

# **Where were they when the noise started**

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*Composed for P. Lucy McVeigh, Yong Su Clark, Eliko Akahori*

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The sentences were written down in the middle of the last century. We don't know who wrote them, but we do know that they were written in the basement of a non-descript building at a well-known university in the northeast of the United States. We believe that they were likely written by only men. We're ignoring some of the more problematic ones, like, "Her purse was full of useless trash." Seventy-two sets of ten sentences. They were used to test telecommunications systems: phone lines, digitization of the voice, transmissions between the earth and satellites. There was once a phone number that you could call to hear people speak them.

The sentences were written in a strange order, one that made little sense. With introspection, one could make out a different order, a sequencing that told of a possible world unknown to the original authors. A world that would marked the ending of their power and a new beginning, a new era and our timely exodus from their grasp.

**This is the story the sentences can be made to tell:**

Where were they when the noise started.

A wisp of cloud hung in the blue air.  
The pennant waved when the wind blew.  
This will lead the world to more sound and fury.

There is a fine hard tang in the salty air.  
The tree top waved in a graceful way.

The leaf drifts along with a slow spin.

It was hidden from sight by a mass of leaves and shrubs.

Code is used when secrets are sent.

No doubt about the way the wind blows.  
The set of china hit the floor with a crash.  
Let it burn, it gives us warmth and comfort.

The lake sparkled in the red hot sun.

Steam hissed from the broken valve.  
The wreck occurred by the bank on Main Street.

The birch looked stark white and lonesome.

All sat frozen and watched the screen.  
Paper is scarce, so write with much care.  
Keep the hatch tight and the watch constant.  
There is a strong chance it will happen once more.

The bright lanterns were gay on the dark lawn.  
The sky in the west is tinged with orange red.

Write at once or you may forget it.

The news struck doubt into restless minds.  
Most of the news is easy for us to hear.  
Those last words were a strong statement.  
Will you please answer that phone.  
If you mumble your speech will be lost.  
Our plans right now are hazy.

The first part of the plan needs changing.  
Say it slowly but make it ring clear.  
Turn on the lantern which gives us light.  
The music played on while they talked.  
The vast space stretched into the far distance.

The sun came up to light the eastern sky.

Lush ferns grow on the lofty rocks.  
Green moss grows on the northern side.

There are more than two factors here.  
We talked of the slide show in the circus.

The square peg will settle in the round hole.

When you hear the bell, come quickly.  
Those words were the cue for the actor to leave.  
Leave now and you will arrive on time.

A calamity has occurred. Or perhaps it's only a calamity for some, but for others, it's the prelude to the new beginning. An opening to the utopia, and an end to the nightmare of thousands of years.

There is perhaps a perfect time to leave, and that time is when the noise is heard, the code is sent, and the conveyances arrive to whisk us away.

In part this is about a dream of removal from the pain of here and the possibility of out there. A dream that comes when looking up at the sky from the plains of the midwest, and the code that is sent through the flickering on and off of a child's flashlight directed to the heavens. For the child has heard that if directed upwards, the light will travel

from the surface of the planet through the atmosphere and out into space forever. Perhaps this light will have been noticed, the code decoded, and the Other has arrived.

Temporalities are difficult to align, and what happened in the past perhaps only actualizes in the now due to the reception of something in the past. We can't make these temporalities line up, especially considering the times of our bodies, the times of our lives, the times of the earth, the times of the solar system, the times of the galaxy and the cosmos. We can merely construct trajectories across these times and make things cohere, occasionally.

There is no tonal **CENTER** to this piece given. The center should be discussed by the performers beforehand. Some ways of communicating what the center could include:

- \* E-mail
- \* Carrier pigeon
- \* Encrypted text message
- \* Puffs of air on the skin
- \* Translation into enciphered DNA sequences
- \* Embeddedness into myths transmitted by people over centuries

Communication does not have to occur over timescales of minutes or days or years. Communication can happen over centuries, over eons, over tens of thousands of years. Know that. Feel that. Consider how that might change your performance of this piece.

But a center has to be chosen. Decide on the center. Know that the center might move, the next time.

If you are unable to decide on a center, **C** is as good as any.

There are four parts to this piece. Each part should flow seamlessly into the next with little to no pause, except where noted. The **TAPE OPERATOR** will raise her/their/his hand at the beginning of each part to indicate the current number.

## **PERSONNEL**

VOCALIST

ONE to FOUR INSTRUMENTALISTS

(at least) THREE RADIO OPERATORS

TAPE OPERATOR

## **EQUIPMENT**

MICROPHONE (wireless) for vocalist

COMMODITY FM RADIOS

FM RADIO TRANSMITTERS set to three different open frequencies

TAPE PART consisting of pre-recorded fragments of the INSTRUMENTALISTS and VOCALIST

## PART ONE: INTRO

There is nothing, and then there is static, which is not nothing. Karl Jansky let us discover that the hiss we pick up with our radio antennae might actually be the remnants of the big bang. Thomas Watson thought he was hearing ghostly apparitions in the telegraph wires. With the right antennas the pops and whistles we hear through our earpiece are the residue of lightning strikes on the other side of the world.

