Kalon – An Essay by Richard Blackford

Background At twenty-four minutes *Kalon* is by far the most ambitious work that I attempted during my PhD degree at Bristol University and was written from 2015-2016. In choosing a string quartet and string orchestra playing in consistently different tempi I wished to explore new antiphonal possibilities, new rules of counterpoint, new definitions of rhythmic consonance and dissonance. It was originally conceived for two orchestral groups separated on the concert platform with two conductors. I then tried to simplify the concept by writing it for two string orchestras, again with two conductors, being attracted to the antiphonal effect in Bartok's *Music For Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. I then read that the Cavatina from Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13 op.130 had been selected as the final work on the Voyager Record, containing a broad sample of Earth's sounds, languages and music and lauched into space in 1977. I found the idea of a string quartet and Beethoven's Cavatina in interstellar space so moving I decided to score *Kalon* for string quartet and string orchestra. My chosen ensemble also has kinship with the *concerto grosso*, and my initial concern that the piece would require two conductors was allayed by Martyn Brabbins, who affirmed that even in the most complex collisions of multiple tempi, one conductor would suffice. I created a number of simulations on Logic, bouncing the string quartet's music onto audio and then inputting a new sequence for the music of the string orchestra. I rejected sketch after sketch, discovering that if the music of each group was too complex, the combination of the two groups in multiple tempi sounded a mess. Ligeti's Foreword kept reminding me that the key to the complexity I sought by combining two tempi lay in the simplicity of each group. In this regard I also found Harrison Birtwistle's preface to the score of *Theseus Game* (written for two instrumental groups with two conductors) particularly relevant:

"Here the intention behind using two conductors was to allow a greater amount of freedom than would be possible otherwise. The various layers are mostly quite simple in themselves, but with two conductors it was possible to fly in different directions and do things that could not be done with only one. If things are too complex they cancel each other out"

The process of extreme simplification of the material for the two groups became my main preoccupation, and my simulations revealed that, even if the music for each group might be disarmingly simple when played alone, it produced music of great complexity and excitement when played simultaneously. I also reflected on how Conlon Nancarrow's experimentation with polytempo in his *First Study for Player Piano* made extensive use of ostinato. In The Music of Conlon Nancarrow (Kyle Gann: Cambridge University Press 1995 PP69/70) the author writes: *When Nancarrow began experimenting with polytempo he turned first to a simple device that would show it to striking effect: ostinato, a phrase persistently repeated without variation. Through the thirties Nancarrow had made a living paying the jazz trumpet and jazz, like Baroque music, relied heavily on the ostinato bass as a foundation. Nancarrow's use of ostinato must be credited to both Stravinsky/Bartok and jazz. Because the ostinato, by definition, repeated itself without changing pitch level, it freed Nancarrow from many traditional harmonic, melodic and formal concerns while he went about forging a radically new rhythmic language.*

Ostinato became only one of several elements of *Kalon.* Even the repeated patterns in the first movement are irregular, often augmented or diminished, and only occasionally repeated insistently to draw the listener's ear to the effect of the simultaneous tempi. The

computer simulations also allowed me to experiment with varying layers of density within the two groups. By adding or, more importantly, subtracting material from one group the ear automatically gravitates to the tempo of the other. So it was possible to evolve a quasi-relationship of tempo consonance and dissonance by contrasting sections of multiple tempo with tempo unison. This in turn posed questions of harmonic clarity versus harmonic blurring: i.e. in multiple tempo sections pitches would need to be extremely limited so that the collisions of the two groups did not produce harmonic anarchy. Two simultaneous groups would also allow new possibilities of bi-tonality. The project also required considerable thought as to how each group would be conducted or cued in order to be practical to perform. Much care was taken to give the leader of the quartet time to give an upbeat to mark the quartet's new tempo, since the most the conductor could do while conducting an alien tempo, was to give a cue to enter or to stop. Most importantly, the two groups allowed a potentially dramatic contrast with the addition of extra-musical elements, such as the narrative of Part II (described later) and its inclusion of two quotations from the Cavatina of Beethoven's String Quartet op 130.

Overview: *Kalon* is the Greek word for perfect physical and moral beauty, as conceived by the philosophers of Classical Greece. The three movements explore different aspects of *kalon,* also the context in which beauty can exist in ugliness and darkness. Movement I is a celebratory exploration of subject and countersubject in contrasting tempi; Movement II dramatizes the tempo conflicts with persistent interruptions and dissolves; Movement III explores complex overlapping music in which a single pulse mainly synchronises the two groups. Whereas Movements I and III mostly combine the two groups throughout, Movement II, the longest and most dramatic, presents each group in sustained sections before they are set into conflict with each other.

