

Matthew Whittall

Ume

for solo guitar

2013

Music Finland



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Ume (2013)
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Ume forms the second "panel" in a projected three-part series of solo pieces that began in 2007 with *being the pine tree* for accordion. The uniting theme is the trio of images of pine tree, plum blossom and bamboo, the "Three Friends of Winter" in Chinese and Japanese art, so called for their aesthetic beauty and resistance to cold, as well as their value as spiritual symbols in a number of Asian traditions. Where the pine stands for longevity, patience and meditative stillness, the plum blossom (*ume* in Japanese) is thought to represent purity of spirit on the one hand; fortitude, in being one of the first plants to blossom in the snows of late winter; as well as fragile, evanescent beauty, much like the prized *sakura* (cherry blossom).

The main intent in this series has been to come to "know" an unfamiliar instrument on an essential level by playing it myself as best I can while composing, building a very still, meditative piece for it using its simplest, most basic idiomatic and acoustic means. A side aim has been to pay special attention to the random sonic side effects of learning to play an instrument (badly), sounds performers are generally taught to avoid in the name of achieving a conventionally beautiful tone, and to incorporate this still-idiomatic but generally unloved detritus into the piece. In this way the common – the imperfect, the accidental – becomes beautiful and rarefied.

The specific technique that forms the foundation of *Ume*, for solo guitar, is the randomized *alla campanella* arpeggiation effect. Simple, resonant diatonic chordal patterns are repeated in minimalistic fashion, swelling and receding freely, changing only when the player feels the need to move on from one to the next. Interspersed between these figurations are more spacious passages featuring crystalline harmonics, a snap-and-bend gesture adapted from the Japanese *biwa* (fretted lute), as well as an exploration of different ways of coaxing sounds from the open low E string. In this way, one can perhaps imagine a delicate flower blooming amid snow, its fragile petals waiting to be scattered by the cold wind.

Ume was composed for Mikko Ikäheimo, my friend and collaborator of many years, and is dedicated to him.

*ume ga ka ri
notto hinoderu
yamaji kana*

scent of plum blossoms
on the misty mountain path
a big rising sun

-- Matsuo Bashō

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dedicated to Mikko Ikäheimo

Ume

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Scordatura: ③=F#

free, "alla campanella"
arpeggiation

slow —→ med. fast —→ slow

Still; Gently rustling

10-12"

10-12"

(sim.)

(half-turn of tuning peg)

l.v.

(add A when E string fades out)

7-10"

l.h. (articulate with fingers only)

pluck

f vib.

f vib.

slide no vib.

slide no vib.

(*finger C# as close to III fret as possible without buzzing/distorting tone)

free durations, as long as needed

10-12"

(mute other strings)

(half-turn of tuning peg)

free dynamics, swell and recede at will, repeat boxes as many times as desired

free durations

free dynamics, swell and recede at will, repeat boxes as many times as desired

(*finger F as close to nut as possible without buzzing/distorting tone)

mp *p* *mf* *p* *f* *ppp* *ppp* *mp* clear

(art.)

(art.) (art.)

8va

(art.) (art.)

① ② ①

① ②

④ ③

p *mp* *#*

(scratch with fingernail)

3-5"

3-5"

Repeat once only

②

④

⑤

①

mf *p*

⑤

④

mf *#*

r.h.

②

⑤

mf *#*

3-5"

3-5"

(stroke length of strings with thumb)

r.h.

f *#*

l.h.

p

mf *#*

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6 5 1 ; 6 5 1 4 , 6 5 1 4 3 , 4 5 6 1 , 3-5" 10-12" free durations (very long)

p *p* *p* *p* *pp* *pp* *mp* free dynamics, fading in and out slowly (but never above mp-mf)

alternating between the upper notes

73 2 1 3 2 1 *mp* *p* *pp* *sfz*

83 2 4 1 *mp* *p* *sfz* *f* *vib.* *mf* VI* *mp* (stroke length of strings with thumb)

April 21, 2013
Paris

*Inharmonic node just above the VI fret.

