

école polytechnique (1990)

for 8 churchbells, mixed choir, bass clarinet, trumpet, percussion, and two-channel audio

by Hildegard Westerkamp

On December 6, 1989 fourteen women were shot to death by Marc Lépine at the École Polytechnique, University of Montreal. A few months later I was invited to write a composition for New Music America 1990 in Montreal. The resulting composition *école polytechnique* is dedicated to the fourteen women.

This dedication is the essence of the piece and is what gives the piece its meaning: as a woman and composer I cannot remain silent about this event and the impact it has had on myself and many others. I want to "talk back" to it. I also want to make room to remember it, to feel what needs to be felt, to breathe, to heal, to hope, to transform energies, and to understand the work that is ahead of us. I invite all listeners to take full advantage of this twenty-minute time-span of *école polytechnique* (a lot longer than it took Marc Lépine to kill 14 women) to listen inward and search for what is sacred, what cannot be compromised, what cannot be allowed to be killed inside us and therefore not in the world. *école polytechnique* is meant to provide the sonic/musical environment for such a journey inward.

This piece is also about life and death in a more general sense. It is about human life rhythms, their violent destruction—destroyed with the same kind of violence that creates wars, kills people, abuses children and the natural environment; a violence that is born from violence, where experience of human warmth, compassion and love is missing, where nothing is sacred or worth protecting—and it is about the recovery from such violence, a process of healing.

école polytechnique is like a journey: it takes us from life (symbolized by heartbeat and breath on the two-channel audio) to violence, death, and aftermath, to the underworld of suffering and mourning, and finally to healing and a renewed energy for life.

On the unusually balmy Saturday of Nov. 3, 1990 *école polytechnique* was premiered along with *A Call to Prayer* by Alvin Curran and *Alma Mater* by Claude-Paul Gauthier in a stunning outdoor performance in Montreal during New Music America/Montreal Musiques Actuelles 1990. The piece was written for the eight churchbells in the bell tower of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), for the UQAM choir, directed by Miklós Takács. Additional performers were Lori Freedman on bass clarinet, Lisa Rodrigue and Véronique Lucignano on trumpets, Daniel Fortin on percussion and Johanne Latreille played the bells.

école polytechnique was commissioned by New Music America/Montréal Musiques Actuelles 1990, directed by Jean Piché. I would like to thank Hal Wake and Jeffrey Dvorkin of CBC Radio, André Rhéaume and Thérèse Champagne of Radio-Canada for supplying the newscast of the killings, as well as Lori Freedman, Sal Ferreras and Tom Parriot for consultation on the instrumental parts.

"The piece was warmly received by several thousand listeners..." (*Vancouver Sun*, Nov. 6, 1990)

"An evocative score in any context, *école polytechnique* seemed to speak with special poignancy to the Montreallers who witnessed its premiere. In an sense, it spoke for them." (*Toronto Star*)

"*école polytechnique* ont su créer une atmosphère enveloppante qui incitait à l'écoute... le moment le plus saisissant, le plus émouvant aussi... Westerkamp a préféré l'usage d'un langage simple et direct, ce langage n'en demeure pas moins imprégné d'une authentique qualité sonore." (*Le Devoir*)