

## **Kent Olofsson: *Chemin de silence* – a work for theorbo solo**

"Chemin de silence" was written for Peter Söderberg in 2009-10. The piece is in three parts and even if the piece is composed to be played as presented on the CD (Phono Suecica PSCD 186), each part can also be played as a separate piece. The three parts of "Chemin de silence" do also belong to a larger suite of pieces called "M / illuminationes" where all the parts can be combined and played in any order.

"M / illuminationes" is written for the Ensemble Lipparella and the first four parts of the project was composed in 2008-09, and first performed at Hägerstens Kyrka in Stockholm in February 2009. It is scored for voice (counter-tenor or mezzo-soprano), recorder, baroque violin, viola da gamba and theorbo. Some parts are for the full quintet, while others are for trio, quartet or solo. In fact, this work is an on-going work and there are no plan for the number of parts that will be composed. So far, there are five parts composed for the ensemble, and then the three part for theorbo solo, "Chemin de silence" which will be presented in detail in this article.

The theme and ideas for "M / illuminationes" is the pilgrimage, both the literally travels to places like Santiago de Compostella and metaphorically the inner journeys that a human can undertake in contemplation and in searching for deeper understanding of the mysteries of life and God. The texts come from different sources, verses from writers as Baudelaire, "Illuminationes" and Rilke, "The Book of Pilgrimage" and "Duino Elegies", as well as from fragments of descriptions of revelations and old hymns.

One important aspect in composing this piece is the fact that I'm guitarist myself. I have composed music for many different types of stringed instruments since more than two decades. My most important collaboration has been my work with guitarist Stefan Östersjö. Our work and experiences in investigating different scordaturas for many different types of guitars, like the ten-stringed guitar and the eleven-stringed altoguitar, did contribute to the way I worked out the tuning for the theorbo. One of my most important pieces when it comes to special tunings for guitars is "Il liuto d'rfeo" for charango, six-stringed guitar, ten-stringed guitar and tape, written for Östersjö in 1998-99.

Special tunings for stringed instruments also open up interesting ways on how to use harmonics, which is especially notably in the third part of "Chemin de silence".

Describing the harmonic and melodic material used in composing "Chemin de silence" is difficult. There are no strict system, no specific scales or chord progressions that are used as the fundament. However, as an attempt to give a simple description of the way I'm working with the harmonic and melodic material is that the music moves between different, in a traditional sense, tonalities. They can be heard very clearly but is mostly present just very short, the tonal passages become blurred and they dissolve into passages where the sense of tonality disappears and where certain gestural materials became the focus, which in turn is further transgressed into new tonal areas. For example, the very opening, the first bar can be analyzed as a E flat harmonic minor scale, that is dissolved in the next bar (see example 4). Bar 3 and a few bars onward can be seen as in the key of C minor (see example 7). This is just one way of analyzing these bars, typically, the tonal passages are often ambiguous.

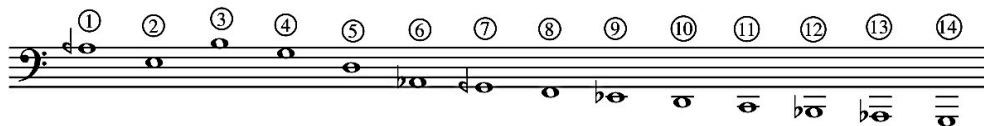
The rhythmic and gestural material is composed as constant variations on certain of the motifs that are presented; a single idea is varied, eventually turned into a completely new idea that is further varied and developed.

Although I often try to play at least a little on the guitar instruments I write for I never really sat down and played the theorbo. Instead I worked with Peter Söderberg and closely studied his way of playing, in order to understand the possibilities as well as the limitations and difficulties of the instrument. We did this first in 2008 for the first parts of "M/illuminationes", then further more for the solo piece.

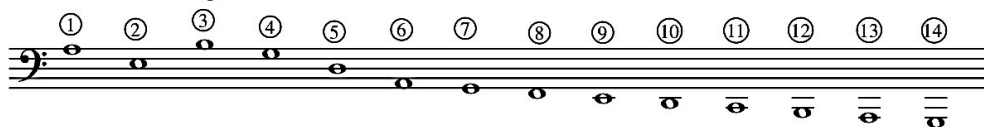
## Tuning

The tuning of the theorbo in "Chemin de silence" as well as in "M/illuminations" is based on the traditional tuning in A, with four strings lowered a half tone, and two strings lowered a quarter tone.

### Theorbo tuning in Chemin de silence



### Traditional tuning in A



## Example 1

There is an extensive use of quarter tones in the piece. Not only is the 1st and 7th strings tuned a quarter tone low, but also an extra fret is placed between the nut and the first fret. This opens up a multitude of possibilities to work with quarter tone, like the following figure in bar 25 of the first part.



