the dispersion of the text across the singers and the simultaneous speaking of the text by many singers at the same time aim to have an effect of highlighting the individuality of a person within a group, the "I". Each one of us is their own self.

The purpose of this is to shock the audience, make them feel like they are unable to anticipate what's going to happen next. It also creates an emotional tension which is resolved as soon as we enter the middle section with the singing.

The middle section acts as a kind of resolution, but in a very primal sense. The ringing chords, the (mainly) soft dynamics, the simplicity and clarity with which each of the words is sung, the spacing of the chords across time, and the aspect of being "sung at" all aim at creating a much more comforting environment in which the audience perceives/receives the music. There is something very stressful about being spoken/shouted at by many people, and something very soothing about being sung at softly (perhaps remnants of memories of lullabies?). However, even during the calmer sections there are still elements of the performance which do not allow the audience to simply settle down, as they are unable to anticipate what is coming next. The chords are mostly similar (sometimes they repeat, sometimes they don't), the words change very slowly (some are repeated, some are not), the dynamics change (sometimes they stay the same, sometimes they don't), the rhythmic patterns sometimes remain the same, sometimes they don't, and occasionally we hear the singers sing in unison, and then return to our usual some-things-change-but-some-don't. These changes do not follow a particular order or logical sequence which the audience could infer, exactly for the reasons mentioned above – to never make it possible to anticipate the rest of the music. The fact that some elements remain the same and some change is precisely a play on the predictable and the unpredictable, at some points having unpredictability in something predictable, and predictability in something unpredictable. (see APPENDIX 1)

The rests between the fragments were composed intuitively – I allowed myself to choose any rest between one and five seconds long, and placed them thoughtfully, keeping in mind the text, dynamics, spacing, and previous/later rests.

For the last section, I chose to use the word "why" for the same reason Berio uses it in his Sequenza V

for trombone – because it's a word which contains all vowel sounds in English (u, o, a, e, i) if spread out over a long duration. Singers keep singing that word, spreading it out to the length of their breath, which creates the effect of hearing all the different harmonics and partials, while at the same time all the singers remain on their own pitch. This continuously- and subtly-changing soundscape is outlined by the singers performing very extreme movements (compared to the rest of the composition) towards and away from the audience, as well as moving around the audience in a circle, bringing the performance to an end by walking out of the room.

The act of walking out of the room is again a decrease in amplitude (whereas the dynamics remain the same), and is meant to create further confusion to the members audience. Due to the structure of the piece (the shocking beginning, the very calm ending, and now the extreme movements of the singers) they are not entirely sure whether the piece is over and how they should react. They don't know when they should take their blindfolds off, or whether they should clap. As a result, they are bound to feel self-conscious of themselves as members of the audience, but also as just people sitting there.

This piece is one which would be extremely effective if performed with the minimum amount of noise (from walking, turning pages etc – which is the reason I have created special parts for each of the singers which are one page long, to avoid the need for stands and page-turning), and in a large space (preferably a church, where the walking-out of the room would take a long time; additionally, the reverb in church halls would add tremendously to the effectiveness of the piece, as it would magnify the confusion during the speaking/shouting moments, and intensify the calm moments by making the sung bits last longer.

## TITLE

The title of the piece is from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry *Le Petit Prince*. The exact quote is “Les étoiles sont belles à cause d'une fleur que l'on ne voit pas.” (trans. “The stars are beautiful because of a flower we don't see.”) I believe that emotions (pleasant or unpleasant) are the flowers of human lives – what we don't see, but what makes them beautiful. It also alludes to the stellar quality of the soundscape of this composition.

## RECORDING

The recording was made by EXAUDI, conducted by James Weeks at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Jan 2011.

Unfortunately, the recording equipment was located outside the circle of singers and thus the spatial aspect of the performance has not been faithfully recorded. This is a composition which focuses explicitly on the experiential aspect of a performance. Therefore any recording of it will lack in that it fails to communicate what this piece is about (which is: being there with your eyes closed, listening to the musicians speaking/shouting/singing at you). The best way to appreciate the recording is by listening through a good set of headphones, to at least get some sense of the voices moving around.

there were a few things which we corrected after the recorded session, such as how to sing two-syllable words; how to sing “why” in the end; how to perform the *sffpp*'s; and walking out of the room (which wasn't performed as intended). Unfortunately, due to time limits we were unable to run it through once more, thus I do not have a more accurate interpretation of the piece.



