STRAIN AND STRESS OF A LINE

BY

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David Dzubay, Chairman of the Research Committee & Director of Document

Claude Baker

P.Q. Phan
strain and stress of a line

for large orchestra

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As the title suggests, this 12-minute work is a piece about lines. The idea of 'line' music is almost always thought of in terms of melody, and the listener will quickly notice that the lines at issue here are non-melodic. The work’s first clear linear element in the score begins as a simple horizontal line: a long unison note in the orchestra. This unison is pushed and pulled around the physical space of the orchestra, and the note itself is pushed and pulled out of tune while being subjected to numerous timbral and color variations. The loud, punctuated tutti chords that are juxtaposed against the long, shifting horizontal line are themselves isolated vertical lines or sonorities. But the continual play on the thickness of the horizontal line, combined with the very slow repetition of the sonority, suggests another possibility: could these large chords not also be very short iterations of extremely thick horizontal lines? The ensuing organic development of the principal horizontal line seems to lead us, in hindsight, to an affirmation of this alternative interpretation of the opening of the work. It is subjected to all manner of contortions: at first the thickening of the line is expanded to a degree whereby small clusters and then more clearly discernable harmonies can be heard in the orchestra in ever shorter segments. Eventually, the line is even stretched and twisted through glissandi: neither horizontal nor vertical, but somewhere on a changing curve in between the two apparent extremes from the opening of the work. The slow persistence of the idea of lines for the duration of the piece eventually forces the listener’s focus on to other musical characteristics, and the listener becomes oblivious to the lines themselves.

This idea is in part inspired by the Italian La Linea film shorts, where all of the action stems from a single line. In this piece it is timbres and colors from the orchestra that take over our attention. Shifting blocks of sound move around the orchestra, often in distinct registers or orchestral colors, like thick brush strokes on the acoustic canvas of the work. These figures settle into a section of rhythmic swells, the first clear pulse of the piece. Here, another feature of the work begins to take shape: an overall accelerando or speeding up of activity that occurs very slowly over the duration of the entire work. This effect is, in and of itself, yet another linear element or line in the piece. In this latter section of the work, what were once swells are now simple, pulsating crescendo figures. The punctuated peaks of the crescendos become a dominating rhythmic element, even reminiscent of the opening punctuated chords of the work. Against this framework, the long and steady unison from the opening of the work makes a return appearance, a highly elongated version of the crescendo figure. In a way the work has come full circle, despite its having moved steadily in a single direction for 12 minutes. But, in reality, the piece never really departed from its focus on the main material: lines.

DURATION: ca. 12'

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

1. The 'timbral trill' marking calls for wind or brass players to use an alternate fingering trill (trill to another fingering of the same note).

2. The dynamic indication 'n' is niente; either to or from nothing.

3. The 'molto s.p.' indication in the strings is molto sul ponticello.

4. Some 1/8 tones are called for in the strings, and are marked beating. The player should drop the pitch to the point where interference beating is clearly heard, rather than to try and determine a precise 1/8 tone.
ORCHESTRA:

3 FLUTES (3rd doubling Piccolo)
3 OBOES
3 CLARINETs IN B♭ (3rd doubling B♭ Bass Clarinet)
2 BASSOONs
1 CONTRABASSOON

4 HORNS IN F
3 TRUMPETS IN C
3 TROMBONES
1 TUBA

PERCUSSION 1: 4 TOMS  \[\text{Suspended Cymbal}\]

CROTALeS
(USE 2 BOWS)

PERCUSSION 2: 4 TOMS  \[\text{Suspended Cymbal}\]

BASS DRUM
(SIDE-MOUNTED)
MARIMBA
(4 OCTAVES)

GLOCKENSPIEL

PERCUSSION 3: 4 TOMS  \[\text{Suspended Cymbal}\]

BASS DRUM
(SIDE-MOUNTED)
VIBRAPHONE
(USE BOW)

CROTALe
(USE BOW)

HARP

STRINGS

ALL INSTRUMENTS ARE NOTATED IN THEIR RELEVANT TRANSPOSITIONS
poco a poco accel.

Fi

Obs

Cl

Bsn

Tb.

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Hn.

Tpt.

Tbn.

Perc.

Hp.

Perc. 2

Hg.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

73 poco a poco accel.
\[115\text{ accel.}\]