

La Caresse du Couteau

La Caresse du Couteau, for string quartet.

Duration: 15 minutes.

It is nowadays extremely difficult to approach the string quartet taking into account the great amount of works that have been written for this ensemble. Its versatility and flexibility have made it a favorite means of expression for many composers, and still today its almost unlimited resources are being explored. That is why I decided to confront this ensemble from a different starting point.

This work is based on a graphic called the enneagram, which was popularized in the West by Georges Gurdjieff (1870-1949), and his follower, Piotr D. Ouspensky. Gurdjieff travelled extensively and, as he himself tells, he found the Brotherhood of Samouni, founded in Babylon some 2500 years B.C. According to him, "all knowledge can be included in the enneagram and with its aid, all knowledge can be interpreted. And in this connection, man knows, that is, understands, only what he is capable of putting in the enneagram."

Apart from the fact that this symbol could have an authentic metaphysical meaning, I was intrigued to know in which way could I relate this image with sounds. The enneagram consists of nine lines organized in a specific way inside a circle. I decided to divide the lines in twelve parts and then I proceeded to associate each one of those parts with the chromatic scale. The intersections gave as a result a series of chords. The enneagram is a symbol that must be analyzed in motion. In its static state, it can only be appreciated partially. The music, a temporal art par excellence, allows us a moving observation of this graphic and when we do it, a new element arises: rhythm. The enneagram consists of infinite cycles. Each one of these cycles extends through an octave and is completed with the closing of the circumference in point 9, repeating itself ad infinitum in successive ascending or descending octaves.

All these procedures gave as a result a musical map of the enneagram, which, when seen at its static state, reveals six clearly defined sections. This work is divided into six parts without interruption and each of them explores a different aspect of the graphic. The first section contrasts dry chords and rapid figurations. The second section explores the highest pitch regions of the quartet in combination with recurring tremolos. The third section makes extensive use of glissandi, which draws, with precision, the play of ascending and descending melodic lines when the enneagram is perceived in motion. The fourth consists of chord successions in permanent harmonic and dynamic motion while the fifth presents a brief melody in the first violin whose quick development contrasts with the static lines of the other instruments. Finally, the sixth section sets rapid figurations in the cello and first violin against a scholastic counterpoint in two parts played by the second violin and viola. In this final section these contrasting -but nevertheless coexisting- worlds create an anachronism that leaves us with a sensation of instability and perpetual search. The work, we could say, does not end, but stops at certain moment in time, leaving the development of the other cycles to the listener's imagination.

"La Caresse du Couteau" was commissioned by the Spanish Cultural Center and the Embassy of Spain in Peru, and was first performed by the Lima String Quartet on November 1, 2004 during the opening concert of the '2nd Lima International Festival of Contemporary Music'. It was awarded 'Honorable Mention' at the '2005 Irino International Prize for Chamber Music', which took place in Japan.