

Sunset on X-Ray

**for four or more voices
and one or more musical instruments**

**by Alex Keller
2003**

“Amnesty International remains concerned at the conditions of detention at the Camp X-Ray facility, including the small size of the cells and the fact that the cells leave the detainees exposed to the elements. Amnesty International is also concerned by the possible effects on the detainees of the powerful arc lighting that lights up the wire-mesh cells throughout the night. Constant illumination through fluorescent lighting in cells has been a complaint among prisoners held in 23-hour cellular confinement in some super-maximum security prisons in the USA. This has been cited as contributing to conditions which, in their totality, violate the US constitutional prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment.”

Excerpt, Memorandum to the US Government on the rights of people in US custody in Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay. Amnesty International, 15 April 2002. AI INDEX: AMR 51/053/2002

Sunset on X-Ray is a piece in which the performers, constrained to a very simple tonality, improvise together. In it, the audience hears the sound of a buzzing fluorescent light created by an ensemble of four or more voices, mimicking the constant artificial light that the “unlawful combatants” indefinitely imprisoned in Guantanamo, Cuba are subject to. While the piece is performed, very bright lights will be directed at the audience.

The piece should feel like a mosaic in which the few elements are always the same but their relationships to each other are always changing. The lack of formal structure and development may seem to be a limitation but will create tension for an audience, and also will cause them to appreciate the more subtle changes that will happen.¹

instructions

The performers stand in a row or on risers facing the audience. In front of the performers are one or more very bright lights facing the audience. The lights should be the only illumination on the stage except for what is necessary for the performers.

The piece begins with the instrument or instruments playing first B2, then F#4, then A4, then D#5.² Make the beginning and end of each note as abrupt and mechanical as possible.

Once the instrument or instruments have started, with as little inflection as possible, each performer hums one of the four notes (B2, F#4, A4, D#5), depending on which is in his/her range. Stop humming to breathe as necessary, but make the beginning and end of each hummed note abrupt.³

The duration of this piece is seven minutes. After seven minutes, the performers should stop humming, with the lowest notes being the last ones to stop. When B2 is the only note heard, turn the light off.

notes

¹ Pieces with a similar compositional approach include *For Samuel Beckett* and *Why patterns?* by Morton Feldman, and *In C* by Terry Riley.

² B2, F#4, D#5 and A5 are the fundamental pitch and first three odd harmonics that are heard when a fluorescent light fixture is on. Most people find that the sound makes them uncomfortable.

³ The particularly difficult thing about making the beginnings of notes abrupt yet pitch-accurate is that performers like to glissando into a pitch. Performers that have to glide into a pitch should try and do so under their breath, then when they have hit the pitch, hum at full volume.

For more information about my work please see <http://www.alexkeller.net>.