Brian Ferneyhough

Kurze Schatten II (1983-89)

Solo guitar
Duration: 14 minutes
First performance: February 1990, Salle Patiño, Geneva, Magnus Andersson
Commissioned by Curo Ltd (Sweden)

The initial impetus leading to this seven-movement work for solo guitar was the powerful image, found in the text of the same name by Walter Benjamin, of the sun which, as it approaches its zenith, casts shadows which become progressively shorter and darker until, at noon, they are so perfectly united with their objects that the latter stand uniquely and completely themselves, naked, without residue.

This image captures rather effectively, I think, the way in which I sought to inscribe my musical language into the rigorous limits of the historically and physically delimited “text” of the guitar. In effect, each movement stages a densely-woven confrontation between temporal and formal modes of compression, the result of which aspires to an evocation of the sort of simultaneous total presence and mysteriously veiled withdrawal to which Benjamin alludes.

On the large scale, two devices conspire to unify this succession of disparate structures. On the one hand, the convention, common in the baroque suite, of pairing a slow and fast movement was adopted; on the other, the gradual re-tuning of several scordatura strings (initially tuned in quarter-tone intervals) leads to the progressive re-emergence of the guitar’s customary acoustic profile from an initial period of reduced or distorted sonority. The last scordatura string remaining, the Bb, characterises the entire final movement, a mercurial fantasia, and the work concludes with a virtuoso passage entirely executed on this string.

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