TREMULOUS IMAGES:
A Portfolio of Original Compositions Based on and
Informed by Static Visual Art

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Volume 3 of 4: Portfolio of Compositions 3

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Philosophy (Music) in Composition
The Substance of Air

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for orchestra 2018
The pre-impressionist works of J.M.W. Turner’s late style have been a fascination of mine for many years. I am enamoured by the hues, the rich air that clacks each object in the scene. These paintings do not focus on a narrative but give an almost tangible sense of the atmosphere at that particular location at that particular time.

Upon visiting Tate Britain in January 2015 to see an exhibition of Turner’s late works, I was struck by two associated paintings that I felt possessed a musical energy: Shade and Darkness -- the Evening of the Deluge and Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) -- the Morning After the Deluge -- Moses Writing the Book of Genesis. These paintings both have a focal point of celestial light from which everything emanates in a spiral. The vortex structure of these paintings coupled with the almost incipient boundaries of object and colour are the most prevalent factors informing The Substance of Air in terms of musical structure, harmony, and spatialisation. Each movement follows the colour changes in its chosen painting spiralling outward from the focal point.

As part of the aforementioned exhibition, contemporary artist Ghadar Elkahia was commissioned to respond to Turner’s works. Elkahia selected the pigments used in individual Turner paintings (unfortunately, neither of the paintings that are the basis of The Substance of Air were chosen) and presented them on circular razzaves as a light spectrum. To me, these ‘Turner colour experiments’ capture the essence of Turner’s late works, and as such confirmed my choice of orchestral layout.

Scoring and Performance Notes

Due to the density of the score and it being comprised solely of sustained notes, ties from notehead to notehead are dispensed with in favour of conventional lines combined with rhythmic stems, thus making for easier reading. Those rhythmic stems correspond with alterations in dynamic and are not intended as restatements. Bars in which no notes occur have also been hidden so as not to clutter the page.

The arrangement of the orchestra is shown on the diagram below. The diagram shows the orchestra split into six segments and four layers. This is to ease the locating of performers from the score, which is similarly split into segments and layers through the use of brackets and sub-brackets at the start of each page, and is not intended to show any separation of the orchestra into smaller ensembles. For instance, the distance between clarinet 1 (segment A, layer 1) and violin 1.4 (segment B, layer 1) should not be greater than the distance between violin 1.1 (segment A, layer 1) and clarinet 1.

As the conductor will be stood in the centre of the orchestra, many performers will be set at an awkward angle to them, unable to see every gesture. If possible, a solution can be found by providing a live video of the conductor displayed on a screen in view of the performers located behind the conductor. In any case, this piece possesses a slow tempo with only two beats in each bar, thus reducing any potential confusion.

Many notes in this piece begin from nothing. The likelihood is that some instruments will find it difficult to begin a note as softly as necessary. In these scenarios the performer is requested to begin the note sufficiently loud (not loudly!), thus avoiding any unintended sounds.

The score is in C. Piccolos will sound an octave higher than written, and contrabasses will sound an octave lower than written.

String IV of each contrabass is tuned down a tone, from E to D.

**Instrumentation**

3 flutes (all doubling piccolos)
3 oboes
3 clarinets in B-flat (all doubling bass clarinets)
3 bassoons
4 horns in F
3 trumpets in B-flat
3 trombones
1 tuba
14 violin 1
12 violin 2
10 violas
8 violoncellos
6 contrabasses

Audience members may be situated between the performers, at a safe distance. Sound reflectors should be used where appropriate.