In any event. We hear radios being slowly turned on in the space. At least **THREE** radios are in the audience, being controlled by **RADIO OPERATORS** who are using stopwatches to help with timing. At least **FOUR** radios are in the space outside of the audience and slowly being turned on starting at time **0'15"** by additional **RADIO OPERATORS** . Timings are approximate.

There should be **THREE** different frequencies the radios are tuned to. Each frequency is set on the **FM RADIO TRANSMITTERS** , and should *not* interfere with other FM transmissions on the dial.

The **TAPE OPERATOR** will control the master levels over the FM radio transmitters.

The following staves all begin at the same time, namely **0'00"** . The **PIANO** part is to be played on some kind of analog synthesizer with a patch that gives the tones a deep yet airy quality. The output of the synth is sent to a mixer, whose outputs are only then fed through **FM RADIO TRANSMITTERS** . Thus, there will be no sound from the synth unless the FM radio transmitters are turned on, the mixer level is above 0, and there are radios turned on in the space. The breath marks indicate the *slightest* of pauses. The time markings indicate *approximate* starting times for the individual performers. The starting times for the radios should always be staggered. The radios are turned off when the pianist has finished. There should be a bit of dead air.

**INSTRUMENTALISTS** (other than piano) and **VOCALIST** TACET for this part.

radio one

0'05" turn radio on

*pp* slowly turn volume up

keep at this volume

*f*

turn radio off once pianist has stopped playing

radio two

0'10" turn radio on

*pp* slowly turn volume up

keep at this volume

*f*

turn radio off once pianist has stopped playing

radio three

0'15" turn radio on

*pp* slowly turn volume up

keep at this volume

*f*

turn radio off once pianist has stopped playing

Piano

0'10"

slow, drawn out, as if you are just getting going; loose  
no note of same q. should be immediately repeated  
rhythms approx.; timing approx.  
stick at first to the I, IV, V pitches of the center  
can slowly incorporate other diatonic, then chromatic, pitches, across octaves  
aim to finish by the time marker at the end of these notes

0'20"  
13

0'30"

0'40"

0'50"

1'00"

1'10"

hold last tone a bit longer  
but then let die out



## **PART TWO: RECITATION**

**VOCALIST** reads the following lines in a matter-of-fact voice, a "poet's voice" , while all other instrumentalists **TACET** . A story is being recited, but perhaps it's not a story from another time in the past, and perhaps it's not a glimpse of our future, but maybe it's what might be happening right now:

Where were they when the noise started.

A wisp of cloud hung in the blue air.  
The pennant waved when the wind blew.  
This will lead the world to more sound and fury.

There is a fine hard tang in the salty air.  
The tree top waved in a graceful way.  
The leaf drifts along with a slow spin.

It was hidden from sight by a mass of leaves and shrubs.

## PART THREE: INCANTATION

**INSTRUMENTALISTS** (but not the vocalist) should begin with the rhythmic staff labeled "dear interlocutor" on page 11 , and then move on to random selections of the following four labeled rhythmic staves. Pitch choice is up to the performer, although one should take note of the previously chosen **CENTER** , and attempt to stay mostly within diatonic pitches, with the occasionally chromatic or microtonal pitches thrown in. Dynamics should swell from *p* to *f* and back down on the order of tens of seconds or so. Tempo for each **INSTRUMENTALIST** should be anywhere between eighth note equals 70 and eighth note equals 110. No instrumentalist should play at the same tempo as another instrumentalist; all tempos are distinct and unique to the instrumentalist. Take breaths and rests as needed. Breath marks indicated the *slightest* of pauses. The instrumentalists' parts end when they hear the vocalist sing, 'The square peg will settle in the round hole'. Extended techniques are desired.

**VOCALIST** (but not instrumentalists) follows the rhythms and words as specified on page 12 . Tempo should be *deliberate* and different than the tempos of the other instrumentalists Words should be sung recitative-style, moving mostly diatonically around the **CENTER** but with occasional forays into chromatic pitches. Breaths and rests can be taken whenever needed. Notated rests should be followed.

There are some things to be known about the rhythms. They mark out Morse code translations of the words at the beginning of the systems. A dotted quarter note corresponds to a dash ( "dah" ), an eighth note corresponds to a dot ( "dit" ). The dits and dahs, ham radio people call them. Thus, your rhythms are themselves encoded messages, to whomever (or whatever) might be willing to listen.

