

Program Note

Night Rituals is inspired by ceremonies of ancient Celts, Mayans, and Greeks. In my title, the word “Night” indicates an absence of sun not only on a daily scale, but also on a seasonal, as well as spiritual one—these ceremonies embrace the night on all levels. Bells ring ceaselessly in the dark, bells of mourning, bells of meditation, bells of playful celebration, and their resonances take on lives of their own, and ring out through even the longest nights.

The Yucatec Maya text spoken by the flutist in the first movement is conceived as an incipit for the entire work, and is a line of a stanza from the “Songs of Dzitbalche,” (a manuscript dating to 1742) which translates to:

from “Those who Build Houses and Temples”

Let us purify our hearts
so at nightfall,
and at midnight,
from horizon to zenith
we may read the face of the sky.¹

I. Last Days (Purification): The Celtic ritual of Samhain (which evolved into Halloween) was intended to purify a community before a long dark winter. Lines of people and livestock would pass between two bonfires, made of the bones of slaughtered animals, and the fire was thought to cleanse them. The end of the Mayan calendar includes a five-day period of purification called *uayeb*, or “The Last Days of the Last Month of the Year.” The ensemble gong sound featured here is an act of sonic imagination: it is a stylized approximation of what I imagine the horizontal wooden Mayan gongs (made from the hollowed out trees) might sound like.

II. Ch’ab’ (Sacrifice): Mayan leaders would pierce their bodies, and the bloodletting would induce visions, which they believed would help them make illuminated decisions. In some ceremonies, they would drip the blood onto paper, then burn it, sending their offering to the gods. “Ch’ab” can be translated as “sacrifice,” but it can also mean chaos or madness.

III. Dithyramb (Celebration): Besides being a poetic genre, a Dithyramb is an ecstatic hymn sung and danced in celebration of Dionysus (the god of wine and fertility).

¹ John Curl [translated by and compiled by], *Ancient American Poets* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press, 2005), 91.