

DANIEL FOX

Tone (excerpt)

for singers

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Description

A single vocalized tone crossfades between three spatially separated *voices*, gently shifting the timbre and source of the sound in a richly resonant acoustic space as the total volume remains constant. The stable tone is perpetually remade as singers coordinate themselves into a collective act that is spread thin over time and space. *Tone (excerpt)* lives on the border between process and object.

Performance Directions

A single tone of essentially constant volume and timbre should be passed as seamlessly as possible between a *performing trio* of three *voices*.

A *voice* consists of at least one singer but may also be comprised of a small group of singers.

On a single breath, each *voice* crescendos from silence, reaches a peak volume, and then decrescendos to silence again. As one *voice* begins to decrescendo, the next *voice* begins to crescendo. The *tone* is passed cyclically around the *performing trio*. The *voices* should be spread apart so that the listeners can hear the tone moving around the space. However, the *voices* must be close enough together to seamlessly pass the tone between them.

At almost every moment a pair of *voices* from the *performing trio* will be heard, with one getting louder as the other grows softer. *Voices* should attempt to blend with one another.

The durations of the vocalizations (each consisting of a crescendo and a decrescendo) should be approximately equal. In rehearsal it may be useful at first to conduct the transition of the tone from one *voice* to another. A conductor may also be used in performance if needed.

The pitch should be chosen in rehearsal to accommodate the singers involved. All singers sing the same pitch. If high and low voices are involved, a pitch close to middle C is likely to be the most comfortable compromise.

The vowel “oo” is recommended, but any relaxed vowel sound can be used.

No vibrato should be used.

The total sound should remain at a constant volume level that fills the space without being perceived as loud or strained.

Any changes in vowel sound, pitch, timbre, volume, or any other aspect should be gradual enough that the rate of change is not perceptible.

Before a *voice* tires the singers should be replaced by another *voice*, shifting the membership of the *performing trio*. To maintain continuity of sound, this should be done while the other two *voices* are sustaining the sound. It may be useful to divide the total choir into three groups. Each group will be ordered so that the members know which *voice* to replace when it leaves the *performing trio*. It may be useful to have assistants help to coordinate the changes in singers.

The piece begins with the first *voice* entering at its loudest volume and beginning the decrescendo almost immediately. The second *voice* begins just a moment later, performing a crescendo from silence.

The piece ends when a *voice* is not replaced. The last *voice* will fade to silence.

Acoustically resonant spaces are desirable. In such spaces the sung tone will often activate a resonant mode of the space. This is a desirable effect and may be cultivated by choosing the location of the *voices* during rehearsal.

Each performance is titled according to the planned duration. For example, sustaining the tone for eight minutes would be titled *Tone (8 minutes)*. A performance may be of any length but the length should be chosen so that no individual undertakes a test of stamina. The strength is to arise from the participation of the community of singers. Ideally the work would never end.

Daniel Fox
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Program Note

Tone (excerpt) lives on the border between process and object. A single vocalized tone cycles between three spatially separated *voices*, gently shifting the timbre and location of the sound in a richly resonant acoustic space. The nearly constant sound is perpetually remade. Simone de Beauvoir described the Forbidden City in Beijing as hesitating between appearing ancient and restored; eternal but precarious, its original form is maintained through its constant remaking. *Tone (excerpt)* is music that moves precariously through time according to a substitutional logic.

Only through the participation of a large community of singers is the tone sustainable for periods of time stretching beyond the scale of a concert. At any one time there is a *performing trio* of three *voices* passing the note between them. (This is the minimum number needed in order to allow for a relaxed passing of the tone with both smooth crossfades of the sound and time for inhalation between each singer's vocalizations.) A *voice* may be a single singer or a small group of singers. To maintain short-term continuity, singers must sensitively balance their sound with that of the singers from which they receive the tone and to which they pass it through a shared sense of rhythm arising from the cycles of vocalization and inhalation. To maintain long-term continuity the singers constituting each *voice* must periodically be replaced by new singers.

Tone (excerpt) is a ritual of community organization and cooperation. By periodically substituting the singers that constitute a voice, the work distinguishes itself from rituals of physical endurance. In contrast to drone pieces which tend to allow a great deal of freedom, *Tone (excerpt)* is highly organized and focuses on the careful coordination of sound at multiple scales: the coordination of the singers that make up a *voice*, the coordination of the three *voices* that constitute the *performing trio*, and the coordination of the entire community of singers that participate.

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Most continuous musical pieces of exceedingly long or infinite duration rely on electric technology: For example, the 639 year-long Halberstadt realization of John Cage's *Organ²/ASLSP* and Max Neuhaus's "permanent" installation *Times Square* both rely on the power grid for their operation. *Tone (excerpt)* stands as a critique of the optimism about technological continuity and the reliance on the hidden labor of the power grid that these pieces imply. Rather than hiding the sounding mechanism within electric technology or hiding the human labor on the far end of a power grid, *Tone (excerpt)* brings the human labor behind sustained sounds to the foreground. A performance distills the challenges of coordinating human communities for the most simple, focused of goals: sustaining a tone.