

Vespers (1968)

for any number of players who would like to pay their respects to all living creatures who inhabit dark places and who, over the years, have developed acuity in the art of echolocation, i.e., sounds used as messengers which, when sent out into the environment, return as echoes carrying information as to the shape, size and substance of that environment and the objects in it.

Play in dark places indoors, outdoors or underwater; in dimly-lit spaces wear dark glasses and in lighted spaces wear blindfolds. In empty spaces objects such as stacked chairs, large plants or human beings may be deployed.

Equip yourselves with Sondols (sonar-dolphin), hand-held echolocation devices which emit fast, sharp, narrow-beamed clicks whose repetition rate can be varied manually.

Accept and perform the task of acoustic orientation by scanning the environment and monitoring the changing relationships between the outgoing and returning clicks. By changing the repetition rate of the outgoing clicks, using as a reference point a speed at which the returning clicks are halfway between the outgoing clicks, distances can be measured, surfaces can be made to sound and clear signatures of the environment can be made. By changing the angle of reflection of the outgoing clicks against surfaces, multiple echoes of different pitches can be produced and moved to different geographical locations in the space. Scanning patterns should be slow, continuous and non-repetitive.

Move as non-human migrators, artificial gatherers of information or slow ceremonial dancers. Discover routes to goals, find clear pathways to center points or outer limits and avoid obstacles.

Decisions as to speed and direction of outgoing clicks must be made only on the basis of usefulness in the process of echolocating. Any situations that arise from personal preferences based on ideas of texture, density, improvisation or composition that do not directly serve to articulate the sound personality of the environment should be considered deviations from the task of echolocation.

Silences may occur when echolocation is made impossible by the masking effect on the players' returning echoes due to the saturation of the space by both the outgoing and returning clicks, by interferences due to audience participation or by unexpected ambient sound events. Players should stop and wait for clear situations or stop to make clear situations for other players.

Endings may occur when goals are reached, patterns traced or further movement made impossible.

For performances in which Sondols are not available, develop natural means of echolocation such as tongue-clicks, finger-snaps or footsteps or obtain other man-made devices such as hand-held foghorns, toy crickets, portable generators of pulsed sounds, thermal noise or 10,000 cps pure tones.

Dive with whales, fly with certain nocturnal birds or bats (particularly the common bat of Europe and North America of the family Vespertilionidae) or seek the help of other experts in the art of echolocation.

Activities such as billiards, squash and water-skimming may be considered kindred performances of this work.

Note: a kit of four Sondols is available on rental from either CPE or the composer.

Thanks to Donald R. Griffin.

Alvin Lucier