

James Whittle

# ahamkara

meditation for three voices

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Texts by Samuel Beckett, Andrei Tarkovsky, the composer  
and after André Breton

James Whittle (b.1989)  
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## Programme Note

In Hindu philosophy, *ahamkara* is ‘the faculty for the unfolding or manifestation of a “self.”’ Vocal ensembles will often aim to sound like one voice: a homogenous, multi-faceted, “blended” sound. I became fascinated with this idea in relation to images of the Hindu god Brahma, who is depicted as a figure with four heads, four faces and four arms – each symbolising a particular trait of Brahma and pointing in one of the four cardinal directions. These heads and faces are joined together as the four sides of one body, so that from whichever perspective they are viewed, only three heads and faces can be seen at once. Yet, the fourth is present, and known to be present.

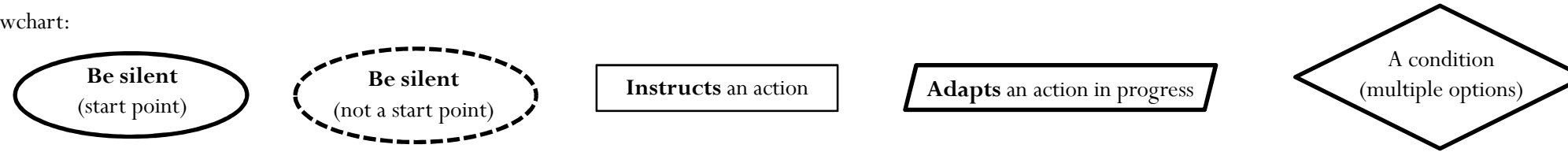
This piece is also inspired by Surrealist philosophy, and ‘the unconscious reality in the personality of the group’ (as Nicolas Calas described the automatic writing game, *Le cadavre exquis*, which André Breton and his fellow poets would play, creating nonsensical juxtapositions of ideas and images). The metaphor of an anoetic fourth voice existing, possibly that ‘unconscious reality’, allows the piece to unfold. The score is a mind-map of texts, assimilated through memory, chance and coincidence. Performers choose to be either independent, or dependent on responding to each other. There may be movements, there may be silences.

## Duration

A performance of this piece may last any length of time. Moments of silence are to be expected. If performers choose to decide on an exact length for any one performance to last, they should keep in mind that there is no need to fill a silence with sound, there is only individual choice and collective listening. As the piece is improvisatory, a conversation about determining the end does not need to take place, but if one is necessary, performers could agree beforehand which one of them will communicate subtly that the piece is over during a moment of silence.

## Performance Notes

The score is a flowchart:



Performers can move freely from any ‘be silent’ ellipse to another, but may only begin the piece from those with a solid line on either the ‘VOICE’ half or the ‘LISTEN’ half. ‘VOICE’ half gives action for a performer to perform independently from the others, though they can listen to the texture and make conscious decisions about their material. The ‘LISTEN’ side surrenders that choice so that the performer must react to whatever is being performed. The intention is for a semi-structured improvisation.

### CHARACTER and ‘VOICE’

Performers assume one of the following characters:

<i>Name</i>	<i>whispers:</i>	<i>sings (if another performer is singing), either above or below:</i>
Clothos	‘spin’	interval of a fifth
Lachemis	‘measure’	interval of a third (major <u>or</u> minor)
Atropos	‘cut’	interval of a semitone

There are four modes of voice in the piece, charting a continuum from incoherence to coherence. : ‘hum’, ‘whisper’, ‘sing’ and ‘speak’.

#### ‘hum’

Imagined text: inner text. Any pitch/pitches, any duration, any dynamic, any articulation.

#### ‘whisper’

Fragmented images of text and thought. Soft dynamic, does not need to project, somewhere between silence and almost full articulation.

*Character whisper (spin / measure / cut): well articulated, slowly, always with Action.*

#### ‘sing’

Texts form, eschewing distortion. Upon choosing the instruction to ‘sing’, if no-one else is singing then the performer should choose any pitch at any dynamic within their entire range. If one or more pitches are being sung, the performer should always pick either of the notes and sing a pitch which is their character’s interval either above or below that pitch. If, after this, the other performer/s stop singing so that one performer is left singing on their own, that performer may move freely again between pitches. Dynamics are free throughout but must be changed where indicated.

#### ‘speak’

Actual text, real thought. May be spoken in any way: performers should imagine themselves as a different persona for each text.

### ‘LISTEN’

Performers alternate freely between acting passively and re-acting actively, based on what they hear. At all times in a performance, they should listen to what else they hear – if only to be aware of the types of sounds and textures that are being generated collectively. It is the composer’s hope that such a practice will enable them to create uniquely personal textures and combinations of sounds based on the options available. While a chronological ordering of any of the texts or sounds is not desired, and the piece is free-form as a whole, some differentiation between actively and passively self-aware sounds should be perceptible. Performers may be as freely expressive as they like with the presented materials, within the ambiguities of the given instructions.

## Performance Notes (cont'd)

### STAGING and PHYSICAL ACTIONS

Performers should either stand or kneel in a triangular arrangement, close together, shoulders touching. One performer faces the audience straight on. Perpendicular to him/her, the other two face opposite sides of the stage. The performers should look and act as if they are of one body with four heads, four faces, eight arms. The fourth 'part' is invisible.

Performers should devise character actions that represent their character physically and visually:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Action</i>
Clothos	spins the thread of life
Lachemis	measures the thread of life
Atropos	cuts the thread of life

Character actions should involve either hand or both, creating a figurative gesture. They should always accompany the words 'spin/measure/cut' (of which the performer vocalises only the relevant imperative). They must have identifiable, distinguishable features so as not to be confused with each other.

Standard movements may be performed at any time, always slowly, though at any pace within 'slow'. They should be elegant, graceful, and ornamented, influenced by Indian Classical dance and by Classical Greek art. The instructions below are basic outlines of movements which can be elaborated on, ornamentally.

			} slowly perform devised character action
<u>Right hand:</u>	raise	move sideways	
<u>Left hand:</u>	raise	move sideways	
<u>Head:</u>	look down	look up	look towards/look away from audience [ <i>for the front-facing performer, read 'look left' and 'look right'</i> ]
<u>Torso:</u>	lean left	lean right	lean forwards

Hand, arm and head movements may not be noticed physically or visually by the other performers. This should not be true of the torso: if one performer moves in a direction to which an adjacent performer is standing, the second performer must move as a reactionary result. The image should be of one body bending, twisting or turning in one direction. Performers should practice incorporating these movements into their performance so that they remain free and unhindered by musical (aural) concerns. It may help performers to think of performance as something to be sculpted.

for Juice vocal ensemble,  
**ahamkara**  
 for three alike voices