Movement I – *Lyra* In 1994 I recorded a three-stringed Cretan lyra in Athens during the location filming of Tony Harrison's Channel 4 film-poem *A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan.* In the first movement I transcribed it, changed the metre slightly and incorporated a fast, dance-like drone motif in the Aeolian mode with its characteristic mordant decorations. At the beginning of *Kalon* the string quartet becomes a four-part "super-lyra", featuring open strings and fifths like its Cretan model. The overall structure is ternary, with two fast sections based on the lyra motif flanking a slower, more lyrical section. The entire movement is based around the lyra motif, but it undergoes melodic extensions, augmentation, intervallic and rhythmic changes in every section of the movement.
In the section that follows the solo viola introduction the fast, dance-like lyra music is contrasted simultaneously with the string orchestra in an even faster 3/8 tempo (bar 24). The quartet plays at crotchet=108 against the string orchestra playing quaver=162. The tonality of both is firmly in G (Aeolian mode transposed) and the string orchestra's counter-melody to the quartet's is saturated with perfect fifths and fourths. Thus when the first tempo collisions occur there is no perceived harmonic clash and the ear is free to enjoy the interplay of the two ensembles in two distinct tempi. As the first section developed I deliberately inserted whole bars of rests into the string quartet. The effect, when one tempo group is silent, is for the ear to gravitate towards the remaining tempo, and the interplay of bars with music and silent bars throws each tempo to the foreground aural picture.

The second section connects the string orchestra's pulse by directing the conductor to make dotted quaver=crotchet (i.e. 3/8 becomes ¾)(bar 69). The second violins, then the first violins develop and extend the lyra motif into a fully-fledged melody, modulating from the original G tonality to E-flat. Under a quasi-harmonic-series chord of E-flat the

string quartet and string orchestra unite under the same tempo for the first time, presenting the new lyra melody contrapuntally (bar 73). Under muted quintal chords (the interval of the fifth, so prevalent in the lyra motif, dominates the whole movement) from the string orchestra the cello solo from the quartet now develops the lyra theme still further in an independent tempo, ending on an unresolved fermata (Ex. 10).

The final section (bar 97) is led by a four-bar pizzicato double bass section solo, against which the quartet plays *sul ponticello* in a faster tempo, first together, then freely and independently of each other. From this amorphous, blurred texture the string orchestra takes the initiative with the lyra motif, developing it by sequence until once again the quartet joins it in unified tempo. The E-flat pedal with its quasi-harmonic series chord returns and this time it is the solo viola of the quartet that leads with the motif (as at the start of the movement), with the whole quartet straining over the E-flat pedal towards the final return of the lyra motif as heard at the beginning back in the tonality of G.
A recapitulation of part of the opening section (bar 146) leads to the introduction of two further string orchestra motifs which dominate the string quartet. Both groups finally unite in the same quaver=160 tempo for the final 42 bars with all the motifs playing simultaneously in counterpoint (bar 88). A final metrical modulation from dotted quaver=crotchet boosts the tempo even further (bar 208) and a descending sequential pattern propels the movement to its dynamic conclusion

Movement II - *Beklemmt* The title "Beklemmt" refers to the eight-bar passage in the Cavatina movement of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13 opus 130. In that section the first violin becomes disassociated from the rest of the quartet, its line is disjointed, syncopated, almost as if the "oppressed, stifled, anguished" melody of its title has become lost, almost in another world, another tempo. At eleven minutes duration, this movement is by far the longest and most dramatic. The quartet assumes the role of the Jewish string quartets in Nazi concentration camps who were forced to pay some of the most sublime music ever conceived (Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven) whilst a few yards away the most barbaric atrocities were being perpetrated. In this context *Kalon,* the embodiment of beauty, becomes a fragile, flickering flame surrounded by unfathomable darkness. The attempts of the quartet to survive in a hostile environment lie at the heart of the music of this movement. . Beethoven's "beklemmt" is described by Mark Steinberg, first violin of the Brentano Quartet) as, "The line that cannot find tears with which to cry, it gropes for language where there is none. The movement which is to sing loses its capacity to do so, or cannot find the inspiration to support it." (Brentano Quartet website brentanoquartet.com/notes/Beethoven-quartet-opus-130). These words and Beethoven's exquisitely paradoxical music were constantly in my mind as I wrote the movement.

