

Markov's Thesaurus

Ian Baxter 2014 arr. w/ Juxtavoices 2017

This score is a 'drunkard's walk' through the thesaurus. Up to section VI, at each stage the word splits to two synonyms of that word in the thesaurus taking us further and further away from the original 'song'. I had to cheat a bit in Sections VI-XI to bring it back to the word song, picking one synonym at a time. Whilst this score formalises the process, the piece could be performed live using actual thesauruses, and many such scores could be generated from a different starting word.

Performance Instructions

In each performance singers follow a chain of words, making a decision at each junction to go one of two ways. For example Song > Anthem > Chorale > Choristers > Choir....At each box you can only choose one of the two paths from that box to the next. So for example, choosing Anthem over Air at the first changeover determines the rest of your journey through the score.

Thus whilst the choir begins in unison, all voicing the word 'song' it progressively breaks up into a varied wordscape until section VI where (in theory) the density is at its maximum and the choir are all (potentially) singing a different word (although as probability would have it, we could have all followed the same path and be singing the same word)

The word in the section is improvised upon by the individual singer, with a mixture of spoken and sung vocalisations. Each singer should be alive to the group dynamic – sometimes imitating what they hear, sometimes striking out with new ideas. Overall they are aiming for a group, rather than purely individual, performance. After vocalising the word, the singers should count (silently) for the duration indicated for each section before vocalising again. Section I is characterised by long pauses between voices (count 20) whereas section VI is near continuous (counting 2). On the conductors signal to begin, singers enter on the initial 'song' at will, keeping to their count thereafter.

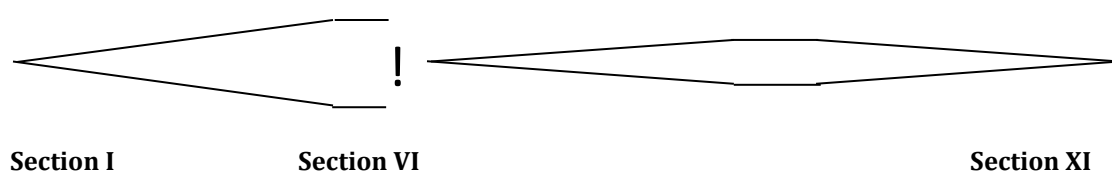
At their discretion the conductor signals to singers (with a gesture to be predetermined by the group) to move to a new section, aiming for a performance time c. 10 mins.

The words shouldn't necessarily be considered direct instructions although a lot have this property (e.g. Gasp, Breath, Jeer, Squawk) and can be incorporated into that improvisation, as can any associations the singer forms from the word (e.g. Air = sing 'airily', Oratorio = sing in your best classical voice, 'Breath' can be reduced to a breathy whisper). Some words (Welkin, Cobalt, Relinquish, Troposphere) can be enjoyed purely for their syllabic richness and improvised upon in an accordingly rich manner, broken

down into their components and extended by use of stuttering, extension of vowels and so on.

The dynamic for the piece is for a gradual crescendo – both in volume and intensity – toward section VI. The increased density of the words and count serves to produce some of this intensity but singers also should pay attention to their vocalisations to achieve the ‘intense’ dynamic required at the apex of the piece. Reading left to right this could be imagined as a moving from legato to staccato and back to legato, although not in too deterministic a way as the odd staccato spoken word adds greatly to the texture in the earlier sections.

Note the conducted dead stop at the end of section VI with a fairly rapid (but pianissimo) return in section VII. The dynamic is built up once more (although not reaching the intensity of section VI) with a gradual fading away of the piece between sections X and XI.



Notes for the conductor (observations developed from performances)

As noted the duration of the piece is indeterminate and the length of each section is at the discretion of the conductor. However, performances seem to flow best when following a concertina like structure, where the time spent on each section is roughly proportional to the counts given to performers. So if section 1 is allowed to play out over 3-4 minutes, section 7 should be in the order of 20-30 seconds.

The conductor counts in the dead stop at the end of section 6, then gestures to the choir to re-enter at will at a greatly reduced volume. We’ve observed that this volume, however, must be brought up fairly rapidly (in concert with the transition to section 7) to avoid momentum being lost.

Conducting one final sustained pianissimo ‘song’ has produced the most satisfying ending to the piece. On the conductors signal all singers entering regardless of their individual count.