

James Weeks

Bee Haven

for a large group of orchestral string instruments

2017

Bee Haven

for any number of orchestral string instruments (at least 12, ideally more than 20)

Duration: 15'-20'

Introduction

Bee Haven is a sound environment, an imaginary (outdoor) space populated by plants, flowers and bees. The sound of bee humming is the primary focus of the work, rendered quasi-realistically through string tremolos; around this, the bees' 'haven' (a living environment, free from agricultural poisons and habitat destruction) is created through quiet air noise and gentle brushing of the instruments. There are no events in the piece save one brief flurry of rain; placing themselves within it, listeners become part of the imagined space for the duration of the work.

Instrumentation and set-up

The piece is conceived for a group of orchestral stringed instruments (violin, viola, cello, double bass, any numbers of each). There should not be fewer than 12 players, and a group larger than 20 is particularly desirable though not essential.

Each player is independent of all the others, whilst respecting their position within the whole and taking care to listen to the sound around them.

Players should be seated individually throughout the performance space, reasonably far apart but not so far as to be sonically and performatively disconnected. The whole sound environment should feel immersive, rich and abundant for the audience and performers, the whole space alive with detailed, intricate sound coming from every direction, even when it is extremely soft. The audience may either surround the performers or (preferably) be invited to walk quietly through the space or sit/stand within it, amongst the players.

All performers should be equipped with a stopwatch, which they should start together to begin the performance.

Musical Materials

There are two materials, BEE and HAVEN. Players move independently from one to the other through the piece (see Structure and Timing, below).

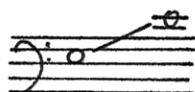
BEE

The sound of humming honeybees is the musical and conceptual heart of the work: the piece is primarily about making and listening to this 'bee harmony'. During these sections the performer, rather than illustrate the sound of a bee 'from the outside' as it were, should embody the bee itself as it journeys through the space in search of nectar, moving from one flower and plant to the next. There are two elements to the BEE sections: Flying and Nectar-gathering.

Flying: this consists of long unbroken humming.

The basic humming sound is a fast tremolo at the point of bow, with quite light bow pressure, either *normale* or *sul tasto*: find the least scratchy sound. The dynamic should never be more than *p*.

Each time a player begins a Bee section they should pick afresh any pitch (including microtones) within the following range (octave specific):



Larger bees tend to have lower hums – this may apply to instruments too. Within a single BEE section do not change your pitch – you are now this particular bee with this hum-pitch.

Whilst playing the tremolo hum, the pitch of the note should be destabilised by a subtle, irregular rolling of the fingerpad upwards and downwards.

Short breaks can be taken if needed during the continuous hum.

Nectar-gathering: when gathering nectar, honeybees do not buzz (bumblebees do, but they are not part of the piece). During Nectar-gathering, therefore, the tremolo ceases, and is replaced by extremely delicate, irregular ricochets.

Ricochets should be played at the point, very lightly, *molto delicato*, by dropping the bow vertically onto the string and letting it bounce up. There can be one, two, three or many bounces, ad lib., each time (see sample notation below). The dynamic should be *p-pp*.

The rhythmic texture should be irregular and quite busy, as if tracking the bee's quick movements within the flower (see sample notation below).

The LH should remain on the bee's hum-pitch; although most vertical bounces will sound near-pitchless, a few ricochets may contain small amounts of lateral bow movement, giving a more defined pitch.

Every so often short bursts of tremolo humming may interrupt the sequence of ricochet/bounces, as the bee flies from one flower to the next to continue searching for nectar.

An example notation of the Nectar-gathering section is given below:



| = vertical ricochet bounce |||| = ricochet with lateral movement (→ pitch)

BEE section structure: each BEE section should last 2-5 mins. Within this the player is free to move between Flying and Nectar-gathering ad lib., each sub-section lasting no less than 40s. There should be more Flying than Nectar-gathering overall.

HAVEN

Around the sound of the bees' humming the instrumentalists create a very quiet but ever-present sonic environment, akin to the background ambient sound of the natural world. There are two elements to the HAVEN sections, Leaf-brushing and Breath. For both of these elements the bow is not required and should be put down.

