

Program notes for:

On The Brink

By
John Biggs

The intention of this piece is to provoke an awareness of the implications of the words “on the brink” for our time. In fact, those three words form the entire text of the composition. In section A there is an ominous invocation and warning. Section B exploits an eerie echoing of the phrase. Section C has a chorale-like texture, with the text translated into Latin. In section D there is a feeling of optimism and cheerfulness, where the singers clap to the rhythm of the music, shouting out the phrase in the language of seven different countries, following the 45th parallel across the globe. Then suddenly their optimism turns to horror, amazement, and frustration, as the accompaniment steals their applause from them. In section E, three bells toll, each one encouraging optimism. But after the final knell, the singers turn into motionless mannequins.

Malcolm Barrington

John Biggs: ON THE BRINK

1. This piece was conceived for SATB Soli, however, it may be performed by any kind of choir, as long as there are four sections of differently pitched voices such as SSAA, TTBB, or SATB.

2. **Concept of the piece**

The composition is meant to provoke an awareness of the implications of the words "on the brink" for our time. The listener, and indeed, the performer, may use his or her imagination to supply an ending to the thought, perhaps stating to himself "on the brink of ----", adding an ending that reflects his own personal reactions during the music.

3. **Form of the piece**

There are five sections. *Section A* is an ominous invocation and warning. *Section B* exploits an eerie echoing of the voices. *Section C* is a chorale-like section where the text becomes translated into Latin: Impensum est (eempensoom est). *Section D* is a more animated section, where there is optimism and even cheerfulness. The singers shout the key phrase in seven different languages from countries across the 45th parallel. But suddenly, their optimism is turned to horror, amazement, and frustration. In *Section E*, three bells toll, each one encouraging optimism, but after the last, the singers turn into motionless mannequins.

4. **General note:** The piece must be memorized, or music stands must be supplied to allow freedom for the hands. (if possible-no conductor) Since exact pitches are not important to the language of the piece, no clef is used in either voice staff. The staff is used only as an indication of high, medium, or low ranges. Since there are discernable pitches in the "chorale" of Section C, a clef is used in the notation of the tape part.

Notes on the musical and visual performance of the composition.

Section A

Four section leaders must be appointed. As soon as the tempo is established by the tape's first three notes, section leader II comes in softly on a freely chosen pitch in the upper part of his (or her) range.* As quickly as the individual section members hear the pitch, they join in on the vowel sound already started, never re-articulating the beginning of the word. Sections III, I, and IV enter in the same manner, growing loud and soft as indicated. Care must be taken by each section leader to listen carefully to the pitches already being sung, and choose a pitch which is new, thus insuring four different pitches at all times. Never sing octaves or unisons with another section.

Visual aspects: During this section, there should be the following almost imperceivable body movement. While facing the audience, the upper part of the body should be slowly and subtly tilted (not twisted) around in a circular motion. The facial expression should be plain and serious; as if one were standing on a precipice; stiff and glassy eyed.

Section B

Again with freely chosen pitches in the range indicated, attack each note strongly on the beat, repeating the indicated word in the same rhythmic manner that is echoed in the tape.

Visual aspects: Here, the facial expression is wide-eyed and surprised. Somewhat fearful, yet excited. No body movement.

*Each succeeding entrance should be on a slightly lower pitch.

Section C

This is an antiphonal chorale where the phrase becomes translated into Latin. (eem-pen-soom est) This time, only the desired rhythms and prosody are notated. Using a good solid chorale style sound, the soloists will make up their own angular chorale melody in response to the one on the tape, following the rhythms notated, and changing pitch with each note.

Visual aspects: Sing and look as if you were performing a normal chorale. In measures 45-46, Sections III & IV should turn toward soloists I & II, smiling politely as they applaud for their performance. Voices I & II, however, do not acknowledge the applause, but retain their "chorale" expression. The same thing happens in measures 59-60 in reciprocation.