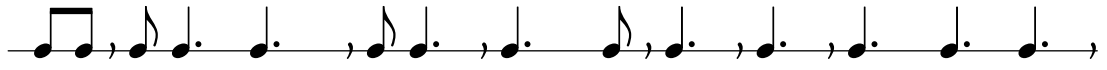
A **TAPE PART** run by the **TAPE OPERATOR** will involve playing **PRE-RECORDED** versions of the parts, overlaying them on top of each other

As the title of this part indicates, there is an entreaty at work in these lines, one that projects towards a beyond for realization in the here and now. Drawing the circle, making the sounds, saying the words: these activities have real effects and could make things happen that we might otherwise think can't occur.

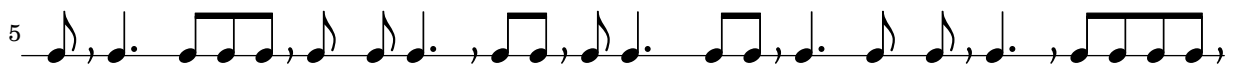
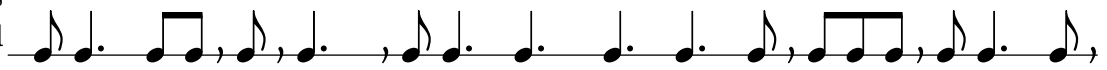
dear  
interlocutor



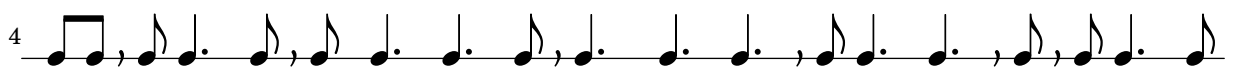
i want  
to leave



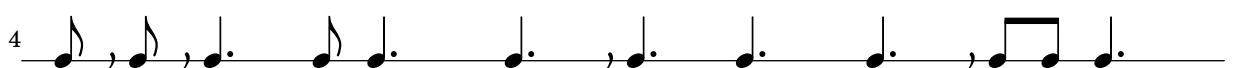
let's  
rebuild  
the  
universe



ruin  
their  
power

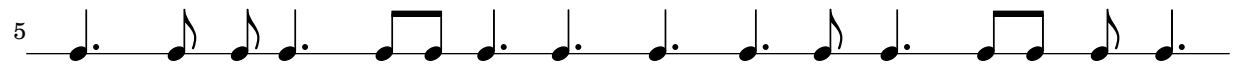


when  
are  
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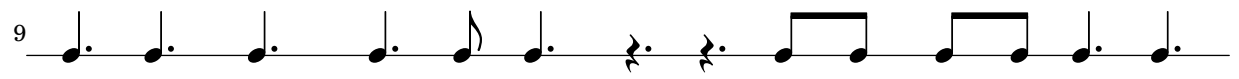


vocalist 

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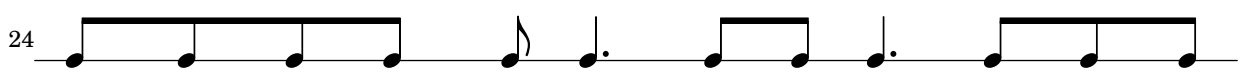
red hot sun. Steam hissed from the bro - ken

17 

valve. The wreck o-ccurred by the bank on Main Street. The

20 

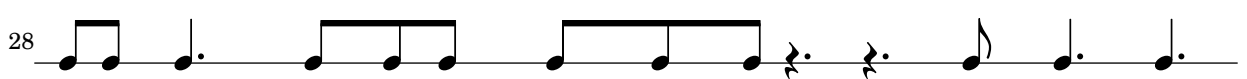
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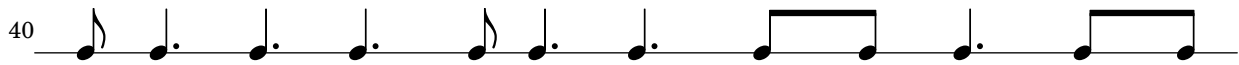
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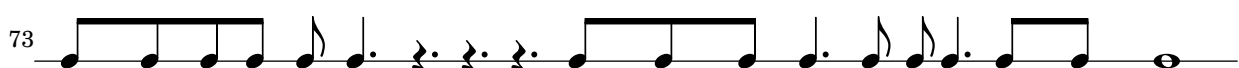
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ern side. There are more than two factors here. We talked of the



slide show in the circus. The square peg will settle in the round hole.

## **PART FOUR: BLENDING**

All **INSTRUMENTALISTS** and **VOCALIST** play the rhythms in unison. When in doubt, follow the vocalist's rhythmic lead and pauses for breath. Pitches should vary a bit around the **CENTER** but not too drastically. **VOCALIST** should sing in *Sprechgesang* . All play at the same tempo, beginning rather slowly, eighth note around 80, *ritardando* to the end where eighth note should be around 30-40. No lengthening of the final note; abrupt end. The **TAPE OPERATOR** will control some static to be transmitted **FM RADIO TRANSMITTERS** for a bit after the final note, fading out the sound slowly. At the conclusion of the piece, the **FM RADIO OPERATORS** will turn off their radios.

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& vocalist

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