Structure In this movement the string quartet is consistently at variance with the string orchestra, the tempi are never synchronised and the two ensembles consistently either interrupt or obliterate each other. The progression of the string quartet is one of ever-decreasing tempi until it reaches the first of two quotations from the Beethoven Cavatina. The string orchestra material, by contrast, is constructed in symmetrical sections based on tempo relationships of duple to triple time (see Appendix 1). In contrast to the first movement the two ensembles present sustained sections individually, rather than in combination. Unlike the first movement, the opposing tempi are deployed to create conflict and dissonance. The movement is dominated by a falling, syncopated theme whose "pushed" rhythm later reveals its kinship with the Beethoven "beklemmt" first violin melody (Ex. 11).

Ex 11

It is preceded by two motifs, a 7/8 repeated "stammering" pattern surrounded by ghostly harmonics, and a surging lower string phrase marked "like a sigh". The main theme features a 6/8 – 2/4 relationship that displaces the pulse, and the string quartet further de-stabilises it by entering with overlapping rushing, descending chromatic figures in which all four instruments strain against each other rhythmically. The conclusion to the first section is an eleven-part piling up chord, which I called "the wall of death", featuring the minor third, the dominating interval of the whole movement. (Eg 12)

EX 12
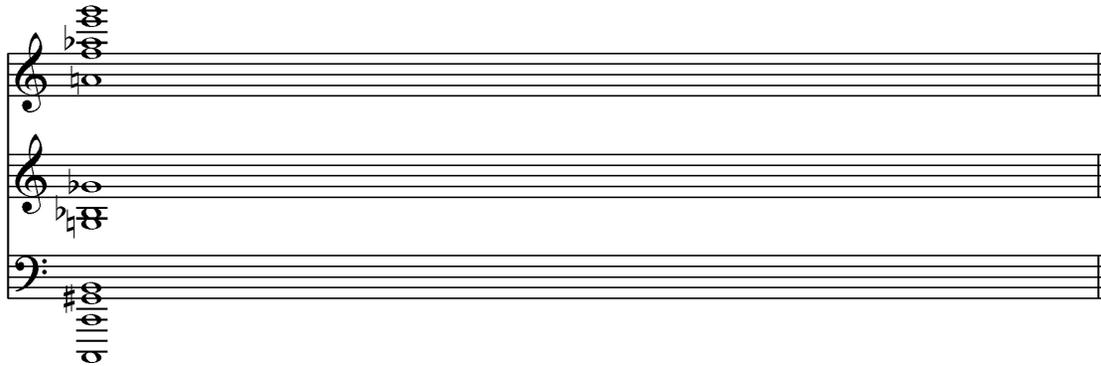
In its first development of the main theme the string quartet introduces an answering downward chromatic phrase, also a feature of the Beethoven "beklemmt" section. Its seeming progress is undermined by a fortissimo interruption of the main theme by the string orchestra, which swamps the smaller ensemble.

The string quartet tries again – its second development is a lyrical cello inverted version of the main theme, against which the string orchestra "stammers" and "sighs" (bar 56) before an even more aggressive statement of the rising "wall of death" chord. The string quartet again attempts the lyrical version, slowing down even further to seamlessly reveal the first Beethoven quotation from op 130 (bar 74).
As the first violin B-flat is left hanging in suspension, unable to go further the quartet is again interrupted by a powerful cello/bass statement of the chromatic falling motif (bar 80). It is taken up in diminution by the violas and violins which develop the motif in dissonant fugato. This time it is the quartet that interrupts, and the violent conflict of

tempi and rhythms create a dissonant climax. The two string groups have nullified each other and there is seemingly nowhere to go. The muted string orchestra, now marked piano, plays a slower version of the main "pushed" theme, (Letter E, bar 106) its corresponding "wall of death" chord now a pianissimo descending mid-range chord. From nowhere the quartet enters with the Beethoven "beklemmt" section (bar 99), its slow triplet quavers contrasting with the lost, syncopated first violin. By the sixth bar the lower instruments drop out, leaving the first violin alone, abandoned, isolated, lost.
In the final section the muted strings reprise the main theme even slower than previously, all aggression spent, having now extinguished the string quartet's presence. The ghostly stammering and "sigh" of the opening return, becoming fainter and fainter until it too disappears.

