

if you open yourself to insight,

you are at one with insight
and you can use it completely

Example 1:
Horatiu Radulescu
Fifth String Quartet,
*before the universe
was born*
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Windows on Eternity: viewing Horatiu Radulescu's Fifth String Quartet *before the universe was born* (1990-95).

Trying to conceive of the immensity of the universe, it soon becomes clear that such vast realities elude our comprehension. Yet in the course of time, we may still glimpse at profundities and we will surely continue to contemplate the mysteries. Musical form occurs on an altogether smaller scale, but sound has often been a gateway to realms of vastness, and the principle remains that at any moment we can perceive only an aspect of the whole.

Faced with a musical work such as Radulescu's Fifth Quartet, which is already 'contemplating' something greater than

itself, we experience at each stage a microcosm of an imaginary microcosm. Each section of this 29-minute piece has a unique and often timeless quality, offering the listener numerous beautiful perspectives on the life of the 'spectral' materials from which it is created. The form as a whole comes to seem like a succession of windows around something too massive to be seen from a single viewpoint, and a sense of unity arises naturally from the materials, in spite of the many discontinuous transitions between sections.

The duration and refined content of each 'conceptually eternal' section enables us to experience deeply what we hear. In spite of acoustic complexities the carefully conceived sounds invite us to focus; they also convey a real sense of intimacy – as if communicating a special secret. Underlying these musical contemplations are verses from Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, written throughout the score. Only the interpreters see them, but their presence is not merely fanciful. They are integral to the sound quality and the meaning of the piece, because [to quote the composer] 'the phonetic, notional and magical significance of the text fragments determine some sound production and performance techniques'.

Such techniques include the 'spectral scordatura' (re-tuning) of the entire quartet, careful specification of bow articulation (position, speed and pressure), a-periodic string crossing with continuous timbral variation, 'morse code' gestures, inexact repetitions, meaningful use of open strings, and a

wonderfully obsessive use of natural harmonics (melodically and texturally). These combine in numerous ways to form what Radulescu calls 'sound plasma' – a continuously fluctuating unified acoustical entity of great beauty.

The manifestations of this 'plasma' are diverse: the quasi-electronic textures of one moment acquire speech-like phonetic qualities in another. The expressive range, from intimate whispers to primal screams, is also great. One thing we certainly don't hear is a traditional 'String Quartet' and this fact emphasises Radulescu's enduring concern to 'conceal cause and effect, in order to obtain a fantastic phenomenon'. Performance techniques aside, this concealment of causality is achieved through specific interactions within and between several harmonic spectra. Naturally occurring acoustical phenomena (frequency beats, sum/difference tones) are emancipated and emphasised, obscuring the origins of this scintillating, almost-alive organism.

Repeated listenings only enhance the sense of wonder, for each time we look through its windows we see something previously unnoticed. The richness of the sound continues to yield fresh beauties for our ears, and the scale of the form allows for the ever changing response of our perceptions. Maybe, then, Radulescu has realised his intention that 'Coming from and going towards the eternal... music creates... a magic state of the soul. This is its single aim and reason to exist'.

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In Analysis

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