## Example 2

### First Part

The first part of "Chemin de silence" is based on material from the first part of "M/illuminations" which is scored for voice, bass recorder and theorbo. Actually, all the three parts of the theorbo piece start with variations on the very first opening of "M/illuminations", a gesture with a falling scale where most notes are played as harmonics. This material is marked with A in the example 3 below.

**M / illuminations - Part 1**

I ♩ = 50

Alto: Des Som - mers Woch - en stan - den still,

Recorder: XII VII, I, 12, 13, 14, 10, 5, 3, 2, 1, 12, VII, 11, 10, 14, 3

Theorbo: 11, 10, 14, 3

## Example 3

The variations of the openings in the three parts are shown below in example 4, 5 and 6.

Example 4: Part 1 start

Example 5: Part 2 start

Example 6: Part 3 start

The material marked as B in example 3 forms the basic material for the first part of "Chemin de silence". It is a repeated bass line/chord progression and suggests a fragmented passacaglia.

Example 7: Part 1, bar 3-6

The music grows out from this in different directions, most notably into the material marked C in example 3, which is the second main material in this part. It's a contrast to the slow moving passacaglia idea, it's a gestural material, moving upward, in quick ornamented figurations, including extensive use of quarter tones. The first fragment of the C material is presented in bar 8 (ex 8).

Example 8: Part 1, bar 7-12

## Second Part

The second part can be described as a Fantasia on one note and it explores the possibilities with the theorbo in playing very rapid figures, on one hand different arpeggios, on the other quick legato playing. This is something that we normally don't hear very often with the theorbo, but is certainly very fascinating and I was captured by the possibilities I found. The ideas for writing like this come of course from my way of writing for the guitar.

After the opening gesture, which is, as mentioned before a variation of the opening of "M/illuminations", variations around the note G start (Bar 36 – ex 9). First this central note is presented with different articulations and sonic variations on different strings, then it is expanded into legato figures and into chords. In bar 39 the arpeggios start, the G played on three different strings. After some unison repetitions the note is again expanded, first into cluster chords and then larger chords. This gesture, starting from the central G and developing and expanding it into other figures is a consistently idea in this part. This process is also used reverse, as towards the end, in bar 82-82 (ex 10), where the cluster arpeggios is moving into the central tone G.

The octave displacement of the two upper strings gave very interesting arpeggios. Using idiomatic fingerings for the right hand opened for unexpected order of notes within the arpeggios. However, I had to work close with Peter with all the details concerning fingerings and orders of strings to be playing in fast passages. Things that I had wrote were sometimes very awkward, or even impossible to play. But by switching just a few notes the passages became playable.

Example 9 consists of two musical staves. The first staff, labeled '36', shows a bass clef with a 7/8 time signature. It begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic, followed by a 'molto vibr.' (molto vibrato) section. The notes are G and A. The second staff, labeled '39', starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features rapid sixteenth-note arpeggios. It ends with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Fingerings (1-5) are indicated above the notes. A dashed arrow above the first staff points to the second staff, indicating a continuation of the G note.

Example 9

Example 10 consists of two musical staves. The first staff, labeled '80', is in 4/32 time and shows a dynamic progression from mezzo-piano (*mp*) to fortissimo (*ff*). It features rapid sixteenth-note arpeggios. The second staff, labeled '83', continues the arpeggiated texture with dynamics ranging from piano (*pp*) to fortissimo (*ff*). Fingerings (1-5) are indicated above the notes. A dashed arrow above the first staff points to the second staff, indicating a continuation of the arpeggiated texture.

Example 10

### Part Three

After the opening bars (presented in example 6), also this part present a repeated chord progression that suggests the form of a passacaglia, just as in the first part. But here the chords are played entirely as harmonics on the bass strings! A most unusual technique on the theorbo, Peter Söderberg told me he never came across this technique before. Example 11 shows the first bars with the chords, the chord progression is played three times, in bar 102 the chords are also played, but in another position on the fretboard, making the harmonics sound a fifth higher. The three chords that form the chord progression are tonal triads, G minor – F minor with A flat as bass – E flat (minor) with an added ninth and a quarter tone low G as bass. The tonality can be C minor, but the quarter tone low note in the last chord gives the progression a special and ambiguous character.

Out from these chords different melodies and figures grows and develops, almost everything is played as harmonics, showing the great capacity there is in using harmonics on the theorbo. In bar 107 a passage with normal fingered chords are played, these are taken from a passage in the first part of "M/illuminations".

The image shows two systems of musical notation for the theorbo. The first system, starting at bar 97, has a tempo of 66. It features a bass line with harmonics and chords, with fingerings indicated by circled numbers. The second system, starting at bar 100, continues the harmonic progression with various dynamics like mp, mf, f, and pp. Chord symbols like XII, VII, IV, and V are used throughout.

Example 11

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