Leaf-brushing: this consists of gently brushing, flicking stroking the instrument, as if it were being brushed by overhanging leaves in a gentle breeze. All touch should be infinitesimally gentle, microscopic, delicate, insectile in scale, as if the sound were for the player's ears alone: the slightest rustling.

Violins and violas may be placed horizontally on players' laps.

All brushing should take place along adjacent D and A strings: using 1st and/or 2nd fingers of both hands *ad lib.*, gently brush the string or strings in both directions in single, irregular, flicked strokes, focusing on the sound of the finger on the string rather than the sounding pitch of the string. The open string pitches are incidental but should nevertheless be audible, an aura or resonance (avoid deliberately plucking the strings, however: the pitch should emerge at the end of the flicked stroke).

Vary direction, finger, hand (R or L) and string (i.e. one or the other, or both together) naturally and spontaneously, avoiding patterns or phrases. Vary length of stroke from very short, flicked brushes to slightly longer ones (c.0.5s).

Avoid accidental brushing of surrounding strings.

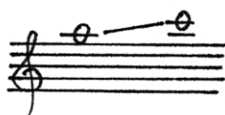
Timing and continuity should feel unintentional and non-directional, with plenty of space. Texture should be sparse: a few brushes followed by silence is typical. Players should not brush continuously: less is more.

All brushing should aim to feel accidental, unintentional, glancing, yet played with extreme care and attention, always infinitely gentle and soft, *ppp-pp*.

Breath: this is part of the natural breathing of the player, and consists of making sound on each out-breath. Players should breathe slowly so that out-breaths can last around 10s or more; slow breathing also helps the players find the right, concentrated mood for performance.

On each out-breath, blow quietly but audibly though a 'w' mouthshape, giving a soft white-noise sound (avoid an 'oo' shape, which sounds too windy. Bees do not like wind).

Every so often, sound a soft whistle (breathy or clear, *ad lib.*) anywhere within this pitch space:



Whistles should only happen one in 10-12 breaths at most; overall, they should not pervade the texture but occasionally create moments of gentle brightness and radiance within it. If whistles are appearing constantly within the overall texture, players should reduce the amount of whistling they each do still further.

If a player begins to feel light-headed from making the consistent breath sounds, s/he should stop the breath sounds for a while and begin again when recovered.

HAVEN section structure

Players should perform the Leaf-brushing and Breath elements simultaneously as far as possible whenever they are in a HAVEN section.

RAIN FLURRY

There is one further element in the piece, performed by any player who is currently in a HAVEN section when it occurs (see Structure and Timing, below).

RAIN FLURRY lasts for 1 minute: HAVEN players gradually switch from brushing to gentle tapping with the 1st and 2nd fingers of both hands on the body (wood) of their instrument. The tapping should gradually increase in density and come in little flurries rather than being completely continuous. It should gradually fade out towards the end of the minute back into the previous texture.

The dynamic of the tapping should not rise above *p* but be a noticeable change of texture to attentive listeners.

Players who are in a BEE section when the RAIN FLURRY occurs should continue unaffected with their BEE material.

Structure and Timing

Before the start, players should agree on a duration between 15 and 20 minutes.

Next, players should independently decide when to move between BEE and HAVEN sections, according to the following rubric:

- All players should begin in HAVEN
- The opening HAVEN section may last between 2 and 7 minutes, ad lib.
- All subsequent sections should last between 3 and 5 minutes

Each player should decide his/her own personal timings in advance and adhere to them in performance. It is essential that players do not all choose minute-marks (e.g. 5'00, 8'00 etc.) or other obvious time-points to make their changes, so that there are not sudden, global changes of texture within the piece.

Finally, players should agree in advance the timing of the RAIN FLURRY. For example, it might be agreed to take place from 12'00-13'00.

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Bee Haven was first performed by participants at the CoMA Summer School, Kirkwall, Orkney, on 28 July 2017.