

Žibuoklė Martinaitytė

Ululations

Composed for the Latvian Radio Choir

Program notes

"When other birds are still, the screech owls take up the strain, like mourning women their ancient u-lu-lu." (Henry David Thoreau, Walden).

The idea of ululations as an audible, ritualistic expression of mourning became essential to the piece and seemed to be quite relevant to the historical times we live in. I imagined that the same way owls are awake at night ululating in the forest, the mourning women whose men of the family are at war fighting and dying or who have lost their loved ones, are wailing their sorrows out loud.

The etymology of *ululate* descends from the Latin verb *ululare* "to howl, yell, wail or lament loudly". Its imitative root likely originated in the echoes of the rhythmic wailing sound associated with it. Similarly, it is reflected in other languages: Greek *ololyzein* "to cry aloud," Sanskrit *ululih* "a howling," Lithuanian *uliuoti* "to howl," Gaelic *uiligh* "wail of lamentation".

The entire piece is developed from the "*ululating*" gesture. First it is given to the female singers in multiple formations and later it appears in its inverted version as an uprising gesture of strength within the male part of the choir. The merging of both forces becomes a climactic axis of the piece.

Performance notes

- The main gesture of "*ululating*" is performed as a tongue trilling with a rapid back and forth movement of the tongue and the uvula. It resembles a howl with a trilling quality. The pronunciation of the consonant "l" in the "ululu" is very soft. Perform this gesture more or less within the indicated duration, yet it should always retain the quality of an organically sounding "*ululation*". Whenever "*ululating*" appears it should be treated as a solo line.

- Pronunciation of vowels as in the Italian language.

- Sustained notes are performed with staggered breathing while attempting to keep a continuous sound world intact.

- Throat tremolo with the syllables "ah", "ih", "oh" is felt in the back of the throat.

Instrumentation

Soprano 1
Soprano 2
Soprano 3
Soprano 4
Alto 1
Alto 2
Alto 3
Alto 4
Tenor 1.2
Tenor 3.4
Bass 1.2
Bass 3.4

Each part requires a minimum of 1 (Sopranos and Altos) or 2 (Tenors and Basses) singers per part. 16 voices minimum. If possible, having more voices would be preferable.

Approximate Duration: 12 minutes

Premiere by the Latvian Radio Choir on September 15th, 2023 at the International IAMIC (International Association of Music Centers) conference in Riga, Latvia.