

An Archive of the musical compositions by Herb Bielawa

Composition: **Monophonies** – organ Solo

Date: 1979

Duration: Flourish 3:03

Canto 4:22

Branle 2:51

Tenore 5:14

Battaglia 5:03

Recording: by Sandra Soderlund

Monophonies is, as the title indicates, a piece whose texture has only one musical line; there is no harmony, counterpoint or chords. The trick here is to give the illusion of polyphony, the opposite of monophony. With the exception of a few soliloquies, the possibilities of monophonic music have not been exploited since the middle ages. Without the help of harmony of any kind or tonal concurrences a composer's attention has to be focused on other elements. In *Flourish*, which is a fanfare, the focus is on extreme contrasts of speed differentials and of octave doublings. *Canto* has the rather straightforward form of a medieval song, with verses and refrains. The focus here is on a subtle tonal interaction. The movement is based on a simple, though original, medieval-like melody in a church mode. A deliberately distant transposition of the melody was chosen as the tune's "alter ego," so to speak, every other note of which is exchanged with the original melody. This gives the melody, at first, a typical atonal sound, but as each new verse enters, it has fewer of the transpositional tones until the final rendition is in its purest form. *Branle* is a dance and is related to our contemporary word "brawl." It, therefore, focuses on general bawdiness. For that purpose, some form of jazz references seemed appropriate. To that, add obscene-sounding stop combinations and the movement begins to suggest a brawl. *Tenore* takes its cue from ancient chant in which the tenor is a reciting tone. It focuses on an attempt to give the sustained tones of the organ a sonic decay pattern similar to that of a harp or lute. Such a decay on the organ is, naturally, impossible. In *Tenore*, however, the tenors are a laminate of short synchronized bursts of a bright flute notes (which disappear immediately) and soft sustained flute notes (continuing through). *Battaglia*, meaning "battle," focuses on the general roughness of combat. Repeated notes, ricocheting at break-neck speeds from pipe chamber to pipe chamber might even suggest wild crossfire of flying projectiles. Contrast is slipped into *Battaglia* in the form of melodic surrealism. Unexpectedly, right in the middle of flashy passage work there appears another folk-like song, in a major key, no less. It has "dirty" spots in it, though, just to keep things in a legitimate state of confusion as it climaxes in battle frenzy to end the whole composition. The world premiere of *Monophonies* was given by Sandra Soderlund at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco on March 9th, 1980.