

THE MUSIC OF PROXIMA CENTAURI B: THREE SINGERS ON PLANET M, BY OLI JAN

Björn Heile and Nikki Moran

Abstract: This article presents an exomusicologically informed response to the theme of alienation through encounter in Oli Jan's *Three Singers on Planet M*, in which actors execute apparently ritualistic sounds and actions. Their activities signal aesthetic intentionality but do so through an unfamiliar cultural display that defies the rules of our own lived experience of embodiment and environment. The conceit sets up an interesting question related to the somatic imaginary: how can and how do we relate to the imagination of non-human bodies?

The following is the last report filed by Captain Dorinell Woruda of GSA mission Prometheus onboard Star Ship Terra Nova. It was received at 14:53:43 on 25 April 2473, during the mission's approach to Proxima Centauri B, an Earth-sized, tidally locked Exoplanet in the habitable zone of the red dwarf star Proxima Centauri, in the triple star system Alpha Centauri.

At present, we do not know whether the Centaurians perform anything resembling what we call 'music', let alone across its three light zones. Given the scale of the planet, it is unclear how such enactments of musical performance could take place between the dark, bright and intermediate zones described here, since this would potentially bridge distances of thousands of kilometres. The use of ancient, human instruments made chiefly out of 'wood' (a substance produced by plants and dated between the Gzhelian and mid-Anthropocene periods but that is now only known from the geo-archaeological record) is regarded as extremely unlikely.

We do not have data on Captain Woruda's state at the time of filing this report. Cryptic elements here and in previous communications indicate potentially unreliable data; possibilities include hallucinations caused by their extended journey, from sub-optimal recovery after revival from cryogenic hibernation, perhaps a malfunctioning brain implant or interface. The Captain may be reporting an imaginary or virtual rather than a physical encounter. Alternatively, the report could describe some kind of broadcast sent from Proxima Centauri B to Terra Nova, or the second-hand relay of that broadcast. We note the possibility of potential corruption of the message itself during its transmission from Terra Nova to mission HQ. The account will no doubt occupy exomusicologists for centuries to come.¹

There are three performers, a clarinettist, a cellist and an accordionist, playing a simple line in parallel fourths, suggesting a unity or

¹ Although some of our account here may be described as fanciful, the notion of 'exomusicology' is well established; see Daniel K. L. Chua and Alexander Rehding, *Alien Listening: Voyager's Golden Record and Music from Earth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021) and Stefan Helmreich, 'Remixing the Voyager Interstellar Record Or, As Extraterrestrials Might Listen', *Journal of Sonic Studies*, 2014, www.researchcatalogue.net/view/109536/109537 (accessed 19 November 2024).

collective identity between the performers.² There are no singers, as the title would make one expect, but the repeated, two-bar phrase is of a vocal quality, its length approximating a relaxed breath cycle, swelling on the in-breath from *p* to *mf* and expelling on the out-breath back to *p* and ending on sustained notes, in the manner of a Bach chorale. There is also a measured pulse to the performance that is reminiscent of a traditional chorale performance. Except where a Bach chorale tends to pronounce eternal verities in declaratory sentences, this music seems to consist only of questions to which, as in Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question* (to whose trumpet theme the phrase bears a faint resemblance), no answer is forthcoming: instead of emphasising the downbeats, each phrase begins on the second quaver in the bar ('one and'), a very weak point (the upbeat to the off-beat, as it were).

The musical parallelism between the musicians is undercut by their physical distance from one another onstage: one player is in the background in near darkness, another in a mid-lit middle ground, the third in the dazzlingly bright foreground. From time to time, they change positions. Whether intentional or not, these short walks have a processional character, the performers' steps matching the rhythm of the music – if not in reality, at least in the audience's imagination.

The slow, deliberate pacing of the music, the regular repeats of the phrase and the firm steps across the stage between the different lighting zones lend the performance a strongly ritualistic character. As audience members, we can have no idea about the nature of the ceremony, however. The performers act according to a plan that seems clear to them but that remains entirely cryptic to us. After all, we know little of the lives of Centaurians. At the same time, there is something dreamlike about the spectacle, in the way it is both familiar and strange at the same time.

After three repetitions, the performers change roles: the part previously played by the clarinet is taken over by the cello, while the accordion takes the cello's part and the clarinet the accordion's. From now on the rate of change picks up: instrumental roles are swapped every bar, and after three phrases the line itself is subtly varied (although still consisting of parallel fourths). In a more far-reaching change only two instruments (clarinet and accordion) play the repeated phrase, which is cut short from six to four notes, answered by an even simpler gesture in the cello. This means the disintegration of the three-member unit into a 2 + 1 configuration. As in social relations in general, in musical trios one performer is always the odd one out.

