The Insomnia of Lilacs

for fixed media

by Kyle Gann
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The Insomnia of Lilacs (2018)

I had a romance with ambient music in the early 1980s, though the only positive result of it was my 1981 three-piano piece *Long Night*. I always wanted to get back to it, and in 2018 I had an idea for a uniformly quiet piece for flutes, vibraphone, and piano using a set of parallel scales, which eventually added up to 58 pitches per octave. This piece is conceived as a recording only, and cannot be performed: who has a vibraphone with 58 pitches? Nor do I think that a concert setting would provide a rewarding listening mode for a piece so devoid of drama or forward motion. Having just written a two-and-a-half-hour piece on the harmonic series (*Hyperchromatica*), I was rather desperate to have minor tonalities again, and especially to move smoothly between major and minor seventh chords, from a septimal minor seventh \((1/1, 7/6, 3/2, 7/4)\) to regular minor and major sevenths, with a neutral seventh chord to smooth the transitions. The resulting 11-limit scale has a 12-pitch scale built up on five separate tonics: \(32/25, 49/48, 1/1, 96/49,\) and \(25/16\). On each of those tonics is built a scale of \(1/1, 9/8, 7/6, 6/5, 5/4, 27/20, 11/8, 3/2, 5/3, 7/4, 9/5,\) and \(15/8\). Combinations of pitches from different scales allow for the neutral seventh chords. (More technically, I had become fascinated with the 49th harmonic as an in-between point between the perfect and augmented fifth, and thus the prevalence of 49s in the tuning. Between \(49/48\) and \(1/1\) and between \(1/1\) and \(96/49\) one can get the same kind of tonality flux that Harry Partch used at the beginning of *The Letter*, which was my initial theoretical idea for the piece.)

Thus I made a score with five flutes, five vibraphones, and five pianos, each trio with the basic 12-pitch scale transposed to a different level. (Two pitches overlap between the \(32/25\) and \(1/1\) and between the \(25/16\) and \(1/1\) scales, which is why there are 58 pitches rather than 60.) A Copland quote appeared inadvertently; I embraced it and played with it. Two Europeans, Eberhard Weber and Arvo Pärt, make momentary appearances, and the spirit of Harold Budd hovers. As for the title, I wanted to evoke fragrance and nighttime, with a tinge of surreality that relates to the strange voice-leading among the tonalities. Plants suspend some natural operations when it’s dark out, but what if some lilacs couldn’t? What if they kept perfuming the atmosphere while obsessing about ideas that kept returning?

The piece last 31 minutes, the longest single movement I’ve written.

The pitch key for the five flute/vibraphone/piano sets appears on the following page. One might note that \(Eb 6/5\) occurs in both the \(32/25\) and \(1/1\) scales, and \(B 15/8\) occurs in both the \(1/1\) and \(25/16\) scales. In addition, \(F77b+ 49/40\) and \(D#<LL-60/49\) are less than a cent apart, as are \(C77b+ 147/80\) and \(A#LL 90/49\), so there are functionally only 56 pitches; I constructed the scales intentionally to play with this ambiguity. Generally speaking, each new section explores a different aspect of the tuning. There’s a section that plays entirely with five-limit dissonances, another that overlaps seventh chords from contrasting tonalities in the most dissonant (but always quiet) music I’ve ever written, and so on.
In Johnston's notation, + raises a pitch by 81/80, - lowers it by 80/81, # raises it by 25/24, b lowers it by 24/25, 7 lowers it by 35/36, <i>L</i> raises it by 36/35, ^ raises it by 33/32, and F-A-C, C-E-G, and G-B-D are all perfectly tuned 4:5:6 major triads.
Pitch Key for The Insomnia of Lilacs

The five staves are all transpositions of the same scale.