

Lukas Foss – Time Cycle (1961)

Written by bluesever

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A1 I - We're Late 3:50 A2 Improvised Interlude No. 1 2:20 A3 II - When The Bells Justle 5:00 A4 Improvised Interlude No. 2 4:50 B1 III - Sechzehnter J nauer 5:45 B2 Improvised Interlude No. 3 3:05 B3 IV - O Mensch, Gib Acht 5:40
Adele Addison - soprano The Improvisation Chamber Ensemble The Columbia Symphony Orchestra
Leonard Bernstein - conductor Recorded at Manhattan Center, New York, USA, 22 November 1960 and at Hollywood California, USA, 26 January 1961

Some see clocks and other timekeepers as friendly reminders, while others see them as necessary evils or mere appliances, but few find them particularly threatening. However, the four texts that make up Lukas Foss' Time Cycle are dark and fatalistic in their view of the clock -- indeed time itself.

At the time of its composition, Foss was parting ways with his traditional, tonal language in the late 1950s and early 1960s, trying his hand first at a very individualized kind of serial music, and then experimenting with new and progressive techniques in keeping with the innovative nature of 1960s art music. Standing as it does near the beginning of this new phase, Time Cycle occupies relatively tame musical ground as compared to some of Foss' later 1960s work (with its graphic scores, semi-aleatory features, etc.).

The music is full of complex counterpoint, and the disjunct melody leaps within the atonal framework; rhythm and meter are shifting and unpredictable. The four songs are connected by the common motive of time, in a nonmusical sense, and a shared chord made of C sharp, A, B, and D sharp. In performance, they may be alternated with three optional, improvised interludes.

The first song, "We're Late," with words by W.H. Auden, is a riddle of time, purpose, life, and death, written as a precise, enigmatic canon. The second song, "When the Bells Justle," from a poem by A.E. Housman, is a reflection on the error of one's own actions, provoked by the

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tolling of bells. Written as a little scherzo, the horns and trumpets simulate the sound of the bells before they are actually heard. The voice resembles this focal timbre as well. "Sechzehnter Januar" (January 16th), based on an entry from Franz Kafka's diaries, contains the sentence that inspired Foss' use of contrasting tempos, one of the cycle's principal musical techniques. It reads, "The clocks do not synchronize: the inner one chases in an inhuman manner, the outer one goes haltingly at its usual pace." The rest of the poet's words describe the chaotic relationship that so many individuals of the modern world have with time. The final song, "O Mensch, gib Acht" (O Human, Take Heed!) with text from Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra, reveals the poet's deep dreamlike desire for eternity. Each of the 11 lines of the tonal and diatonic vocal part are interrupted by strokes of the midnight clock, as played by the piano, celesta, harp, and percussion. In the background, a chromatic, atonal canon at the fourth moves gracefully through the piece. This song contains the most complicated method of musical organization in the entire cycle: after the men in the orchestra whisper the hour, the clock chimes the passing of time and the meter changes; the number of quarter notes in each measure momentarily corresponds to the number of strikes, which always enter on the last beat of the measure; overall the song is held together with an undetectable 3/2 time signature that reemerges when the clock is silent.

Time Cycle was composed for soprano Adele Addison under a commission from the Ford Foundation's Humanities and Arts Program. In addition to receiving the New York Critics Circle Award in 1961, the cycle was honored by the New York Philharmonic as the first composition the group ever repeated at its premiere. This rare event took place under the direction of Leonard Bernstein at Carnegie Hall Philharmonic on October 20, 1960. ---Rovi

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