

Varem

Instrumentation

- 3 Flutes (3rd doubling Piccolo), 2 Oboes, 3 Clarinets in Bb (3rd doubling Bass Clarinet), 3 Bassoons (3rd doubling Double Bassoon)
- 3 Horns in F, 2 Trumpets in Bb, 1 Tuba
- Timpani; Perc.1: Glockenspiel, Tom-toms (2), Snare Drum, Vibraphone; Perc. 2: Vibraphone, Wood Blocks, Whip, Glockenspiel, Gran Cassa, Tam tam
- Solo Koto
- Strings

Varem, concerto for koto and orchestra.

Duration: 27 minutes.

In VAREM López reflects upon the feeling of expansion. This expansion may progress slowly or at times remain static while each part unfolds within its own local dimension.

The title of this piece came about as a result of López's contact with Jitanjáfora, a style of poetry where words have no meaning but instead are a collection of syllables that depict feelings of peacefulness, anxiety, tranquility, etc. "It all depends on what words you use to pile up together. It is like listening to a foreign language, you don't understand the words but you understand what is implicit". López liked the idea of transmitting feeling and intensity while at the same time remaining detached from meaning. In creating the word VAREM López was guided by sound and not by meaning. He feels that language is imperfect: "One can say more with the eyes than with the words". That is exactly what he likes about the conductor: "He is not talking but just using his eyes and body to express the music and the musicians understand this best. Music is an art of time, and the conductor manages time".

From silence back to silence

VAREM is a composition that emerges from silence and returns back to silence. It is based on the Hindu diagram Sri Yantra which represents the creation of the world. This diagram is a series of nine triangles inscribed in a circle that emerge from its central point, Bindhu. Being fascinated by this symbol, López tries to translate this figure into music by superimposing a Cartesian grid upon the Sri Yantra.

This superimposed grid is 48x48 where the center of the circle is at coordinate 24,24. The central sound, G4, corresponds to the chanting of the mantra 'Ohmm' during meditation. Each coordinate of Lopez's superimposed grid that intersects with the nine triangles of the Sri Yantra is given an associated note value. This note value has a particular location in the scale of 48 notes where the note #24 is always G4.

The solo instrument in this concerto is the koto, a traditional Japanese instrument played at the world premiere by Makiko Goto. Koto is a kind of zither and it has been used as one of the main chamber instruments of Japanese traditional music for centuries. The length of a koto is about 180cm. A traditional koto has 13 strings, being arched tautly across 13 movable bridges along the length of the instrument. Players make base pitches by moving these 13 bridges before playing. There are two ways of producing sounds on the koto: one is by plectrum (using finger picks) and the other is directly with the fingers, which produces a more intimate sound. In VAREM López chooses to use three different kotos: the traditional 13-string koto (7th-8th century), the 17-string bass koto (circa 100 years old), and the 21-string koto (30 years old).

Structure

The structure of VAREM is distributed over six sections that flow seamlessly into each other. Each section is based on its own scale, its own manner of reading the Sri Yantra, and its own combination of koto instrumentation. The whole performance of VAREM takes places within a time span of 24 minutes where the piece accelerates from a peaceful beginning and contracts in time toward the end. The piece begins with the first section emerging from silence as the beginning of creation itself. The second section represents traditional Western music and the koto returns here as a solo instrument with the orchestra after the first opening single note G with which the piece begins. López composes this section for the 21 string koto, using the chromatic scale, and his 'second series' circular time. The third section becomes more active and rhythmical. In this section López uses the 17 string koto, the chromatic scale, and vertical time. The fourth section is based on traditional Japanese music and uses the 13 and 17 string kotos, the Hira Joshi scale in D, and vertical time. In the fifth section the koto is tuned in two different traditional tunings superimposed to clash with the orchestra. Here López uses the 13 string koto, the chromatic scale, and his 'third series' circular time. The last and sixth section is an accumulation of sections 2 through 5. Here he uses all the three kotos, the chromatic scale, and the Sri Yantra circular time. This last movement brings everything together, showing the whole Sri Yantra and all sections superimposed.

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