

Water on the Mountain ... Fire in Heaven (1985)

James Tenney's *Water on the Mountain ... Fire in Heaven* is electric guitar music. It is even scored for what might seem like the kind of heavy-metal assault force—six queerly tuned electric guitars—for which tonal and timbral subtlety is often quite beside the point. Yet this remarkable score inhabits its own unique and fastidious sonic world and not only sounds like extraordinary harmonic effects, but also radically alters the tone of the instruments when played in concert. Written in 1985, *Water on the Mountain ... Fire in Heaven* is a notable demonstration of Tenney's new way of harmonic thinking, where harmony is used not for dogged forward motion but to affect timbral perception. It is structurally arresting music as well, with the piece coming into being as it progresses through its three parts. Conceived as two independent polyphonic layers, its first part consists of only the top staff of each guitar part; the second part is the bottom staff, and the third part combines the two. This results in the epiphanic satisfaction that pianists—who learn music first for one hand, then for the other—know so well: namely, the delayed gratification of not discovering the whole until the individual staves are known. But Tenney's score is also an emerging music on all levels, since each of the two polyphonic strata consists of bits and pieces from the six different guitars spread in space. Each line has irregular rests and overlaps of notes and decays that produce a mysterious complexity, a music that give the sense of still coming together.

- Program note by Seth Josel, From "Long Distance", CRI 697

Water on the mountain...Fire in heaven ... achieve[s] (quasi-) just intervals on standard-issue guitars. The six guitars are pitched ~17 cents apart from one another, yielding a complete 72-step division of the octave. Although tempered, this tuning results in significantly closer approximations of intervals up to the 11th harmonic, compared to 12-tone equal temperament, while also maintaining the same possibilities for modulation. Like *Changes* (a piece for six harps in 72-tone equal temperament from the same period), this piece consists of an algorithmically-generated series of modulations, a sort of "random walk" in harmonic space that will eventually return (after much meandering) to the original starting pitch. The music's two independent voice are shared among the six guitars, effectively transforming them into a single hyper-instrument.

- Program note by Giacomo Fiore (from a concert with Larry Polansky in April, 2015)