

James Weeks

Meadow

for a large number of performers, vocalising or/and playing

2016

Duration: open (10 minutes or more)

Introduction

Meadow is an installation for any performers – singers, instrumentalists of any type – and requires large numbers (minimum 20). It should be performed without musical score, although the text to be spoken may be printed on a piece of card that can be held in the hand by performers. In addition, each performer will require a coloured tissue paper ‘butterfly’, as detailed below.

The performers populate a sonic wildflower meadow, constantly varied in detail but unchanging in overall texture. They collectively produce a highly variegated, quiet ‘hum’ – a dense but delicate weave of sound that may rise only a little above the ambient sound of the performance space, revealing its intricacies only to those listening close-up.

Set-up

Meadow was designed to work as a pop-up performance within a large, multipurpose public space. Performers should work independently from each other. The whole group should be quite densely clustered, close together, but one or more paths through the performer ‘meadow’ should be left. The audience should be able to walk among, around and through the performance as much as possible.

The performance should start and stop without indication – stopwatches should be used to coordinate players. The start- and endpoints should not be exact (the meadow can appear and disappear over the course of up to a minute).

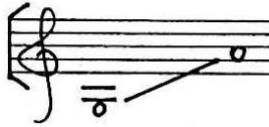
Materials and Structure

Each sound should last the length of a relaxed, medium length breath, c.8 secs, and be followed by a similar length pause (an in-breath) before making another sound. The music therefore sits on top of the performers’ (slow, relaxed) breathing.

There are 3 categories of available sounds:

Tones

- single tones within the following (octave-specific) pitch space, played or vocalised (either humming or with lips very slightly apart, creating a slight buzzing in the lips) very gently:



When playing Tones, each performer starts at any point in the pitch space, and then moves up from it in a scale (any scale may be used), one scale degree per full breath. At any point on the scale the performer may jump back down to a lower degree and begin moving upwards again, one note at a time. The choice of scale is free to each performer, and may be changed at any time during the performance, as long as the motions are always upwards within the defined pitch space. Microtonal or gap-toned scales are as welcome as more standard modes.

If a part of the pitch space is outside a performer's range, it can be ignored.

Any Tone can be played/sung in the following ways:

- straight
- ***instruments only***: with tremolo or gentle fluttersong
- ***instruments only***: single unpitched noise (air sound) with tremolo, fluttersong or rolled r.
- ***voices only***: with a soft 'zz' sound or 'zh' sound, lips very slightly parted
- ***voices only***: lips very slightly parted (giving a very slight buzzing feeling as the air escapes), with a tremolo/rolled r like a flutter
- ***voices only***: single unpitched noise (air sound), lips very slightly parted (giving a very slight buzzing feeling as the air escapes), with a tremolo/rolled r like a flutter

In addition, occasional Tones can be played as octave or two-octave harmonics (strings and flutes) or may be whistled (voices) at any octave, giving a momentary extra brightness to the sound like a gleam of light.

Words

- a short section of the list of wildflowers given in Appendix 1 (between c.4 and 6 names, lasting c.8 secs in total), read very quietly to oneself, *legato*, in a single breath, only just voiced, murmuring (but clearly enunciated, not mumbling). The list should be read from bottom to top, circling round back to the bottom again as required.

Butterflies

- squares of coloured tissue paper (c.10cm by 10cm – see photo in Appendix 2), folded in half and narrow ribbons cut into the side opposite the fold (like a comb), to about two-thirds of the way down its length. This is then held at top and bottom and the ribbons blown through gently (one single breath) to create a very subtle fluttering sound, often at the brink of audibility. Getting the paper fluttering is difficult and uncertain, and usually requires the paper to be turned slowly in different directions in the airstream to find a flutter. The gesture is as much visual as it is sonic, though one should attempt to make it sound.

Structure and Performance Approach

Each performer begins in the Tones category for several minutes. The performers may then move around the 3 sound categories *ad lib.*, spending a certain amount of time in each before moving on. It is expected that proportionally more time will be spent in the Tones category; in any case, whichever category the performer is in, they should remain there until they are comfortable and established, and only move on when they are ready to do so. Too much changing between categories is liable to compromise the calm and concentration of the performance, in which the performers should aim to become meditatively absorbed, oblivious to any listeners.

All sounds should be performed gently and with a minimum of extraneous action.

Meadow is intended to be quiet: a delicate but dense carpet of sounds with a subtle but distinct presence in the overall sonic environment. In very quiet spaces it should be possible for the work to be performed *pp* (though the sounds should not be tentative). In louder environments the overall sound may need to be *p* for the sounds to blend together, but the feeling should always be absolutely relaxed, the sound never pushed, forced or 'performed outwards'.

Performers should spread out around the performance space. If an audience is present, let them wander quietly among you.

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Meadow was devised for the CoMA Festival of Contemporary Music for All, and first performed by all-comer workshop participants at Kings Place, London, on 5th March 2016.

Appendix 1: wildflower names

agrimony
betony
birdsfoot trefoil
columbine
common fleabane
common knapweed
corn chamomile
corn cockle
cornflower
cowslip
cuckooflower
devil's-bit scabious
dyers greenweed
field poppy
field scabious
goatsbeard
great burnet
hedge bedstraw
lady's bedstraw
lady's smock
lesser knapweed
meadow buttercup
meadow cranesbill
meadow saxifrage
meadowsweet
meadow vetchling
musk mallow
ox-eye daisy
quaking grass
red clover
ribwort plantain
rock rose
salsify
self heal
snakeshead fritillary
sneezewort
St John's wort
viper's bugloss
wild carrot
wild daffodil
wild marjoram
wild thyme
yarrow
yellow rattle

Appendix 2: A selection of butterflies



The square of tissue paper has been folded in half before having ribbons cut halfway into it along the long open edge, to about two thirds of the way down. Hold taut at top and bottom along the closed edge and blow down the ribbons until a flutter is created.