

Glossolalia

Composer: Erkki Veltheim
Commissioned: Soundstream Collective
Premiere: May 2012



Glossolalia is a string quartet that is conceived of as a sort of critique of modernism from within; using elements of 20th Century modernist culture, it gradually erodes them through various playing techniques and radical detuning of the strings. It is a kind of quixotic homage to the private language games that so preoccupied the modernists of 20th Century; games that, like a candle to a moth, have always both fascinated and repelled me.

This work's rhythmic material is derived from the main propositions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* via translation into morse code, an early and now officially obsolete mode of digital communication. In his arch-modernist treatise, Wittgenstein rages against the vagueness of language by trying to limit its scope to the binary values of truth and falsehood, but in the end falls on mystical silence to escape his logical labyrinth and find expression for the less coherent aspects of human experience.

My harmonic elements are gleaned from Elliott Carter's fixation with highly isomorphic all-interval chords, an equally obsessive quest to maintain a sort of precarious balance and symmetry in the materials of communication. These rigid structures are corroded from the outset through the use of playing techniques that continuously destabilise and obscure them, as well as a gradual detuning of the top and bottom string of each instrument until they are completely slack.

As the players begin to battle with the increasingly volatile and failing instruments, the musical language moves closer to a kind of involuntary onomatopoeia, resembling the sounds of concrete nature more than abstract culture. In the end it is a happy requiem, a hope that the exquisite corpse of modernism feeds maggots of a different breed; ones that embrace and celebrate the arbitrariness and uncertainty of existence rather than bracketing and analysing it.