

Ramon Humet

El temps i la campana (2013-2015)

for piano and orchestra



Work commissioned by Orquesta Nacional de España

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El temps i la campana (Time and the Bell)

Programme note

The process of gestation and composition of *El temps i la campana (Time and the Bell)* has been slow, involving the writing of preparatory studies for solo piano - which found form in a new work *At the Recurrent End of the Unending* -, as well as innumerable revisions of the formal outline, rewriting certain movements, precision in the search for and discovery of ideas, and constant re-adaptation of the components of the orchestra as my approach was modified. It has been two years of complete, meticulous dedication to a work which, seen in perspective, sought natural fluidity, and the perception that each sound has its place exactly where it belongs: the paradox of a minutely detailed process of creation and allowing the music to exist, now, on its own terms, as something natural.

Perhaps one cause of this slowness in the process of gestation and composition of *Time and the Bell* was the time needed to assimilate the formidable collection of poems, *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot; a work that contains a particularly fine vision of time in its different manifestations. The primary source of inspiration - time, to which the title refers - gradually gave way, during the process of composition, to a tangible element in our daily life: the bell - the second part of the title - with its associated resonant sound quality and other, multiple variants and processes, such as attack, resonance, inversion, inharmonicity, pulse, sound mass or polyrhythms.

My preference for the bell - tangible object - over time - philosophical element - has had a direct consequence in the choice of orchestral resources; as the writing of the work progressed I found myself needing to leave aside instruments normally considered essential in the symphonic repertoire: trumpets, oboes and *timpani*. On the contrary, I increased those instruments in which resonance is the principal characteristic: two harps, celesta and five percussionists including vibraphone, crotales, bells, gongs and *glockenspiel*. The resulting orchestral sound is very close to the timbre of the piano, brilliance and clarity over opacity and distance. Without renouncing the lower register, more use is made of the middle and upper ranges while favouring metallic sounds, evocative of the inharmonic quality of the bell.

I pursued conjunctions between the orchestral sound and piano in order to fulfil my initial intention that the work should not become a dialogue between soloist and orchestra, or an exercise in comparison and contrast between two distinct characters, or a dialectical struggle between opposites. On the contrary, the orchestra served to provide a colossal expansion of the timbres of the solo piano, penetrating its harmonies, figures and resonance, providing the necessary ambiguity for the evocation of imaginary sound passages, and integrating the soloist and the orchestral sound mass in perfect fusion during the seven different scenes in which the work is organised.

The very short, first movement, is inspired in the words *At the still point of the turning world*, and specifically, in the direct relationship established between the immobility of a single point and the dynamic nature of the world that turns. Even though the piano does not intervene here, the movement is not an introduction. The insistence on wind and string instruments, treated in a non-harmonic way, creates a number of imaginary, virtual bells which strike alternately, culminating in an ascent that incorporates all orchestral registers until, finally, sublimation is reached at the extreme high end of the string section; this then leads to the entrance of the piano in the following movement.

...Whirled in a vortex that shall bring / The world to that destructive fire ... are the lines which corresponds to the second movement, orchestrated with resonant instruments: two harps, celesta, vibraphone, bells, gongs, crotales, *glockenspiel* and solo piano, together with a number of strings in the background which complete the luminous, metallic sound of the musical landscape. High-pitched chords augur the first appearance of the piano and are the catalyst for a polyrhythm between various percussion instruments. The incessant pulsation - which travels through different metrical fields and is reinforced by differing tones - creates a landscape of stasis which, at the end of the movement, will give way to a small scale catastrophe and dilute metrical time in a sound cloud on a single note.

I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where. / And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time. The *sospeso* character of the third movement - the most extensive of the whole work, of six minutes' duration -, is a hypnotic passage which implies the dissolution of time evoked by the poetic text, and contains different, contrasting sound levels: vertical sections of rapid figuration on two fundamental notes - as with the tolling of two big bells - and a melodic profile of unusually long values on the strings, offering a horizontal aspect.

The fourth movement, a *scherzo semplice*, is based on the lines *Quick, said the bird, find them, find them, / Round the corner*. It serves as a chamber episode in which the symphonic sound world gives way to the minute detail of a solo string quartet, and to graceful figures in the wind section that evoke birdsong. At the same time, the use of more primitive wind instruments such as the temple block, marimba, or log drum provide a background suggesting mysterious sounds that might be heard in an imaginary wood.

The fifth movement recreates the line *Only through time time is conquered* by means of kaleidoscopic sound textures of a mechanical nature which ring across harps, celesta and piano - *tintinnando* is the expression which encapsulates this section -, alternating placid passages on the solo piano with static harmonies which nevertheless possess a fluid internal movement. The mechanical device that characterises the first part of the movement leads to a great catastrophe which sweeps away all orchestral registers, exploding the deepest of all. Resolution on a new high-pitched ringing - following the previous collapse - leads into an ending marked *senza espressione* that resolves in the evanescence of a diaphanous harmony.

The sound of the sea bell's / Perpetual angelus is the phrase which, from the first moment, generated the work's principal musical motif: a motif that appears minimalist, with a certain innocence, and whose harmony is of great purity and highly colourful - not exempt, however, from inharmonicity. It proceeds mechanically and with mathematical precision during the movement's duration of scarcely two and a half minutes; the movement makes a journey from the most extremely high-pitched to the deepest register, causing resonant flashes of light, spaced irregularly and reaching saturation once more.

The climax of the work is the appearance of the principal motif in its full form, for the first time, played on the piano with sweet, serene expressiveness. The motif is repeated twice, each time with slight variations which bestows on it an expression of ever changing immutability - expression which I often refer to as "always the same and always different". In the final *piacevole* and *sereno*, the music does not dissolve; rather, it halts its internal pulse to come to the state evoked by the lines that inspired this movement: *Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present.*

El temps i la campana has been commissioned by the Spanish National Orchestra and will be premiered at the National Music Auditorium in Madrid on 23rd October 2015, with further performances on 24th and 25th October. The work will be performed by Yukiko Akagi and conducted by Guillermo García Calvo. *El temps i la campana* is dedicated, with affection, to Miquel, Oliva, Isaac and Marc.

Ramon Humet
Translation, Rebecca Simpson