This relates not only to the musical texture but also to the positioning of the players: one player is in the privileged, Goldilocks zone of medium light and is calling the musical shots; the other two may be in the shadows or the bright light respectively and play the supporting roles. In that sense the piece is also an exercise in power relations. In this version of the composition the cellist, being immobile, remains at the musical and stage centre in the temperate zone; the other two are shifting positions, variously playing supporting roles or rivalling the cellist.

At the same time there is little initial sense of outward conflict. Nevertheless, the initial unity between the performers cannot be

² The score and programme note for *Three Singers* can be found at <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1E76ZTg-867-ApuuRb6Ar17thKO2kd-8E?usp=sharing> (accessed 19 November 2024).

restored. This aspect too is both familiar – the musicians act out power relations that are recognisable from social interactions, among humans, terrestrial animals and alien life alike – and strange: we cannot comprehend the nature of the struggles or their reasons (the preferred position on the planet, surely, but this remains a rather abstract notion for us).

It is at this point, too, that the simple lyricism of the melodies is abandoned in favour of instrumental virtuosity. First the cello is playing furious tremoli, then the clarinet answers with a multiphonic. Although the instruments return to the earlier phrase in its shortened version, split between the duet of clarinet and accordion and the sole cello, it is now played in *f* to *fff* with the accordion doubling its lines, a clear indication of conflict. A flurry of pizzicato notes in the cello is answered by the clarinet's flight into its highest register (only the accordion stays out of this conflict). As quickly as the music exploded, it quietens down again, however. As the clarinet and accordion revive the shortened phrase, the cello is left forlornly repeating a low C, the lowest note on the instrument, in a regular pulse, an apparent expression of loneliness and desolation.

While, on the one hand, it is thus easy to see the performers as characters in a psychodrama, their musical struggles for supremacy, access to the favoured spot and companionship seemingly mirrored by their changing positions, on the other, there remains something alien (in every sense of the word) about the nature of their conflict and motivations. Like a more aggressive version of the Clangers, they speak a language and inhabit a world that seems like ours but remains incomprehensible to us.

A Postscript

The response above shares a flight of fancy provoked by the theme of alienation through encounter in Jan's *Three Singers on Planet M*, in which actors execute apparently ritualistic sounds and actions. Their activities signal aesthetic intentionality but do so through an unfamiliar cultural display that defies the rules of our own lived experience of embodiment and environment. The conceit sets up an interesting question related to the somatic imaginary: how can and how do we relate to the imagination of non-human bodies? We can examine this question in a couple of different ways, by attending to both formal aspects and performative enactment.

As we have described, the key feature of this work in its entirety arises from a disjointedness between these formal, compositional properties and the staging. The setting in which the collective audience encounters the music, versus the sonic affordances of the formal characteristics of the composition, feels unexpected. The most striking formal feature of the composition is of parallel melodic motifs. The duration and pacing of the phrases are matched, as we have described, by highly congruent performance directions: their dynamic unfolding holds no surprises. In fact, it feels inevitable, a swell that breaks like a tide and recedes. This simple ecology of repeated parallel movement has a predictable trajectory. The consequence is sonically reminiscent of a line-drawn visual animation: the contours carve out vectors in our auditive, imaginary space. They define boundaries, creating intervallic shapes in the resultant liminal territory. The most striking aspect of the staging and delivery, on the other hand, is its theatrical placing and emphasis on three disparate sites: three locations, three musical animateurs who appear doll-like and distant on the platform. These

focal points reveal (or, according to the theatrical directions for the stage lighting, conceal) the actors. They are localised to three zones on the stage. Their movements are modest, and the physical delivery offers no analogy to the parallel motivic character of the music.

The resulting effect, then, insinuates gestural contours that present associations with the mark-making, impulsive expressions of the human mind–hand imaginary. But at the same time, the work contains the actors in distal and isolated sites of activity. The communicative interfaces and capacity of the fragile human body appear redundant, diminished, irrelevant. The zoned, localised presence of the real-life performers and their ritualised, stately relocations – between shrouded darkness, stark illumination and the sought-for middle ground – give rise to the sensation of alienation.

Where this all takes us is ultimately, of course, a subjective outcome. Based on the limits of our imagination of alternative bodies we, the audience, may decide: are we alienated, or are we alien? Our interactions with all current and future Others might ultimately be contingent on this capacity for creative somatic conjecture.