

THE PRICE OF OIL

for two voices or vocal groups, eight groups of amplified pipes,
and two similar instrumental ensembles (1980)

THE PRICE OF OIL was commissioned and first performed, in partial form, by the Hocketus Ensemble of Amsterdam in 1980. The immediate impetus for its composition was provided by an unexpected event: the disaster which in the spring of 1980 overtook several hundred people who were living on the "Alexander Kielland," a floating platform off the coast of Norway, used to house the workers employed in oil-drilling operations in that part of the North Sea. This structure, reputedly a highly advanced model of the floating 'semi-submersibles' designed to withstand high seas and all types of weather, inexplicably capsized in a storm, causing the loss of hundred and thirty-nine lives. As I read newspaper accounts of the incident I sensed that the seeds of a musical-dramatic treatment were present, in questions concerning the construction of the platform, the living and working conditions of the men, and the general relation of this crucial industry to the lives of humans and their needs.

Specifically, I was interested in creating a piece of music based on the technique of 'hocket,' in which elements of a single continuous musical line are distributed between two alternating voices or instruments. This technique is characteristic of much of the world's traditional music (Pygmy music provides a good example), and is, as one may divine from the group's name, a speciality of the Hocketus Ensemble. I was already working on a system whereby a single basic rhythmic pattern could be applied, simultaneously but with changing interferential relationships, to several different parameters: alternation of high and low pitches, treble and bass instruments, hard and soft attacks, and left and right spatial orientation. I wanted to find a way to apply the same technique to texts as well, and had been experimenting with some promising passages from Greek tragedy (for example, the 'binding chorus' from Aeschylus' *Eumenides*), when the accident happened. I suddenly remembered a text which I had clipped from a newspaper some months previously: an anonymous interview with a dealer in the

Rotterdam spot market, who talks in colorful and candid terms about the oil business and its risks, from the entrepreneur's point of view. I immediately went to work and assembled, from newspaper accounts of the survivors of the North Sea disaster and from other documentary sources, a second character who functions as a counterpoint to the dealer.

Although the dealer and the worker (rôles which can be played by single individuals or several people at once) never meet or interact directly, both of them together make up complementary parts of a superstructure which governs their individual behavior, and whose functioning in turn depends upon their active presence. Both of these characters are caught in a tragic design over which they have no control, manifesting itself on the one side as greed, and on the other as need.

The first part, in which the two texts are chanted, is accompanied by specifically constructed instruments consisting of clusters of amplified pipes: again a reference to traditional music, in this case Andean folk music. The second part is entirely instrumental, now using more conventional means in a kind of formalized wordless chorus which comments on the preceding action, thus retaining something of my original intention to develop, in contemporary musical language, some of the basic motifs of classical tragedy.

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