Movement III – *Stile Concitato* Claudio Monteverdi coined the term s*tile concitato* in the preface to his Eight Book of Madrigals, published in 1638. He describes it as "repeated sixteenth notes in the strings, basso continuo and voice", a practise also deployed by him in 1624 with the opera *Il Combatimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*. The mood of *concitato* is of agitation, anger, warlike sentiment and is contrasted with what Monteverdi termed *molle*, or music that is soft, gentle and soothing. In *Monteverdi's Tonal Language* (1992 Schirmer pp239-240) Erich T Chafe writes "The *stile concitato* might even be viewed as an emblem of human assertiveness, of a positive viewpoint on anger that seems almost to anticipate the emphases of modern psychology."

Structure Movement III, in rondo form, mostly combines the two string groups with the same tempo. However the bar divisions are completely diverse, so that the two groups maintain different sounding music due to overlapping phrases and barlines as well as simultaneous triplet divisions.. Thus the effect of two distinct layers of music is maintained, even though the pulse is mostly synchronised.
It begins with a fast five-bar theme on the string quartet which is dominated by the repeated sixteenth notes of *stile concitato* alternating with pizzicato. Against it (bar 7) the string orchestra plays four bar phrases made entirely of minim triplets across the beat. The two groups join, as if miraculously, and exuberantly develop the repeated *concitato* idea to a definite cadence (bar 38). The orchestral celli and basses develop the *concitato* theme (bar 40), with the upper strings extending the pizzicato element in imitative counterpoint whilst the quartet takes over the triplet minim material. A new cello version of the theme emerges (Ex 13 bar 59) which is taken up also by the quartet as the music grows to a second climactic cadence.

Ex 13

The middle section is described as *molle* (bar 98) and features a slowed down and augmented version of the cello theme, and this is taken up and developed by the quartet in a softer central section. The final part of the section divides the groups into two tempi once again (bar 117), providing tension that heralds the return of the opening theme.

Rather than merely repeat the opening material, the phrase lengths are reduced and the repeated *concitato* sixteenth notes doubled. Finally the sixteenth notes dominate the entire texture of the string orchestra and the cello theme is now heard above rushing *concitato* passage-work (bar 155-165). When the climax of the movement appears to present the two groups in a united tempo, the tempi are once again divided and both groups appear to fizzle out in disconnected pizzicato (bar 179). A final chord unifying both groups provides an affirmative conclusion.

Conclusion Note-for-note *Kalon* took me longer to write (seven months) than anything hitherto. I nearly abandoned it twice and am grateful to Prof.John Pickard for encouraging me to keep going. It was analogous to having spent my life playing chess, and one day someone asking me to suddenly play three-dimensional chess. I found composing large-scale structures in two different tempi extremely hard. In April 2018 I recorded *Kalon* with the Czech Philharmonic and the Albion String Quartet. Both groups were rehearsed separately so that when they were first combined each would be confident with its own material. My fears that one group would be so distracted by the alien tempo of the other were quickly allayed after the conductor made it clear which sections they were to work as an ensemble in tempo unison and in which sections, the multiple tempo, they must on no account listen to the other. The learning and research has been of immense value, and the new rhythmic combinations discovered in *Kalon* profoundly influenced the first movement of my violin concerto *Niobe.* I had also never attempted large-scale tempo planning on the scale of the second movement *Beklemmt* and it remains to be seen if the listener will perceive tempo relationships as an effective structural element in this context. I found the need to employ a harmonically restricted language in order to preserve rhythmic and textural intelligibility quite constraining, but am also resolved to further research bi-tonality and tri-tonality. On a practical level it was also a journey of discovery to work with programmer Danny Ryan to adapt Sibelius to time-stamp two separate files and to then combine them, so that the score represents a perfect alignment of the music of the two tempi.

Kalon receives its world premiere at the Cheltenham Music Festival, Town Hall, Cheltenham on July 7th. 2018. The BBC National Orchestra of Wales is conducted by Martyn Brabbins. It is a Cheltenham Festival commission and is dedicated to Meurig Bowen.

Kalon is published by Nimbus Publishing (Antony Smith: antony@wyastone.co.uk) and is recorded by Signum Classics with the Albion Quartet and Czech Philharmonic, conducted by Jiri Rozen.
June 19th. 2018. *richard@blackford.co.uk*