

‘Scend for Scelsi (1996)

“scend...To heave upward on a wave or swell...
[Perhaps from earlier *‘scend*, short for DESCEND
or ASCEND.]” The American Heritage Dictionary

‘Scend for Scelsi involves a mixture of notations and performance procedures: metrical notation and conventional procedures at the beginning, at a mid-point, and at the end, and — in between — a non-metrical, “available pitch” notation, involving certain decisions and choices on the part of the performers. The procedure to be followed by the players in interpreting this “available pitch” notation is as follows: each player chooses one of the available pitches given by the notation for that segment of the piece, favoring pitches not already being played by someone else in the ensemble, and plays it for approximately 10 to 30 seconds, with the dynamic shape: *ppp—p—ppp*. After a few seconds pause, the player chooses another of the available pitches and repeats the process described above. During these sections, the conductor does not conduct metrically, but rather — following a stop-watch — simply indicates the times when a new pitch is to be added to the set.

The saxophone begins like just another woodwind instrument, going through the available pitch selection process in the same way as the flute, oboe, and clarinet. But gradually the saxophone separates itself from those other instruments, becoming more active, rhythmically, and more involved in the creation of melodic phrases.

My intention in the piece has been simply to explore new harmonic processes made possible by non-standard or non-tempered tuning systems. In this case, the tuning is based on segments of the harmonic series over three different fundamental frequencies, which together comprise an extended “I-V-I” harmonic progression.

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- Program note by James Tenney