

Stratum under Milton: I

Performance Directions

General directions

Non-vibrato to be used throughout, except where indicated.

Lyrics and wording are based on phonetic sounds. The first letter of each word should be pronounced promptly and in relation to the duration of the beat on which it is to be sung.

To be performed in a large and reverberant space by a minimum of two performers per voice, up to a maximum of four per voice.

Note-heads and accents

Cross note-heads indicate spoken word:



Notes with accent or tenuto are intended to enhance either the first or last letter of the given word. In this example, the 'M' sound would be emphasised:



meh

In this example, the 'eh' sound would be emphasised:



meh__

Supporting text

Rather than writing a piece which reflected on the financial and industrial successes of the ironworks, of which there were many, I decided to write from a position informed by the traces left by the workers, now deceased. Although the names, faces and voices are now largely forgotten, traces of the actions of their working lives remains in the earth, discovered and uncovered in 2018.

I perceived the radar and electromagnetic 'pings' generated by the geophysics team's scanning of the area prior to excavation to be whispers from the past, trapped inside the earth until an 'ear' came along to release and hear them.

Pitch was derived from two pieces of local folk music, found while researching the history of the village, the ironworks and the local area. I took the pitches from the songs *The Pit Boy* and *Fearless Collier Lad* to create two distinct pentatonic scales. There is a shared note of G and a tritone pivot note (F and B) to bring extra spice from the two scales. The movement back and forth between the two scales creates a sense of undulating movement, while repetition creates self-similarity over the course of the piece.

Stratum under Milton: I and II - About the Compositions

The work is in two movements, named *Stratum under Milton* in respect of the hard work the archaeological has put in while also acknowledging the class divide that existed while the ironworks was in service. The concepts of social and geological stratification is present between the two movements: one written for those who have the skills to read notated music and the other written to be instantly accessible for all.

Stratum under Milton: I is a piece for four-part choir of no more than 16 performers. Written for voice, the aim of the movement is to bring out soft and ethereal musical textures and work them against harder and heavier moments. These moments reflect the type of employment ironworkers were involved with at the Milton site, as seen from the excavation.

Stratum under Milton: II is an audio mix of field recordings made during the excavation of the Milton site in July. They include:

- Trowel on sandstone
- Trowel in grit
- Shovel on sandstone
- Shovel in grit
- Footsteps through grit
- Pickaxe cutting through the earth
- Various voices of the volunteers

All sounds were recorded live at the excavation site. Once the sounds were edited and cleaned up, they were categorised and arranged as if they were traditional instruments (wind, strings, percussion), using a database. This allowed me to begin composing *Stratum under Milton: II* using traditional notation techniques on five-line staff before inputting these ideas into a computer program to hear my composition come to life.

I approached the second movement with influences from popular culture, particularly hip-hop, which brought these familiar and ancient sounds of human construction and destruction to life in a very different way to that of the choral movement *Stratum under Milton: I*.

The Composer

Working as a composer, I try to find ways of challenging my understanding of music and how I perceive sound. This current work presented several challenges, not only in how to convey my experiences with the excavation but also with several compositional techniques as well.

For more of my compositions and writing, please visit my website: musicalmrfox.co.uk

James A. Fox