

Music Alive: New Partnerships
A Residency Program of
Meet The Composer and the League of American Orchestras

Pulse Mutations (2004)

Kenneth Froelich

Program Notes

Pulse can be defined as a brief, repeating irregularity in an otherwise constant stream. For example, in the case of an electrical current, a pulse manifests itself as a spike in the overall level of energy. In the case of a sound wave, it occurs as a sudden surge in amplitude. With the organic heart, pulsations coincide with the rapid contractions of valves and muscles. Although the single pulse thus can be viewed as an irregularity, in music repeating pulsations are used to establish rhythmic regularity. This pulse creates the beats to which man dances. It creates the rhythmic cadences to which groups hold ritual. These regular streams of pulsations create order so that music can function in a practical and predictable manner. When pulse is disrupted in music - that is, the irregularities themselves become irregular in repetition - that sense of order is obscured. Yet, it is possible for pulse to exist in music even if it is hidden from the surface. The music that create the original pulse can be developed into a fully formed melody. That melody can then be transformed into a brief motivic gesture. And that gesture can then be mutated, until all that is left of the original pulsating theme is a brief wisp of music. Even in these altered forms, the original pulsating line can still exist fundamentally as a brief, repeating irregularity in an otherwise constant stream.

Pulse Mutations is a single-movement work for large orchestra. As suggested by the title, this piece manipulates rhythm in order to at times accentuate, and at other times to distort a regular sense of pulse. A passacaglia is introduced early into the work in order to create a strong repeating bass line from which to establish regularity. However, the passacaglia theme itself is jagged, highly syncopated, and quite unpredictable in rhythm. These features do not help to establish regularity, but in fact serve to undermine it. The passacaglia theme thus has two functions: one, to create rhythmic stability, and two, to establish the initial seed from which all rhythmic instabilities will eventually grow. As the piece approaches its climax, the passacaglia is subjected to several different rhythmic mutations and transformations, eventually causing it to lose all sense of identity. Following this climax, the passacaglia rematerializes in various guises - gestures and wisps of music - but never regains its original form as the foundation of the work.

To inquire about a residency, please contact:
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