Section D

While sections I and II are smiling and applauding for voices III and IV, the tape enters with a forceful, rhythmic figure in the bass range. Demonic in its power, it forces their polite applause into strictly metered patterns of quarter and eighth notes. Against their will, sections III and IV are drawn into the tempo too, and join in on the clapping. Once all four parts are clapping in tempo, soloist I yells out over his (or her) clapping – "SOOR LUH BORE". This phrase is immediately echoed by all members of that section, who quickly whisper it three times; first loud, then medium, then soft. Entrances will naturally be staggered. When the whispering has died down, soloists II, III, and IV (and their sections) follow in the same manner, using this scheme: II "SOOL ORLO", III "NAH ROOB OOH" IV "PAY MARGINYA" I "NAH KRAH YOU" II "TSA BOO BOH" III "NEEH HEEN SHTEH" IV "SOOR LUH BORE" I "SOOL ORLO", and so on. This sequence continues, and with the clapping is building to a climax when all of a sudden, and as an unwelcome surprise, the clapping is taken over electronically by the tape. The singers are stunned, and try desperately to get their hands to clap, but cannot pull them together. These attempts become more and more subdued as they realize the futility of their efforts, and the power of the tape. Their hands slowly come down into a praying position in their laps, and their heads bowed solemnly.

Visual aspects: At first, as the performer's polite applause is drawn into the more regular pulse of the tape, he is expressing amazement that this could happen. When his clapping becomes steady and regular, he begins to enjoy the whole thing, smiling while he yells out the translations. The faces should now express happiness and optimism. (Maybe we're on the brink of something good!) When the tape takes over the applause, this happy optimism gives way immediately to a completely surprised, frustrated look, searching around trying to see if the other performers are equally unable to bring their hands together, realizing that even a basic spontaneous expression like hand clapping is being taken away through automation.

Section E

When the tape's clapping finally dies down, it is interrupted by this electronic clapping figure:



—which repeats twice, growing softer and softer. Finally, after the repeat has died out, and before the first of three bells sounds, the performers have time to make a blossoming gesture with their hands (like rose petals opening) and say the word "on" – (first bell) – "the" – (second bell) – "brink" – (third bell). These three words, and their accompanying hand motions, should express the countenance of a waking mortal, with love, innocence, and hope in his smiling face. Each one is said at a higher pitch, with a sustained voice which drops down in pitch and volume before the next bell. Each word is begun by voice I, followed immediately across the ensemble by voice II, then III, then IV, — all fading together each time. The dropping off voices follow the dropping off hand gesture.

Visual aspects: During the short rests in the above repeated figure, the performers slowly raise their heads and hands in another attempt to clap, but each time, just as their hands are about to applaud again, they are thwarted by the quick re-entry of the electronic clapping, and must fold back to their solemn, bowed position. It is from this position that they open up to make the last statement with the bells. On the final word "brink" the eyes are searching the sky, and looking into the audience. The hands are traveling downward from their blossoming gesture, and half way down, all is frozen into position. All performers remain motionless, like mannequins, with a glassy stare, until after the third bell has died out.

ON THE BRINK

JOHN BIGGS
a.s.c.a.p.

(A)

$\text{♩} = 72$ sing with straight tone - no vibrato

I
 II
 * T A P E
 III
 IV

6
 10
 14

ON
 ON
 ON
 ON
 ON
 ON
 THE
 THE
 THE
 THE
 THE
 THE
 THE
 THE

* Accompaniment tape available from the Publisher

21

BRINK

BRINK

BRINK

BRINK

(B) $\text{♩} = 72$

24

ff ON THE

sim.

ON THE

ff

ON THE

27

THE ON THE BRINK *

diminuendo

THE ON THE BRINK *

(C) $\text{♩} = 100$

Two solo voices

31

IM - PEN - - SUM EST

* Loud whisper

35

IM - PEN - SUM EST IM -

39

PEN - SUM EST IM -

43

PEN SUM EST

applause

47

Two solo voices

IM - PEN - SUM EST

51

IM - PEN - SUM EST IM - PEN - - SUM

56

EST IM - PEN - SUM EST

applause

61

(D) $\text{♩} = 132$ becomes metered clapping →

CP46

France:

SOOR LUH BORE

Yugoslavia:

NAH ROOB OOH*

Russia:

NAH KRAH YOU*

Japan:

NEE HEEN SHTEH

Italy:

SOOL ORLO

Rumania:

PAY MARGINYA**

China:

TSAH BOO DOH

* Roll the "R"

** G as in GO

(E)

ON



THE



BRINK

