

in extremis

for an unspecified ensemble (3+) of instrumentalists

Stephen F. Lilly

(2016)

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This work was conceived for performance outside of the conventional concert hall, in an environment with less than optimal sound isolation. It is written for instrumentalists who must contend with background noise (e.g. noisy HVAC systems or crowd chatter). As winning or losing this struggle is a part of the piece, the instruments should not be amplified. Also, all sounds produced by the performers must be through their instruments (i.e. no vocalizations or striking of anything in the environment external to their instruments). That being said, extended or unconventional playing techniques are welcome and encouraged.

The structure of the piece is described below, but the duration of each section is left up to ensemble—these can be established beforehand or arrived at spontaneously during the performance.

Structure A:

Begin simultaneously.

As loud as possible with each sound sustained as evenly as possible (i.e. no sense of pulse or rhythm outside of the alternation between sounds), each instrument freely alternates between

- as complex and as non-pitched as possible.
- as high as possible with a clearly defined pitch.

Structure B:

All players simultaneously switch to Structure B abruptly (i.e. cued by one member of the ensemble) without transition or break in sound production.

Playing at the same level as the ambient background noise, again sustained as evenly as possible, each instrument freely alternates between

- non-pitched breathy hiss (e.g. breath or bow noise).
- as low as possible with a clearly defined pitch.

Hybrid:

Each player independently determines when to enter the Hybrid section.

Perform Structure B, but occasionally punctuate it with extremely short fragments of Structure A (i.e. single staccato outbursts consisting of noise or the highest possible pitch). Across the ensemble, these punctuations should not be coordinated, and each performer should perform them sparingly—the Structure B sound should dominate.

Morph:

Each player independently determines when to enter the Morph section.

Starting with the low, clearly defined pitch from Structure B, each performer begins to slowly crescendo until just on the verge of the pitch breaking up. Once all players have reached this plateau, the ensemble abruptly switches (via cue) to the non-pitched breathy hiss played as loudly as possible (such that the sound contains no pitched elements).

To end, the performers all cut off together.