

## SONIC PROTEST

*Musicians have tools to heighten the emotional power of protest through the art of outright noise.*

*Given the danger of today's political climate, this proposal urges your input and participation.*

### **Instrumental Protest**

Based on principles pioneered by composer Charles Ives, an "organized cacophony" is created to convey anger and outrage. Numerous instrumental ensembles in a given city are invited to participate in a large outdoor setting. Each ensemble is assigned in advance one emblematic American work: *The National Anthem, Battle Hymn Of The Republic, We Shall Overcome, Fanfare For The Common Man, God Bless America*, et al.

On cue from an overall, supervising conductor, each ensemble plays their assigned piece. They begin one at a time, then continue simultaneously. A wild cacophony develops from the conflicting melodies, keys and tempos. Many of the patriotic strains can still be recognized as each ensemble fades in and out numerous times in an evolving, unsettling montage. Suddenly the conductor cues everyone to play very softly, creating a surreal, dreamlike effect. Then a gradual crescendo builds back, even louder and angrier than at the start.

**Sonic Wave** – In a climactic closing, all the instrumentalists form a huge semi-circle. A lead instrumentalist standing at one end improvises a colorful phrase (melodic, wild or shrill) which is then passed to the next person to imitate, then to the next, all the way down the line. When it reaches approximately half-way, a contrasting phrase is passed, then another. Each player continues playing a given phrase until the next is passed. These overlap into a huge, textured din - even more turbulent than the simultaneous anthems. [Percussion can be added to the above. A random assortment of world percussion instruments can be used to symbolize cultural diversity, immigrants and et al]

*(Note: Sonic Wave can be a separate event with percussion added. It is the most-easily mobilized of the various component parts, utilizing an open call to individual musicians rather than the more-complex coordinating of numerous ensembles.)*

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"Sonic Protest" can be a platform for countless musicians, professional and amateur alike, to make their feelings known – non-verbally - through their dedicated art form. It could last 30–60 minutes, depending on the number of ensembles and how the conductor paces the entrances. Audiences might experience it as a kind of political/musical street theater.

- **Choral Protest** [or "Placard Chants"]

No musical experience is needed to participate in this version.

Numerous protest chants from throughout American history are compiled: "I Can't Breathe," "Hell No, We Won't Go," back to "Give me Liberty or Give Me Death." (Today, impeachment themes could be at the forefront!) Shouted aggressively, these are distributed among a network of small groups, coached by individual leaders.

In advance of the event, a supervising conductor teaches an overlapping structure to ~ 12-15 volunteer leaders. They each carry a sign with one protest phrase and disburse among a large crowd, assembling the small groups. (Can be at an existing protest, or one gathered for this purpose.)

**Sonic Wave** – The entire crowd forms a huge semi-circle for a vocal version of the climactic, "sonic wave," similar to the Instrumental version above. It's non-verbal and overwhelming.

From the neo-primitive outbursts of gibberish, barking, cackles and moans, traditional singing slowly emerges. "We Shall Overcome" and "Give Peace A Chance" overlap with several of the anthems from the instrumental version– this time with their lyrics. Another dissonant accumulation develops. Gradually the themes are faded out one at a time, until only 3 remain, then 2, then 1. The otherwise boisterous event gradually *diminuendos* into a prayerful, melodic coda.

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I am in the process of structuring a score in which many of the parameters can vary at the discretion of the local conductors and organizers. Walking/marching can be included or ensembles seated. Instrumental and vocal versions could take place consecutively on a given day, travel within a city, or appear in numerous cities at once. Amplification or other media can enhance or broadcast the materials. A all-night vigil could occur at a provocative location, with participants spelling each other. Alternately the entire event could be presented as an indoor concert.

## Logistics

In the 1970's and 80's I conducted numerous large outdoor participatory events – many involving untrained voices sonically chanting, others inviting audiences to sing with animals at zoos. We had non-profit status and received foundation grants. The resourcefulness of a dedicated board of directors somehow made the disparate elements come together.

But for the far more elaborate "Sonic Protest," I can only speculate on the needs. Perhaps...

- A team experienced in event production, political activism and/or community outreach.
- Dates and locations selected, permits acquired. A media campaign. Legal counsel.
- Numerous conductors of existing ensembles and one supervising conductor. Published orchestrations (purchased or licensed), assigned to the various ensembles.
- A theatrical director experienced with outdoor events. Amplification, staging materials.

*(The logistics may resemble those of a large parade - which of course was the context in which Charles Ives was first intrigued by the overlapping sonics of marching bands.)*

Perhaps a large university music department could present the entire event if their ensembles included say, a symphony orchestra, marching band, concert band, jazz band, SATB chorus, opera ensemble and music-theater troupe.

The vocal version is a bit less labyrinthine, but still best organized by a team of experienced producers and community leaders.

*A tutorial could be assembled for recreating versions in other cities - including a printed score plus video excerpts from the first event(s). Also, a documentary could be made following the trial-and-error stages from the beginning.*

**"...when mere words are not enough"**

At its essence, Sonic Protest is a media event. Its central message can be suited to a given issue, like impeachment. An approximate spin could be "noise being made urging..." [in this case] Robert Mueller's commission to move faster. Advance promotion could include sound bytes from a prominent politician, the conductor and several of the musicians, describing the premise.

The component parts of Sonic Protest are modular and can be staged individually or in various combinations:

- Sonic Wave – Instrumental (with or without Percussion) \*
- Sonic Wave - Choral
- Overlapping Anthems (instrumental)
- Overlapping Slogan Chants (spoken/shouted)
- Overlapping Melodies (We Shall Overcome et al, w/lyrics)

3 larger forms could be:

- Sonic Vigil (Any combinations of the above, taking place through the night or even 24/7 with participants spelling each other)
- Indoor Concert (any of the elements, on a concert of its own or part of a larger evening. The huge totality of all the modules could perhaps best be presented in a huge arena.)
- Monthly Event (Because the premise is designed to address any cause for which protest is needed, the event could be a monthly occurrence, each one dedicated to an arising injustice.)

\* One of the most manageable could be "Sonic Wave With Percussion." Responding to an open invitation, instrumentalists arrive at a given time and location. Directions are taught at the time. The huge wave begins under the direction of one instrumentalist. A percussion ensemble is also open to anyone with a percussion instrument. (World Percussion instruments are encouraged and can symbolize cultural diversity and celebration of immigrants.) It has its own leader and enters periodically with its own rhythm. A single-page score would be distributed to all.

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Thank you for your attention to this proposal. Your input and energies are urgently invited!!

With anger and patriotism,



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