

Tweener B

Like a versatile athlete who can play more than one position in a game, the percussion soloist in Tweener B fulfills many roles, and, in the course of the piece, goes from being a team member of the ensemble to becoming the featured protagonist. The relationship between soloist and group is volatile and constantly changing in this one-movement work: the soloist may be seen as a “catalyst,” igniting musical processes within the group, and also as a “mediator,” engaging in an ongoing “give-and-take” with his recorded image. Either way, the basic idea of the piece is the energetic exchange and metamorphosis of communication, but it is a communication of a mercurial sort, taking many unpredictable turns as it unfolds.

Yet this is not the only sense in which this work is a true “tweener:” it moves between the extremes of simplicity and complexity, in terms of both instrumental technique and musical structure. Instrumentally, the soloist can play simple pairs of notes on the marimba, alternating between left and right mallets, or highly involved passages with two mallets in each hand. Structurally as well, Tweener B alternates between two states of mind: it is part mysterious and introverted, part energetic and full of drama. In the course of the twenty-minute work, two large cycles of slow-fast are completed, with many subtle nuances of speed within each basic tempo.

The piece was originally written for solo percussion, orchestra and electronics. Tweener B is a different version of the work where the soloist is joined only by electronics. The soloist uses a KAT mallet controller system—an electronic percussion instrument triggering a computer.

The piece opens with what seems primeval “mist,” out of which a number of short motifs gradually emerge, each centering around a certain interval such as a second, a third, a tritone or a seventh. It is striking that, if the motif consists of three notes, the middle note is often emphasized either by dynamics, by rhythmic elongation, or by a melodic leap, in another manifestation of the “tweener” idea.

The first fast tempo, marked “Dramatic,” arrives suddenly with insistent ostinatos leading into a brief jazzy passage marked “Sardonic.” The next section, “Lava-like,” introduces some fundamental types of motion in the piece, first spreading material inexorably in a linear (horizontal) fashion, and later erupting like a volcano in a “hyper-aggressive” outburst.

But then the tempo slows down again (“Lyric”); it is as though the music were succumbing to intense gravity and passing through a “black hole” into another dimension before the piece enters another high-energy phase. There is a cadenza where the soloist is instructed to improvise freely using materials suggested by the composer. The final measures see a last explosion of energy—a musical “exhalation,” as it were, where the soloist comes across somewhat like an Olympic running champion who winds down his gallop around the arena after passing the finish line.

- Adrienne Elisha and Peter Laki