

Marc Sabat
**3 Chorales for
Harry Partch**

for retuned violin and viola

PLAINSOUND MUSIC EDITION

3 Chorales for Harry Partch (1993)

for retuned violin and viola

NOTES

The violin and viola are both retuned: the uppermost string is lowered by a perfect fifth, and the lowest string is lowered by a perfect fourth. The violin is tuned to pitches D-d-a-a and the viola to pitches G-g-d-d. The music for each instrument is written across two staves, each of which represents a pair of strings. Upward stems indicate notes to be played on the upper string; downward stems refer to the lower string. Notes without stems may be played on either string (or on both strings simultaneously).

The music proceeds slowly, approximately two minutes per system. Wavy lines indicate the durations of available tones. Timbre is free and ought to be varied using all possibilities ranging from pure pitch to noise, using the timbral idiosyncrasies of the loosely detuned strings as well as the tonal purity of the normally tuned strings. It is not necessary to play all possible written notes at all times, but an effort to do so within the indicated dynamic should be generally attempted. The model is of sound "in slow motion", as though string playing were being examined through a microscope in time.

The intonation is based on an 11-limit Utonal chord of subharmonic tones, and it is expected that additional subharmonics will be produced in the course of performance by occasional use of excessive pressure.

This piece was written and premiered in Sheffield, Vermont, during a workshop with composer/violinist Malcolm Goldstein. The texture of the slowly-evolving sound was inspired (in part) by the work with Malcolm and by his style of improvisation. I had also been thinking about a 1960s article by Steve Reich, "Slow-Motion Sound", in which he envisions the utopian possibility of microscopically examining every possible detail of a sound expanded in time.

At the time, I had recently encountered the theoretical ideas of Harry Partch, expressed in his book "Genesis of a Music" (1949). Partch recasts the conventional understanding of "harmony" and "tonality" in terms of Just Intonation, proposing an expanded understanding of musical intervals, tone systems, consonance and dissonance. His system is based on ratios of natural numbers, primarily ratios built from the first 5 prime numbers: 2, 3, 5, 7, and 11. I was already then convinced that Partch's conceptualization was sound, radical and of crucial importance to any future evolution of musical harmony.

In the piece "3 Chorales for Harry Partch", my music explores Partch's concept of "utonality", which constructs the minor triad as an inverted mirror-image of the major triad. Since the major triad is derived from the harmonic series, i.e. 4-5-6, and may be extended upward by taking additional overtones, i.e. 4-5-6-7-9-11, Partch suggests a parallel notion for the construction of the minor triad, by taking intervals from a subharmonic series. There is an inherent paradox in this construction, since the overtone chords "fit" into a fundamental (1) and form a consonant blend, whereas the undertone chords tend to produce much more complex-sounding (dissonant) structures. In my composition, a single "utonal" chord is gradually constructed, pitch-by-pitch, over three phrases. The undertones appear in the following sequence:

- (1) 12 (D) - 8 (A) - 9 (G)
- (2) 12 - 10 - 8 - 11
- (3) 8 - 11 - 12 - 14 - 10 - 9

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Very Slowly (at least 2 minutes for each system)

Marc Sabat, 1993

The score consists of three systems, each with a Violin and Viola part. The Violin part is in treble clef with a 12-string retuning of A (I, II) and D (III, IV). The Viola part is in alto clef with a 12-string retuning of D (I, II) and G (III, IV). The first system is marked *ppp* and *cresc.*, with dynamics *mp* and *pp* indicated. The second system is marked *cresc.*, with dynamics *mf* and *pp* indicated. The third system is marked *cresc.*, with dynamics *f* indicated. Each system contains three measures of music, with a final measure in each system featuring a fermata. The music is characterized by long, sustained notes and a gradual increase in volume over time.