

## “From Dusk to Light – an approach to the music of Edison Denisov”

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### Abstract

The complexity and dense texture of Edison Denisov’s music seems to contrast with the simplicity and clearness sounds that cross the listener’s universe and its capability to understand the flow and direction of the melodic line. “From Dusk to Light” takes us for moments of incredible complexity of written music, surpassing the notes in the score and fulfilling our imaginary and soul of dreams about different moments that extend from chaos to purity. This musical work defies the interpreter’s sensitivity and the limits of the instrument in modern language to over cross different patterns of construction, objectivity, pure intuition and assertiveness in the musical field. It also determines the profile and the creativity of the composer to paint a musical picture with modern language, technic and ability.

This article is presented in three main sections: general notions about the composer and the work, interpretative analysis of the work and the interpreter’s point of view. Some frames and musical examples enrich the text in order to contribute for the understanding of musical ideas.

Keywords: From Dusk to Light; Edison Denisov; Free Bass Accordion; Contemporary Music.

*"I love to write quiet, beautiful music"*  
Edison Denisov

### From Dusk to Light (1995) – Edison Denisov (1929-1996)

#### 1. General notions about the composer and the work

Having been a university student in mathematics at an early stage, Edison Denisov (fig. 1) has always declared the influence of mathematics on his works. Painting and nature were also important sources for his inspiration (Gérard Billaudot Éditeur, 2014). Imbued with a deep spirituality, his music is marked by an incessant search for beauty (Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine, 2009). In the words of the composer, *"I love to write quiet, beautiful music"* (Boosey & Hawkes, 2014).

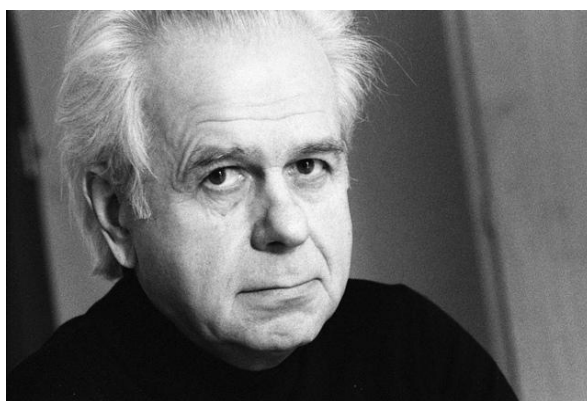


Fig. 1: Edison Denisov

This inspiration of the composer in great themes linked to existence and religion, where his works express symbolism through melody, harmony, rhythm and different sonorities, is especially evident from 1990 (Ircam-Centre Pompidou, 1998).

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The titles of Denisov's works often reveal impressionist colors (Oron, 2006). The composer himself, in an interview with Bruce Duffie in 1991, argues that music should bring light to people, saving them, acting on the soul. The concepts of beauty, kindness and light intersect his works, a characteristic that marked Denisov as 'the composer of light'.

His style of composition is refined, richly detailed and elaborated, at the same time romantic and melancholic, creating intricate chromatic textures and micropolyphony (Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine, 2011). In the words of the composer, "*The most important element of my music is its lyricism. I find serialist procedures very promising, but in my work I strive for synthesis and use tonality, modality, aleatory and other expressive media*" (Sikorski, n.d.).

In 1987, Edison Denisov composed a Fantasia for themes of Soviet songs of the thirties, for accordion, piano and percussion. Accordionist Friedrich Lips (Moscow) premiered the piece, but he had been waiting for the promise of a solo work since 1973. As a way to redeem himself, Denisov later wrote, in Paris and shortly before his death, the piece "From Dusk to Light" (Lips, 2009). Written for accordionist Friedrich Lips, the work has an approximate duration of 15' and, in the 1996 edition of J. Hamelle & Cie Éditeurs, it develops in 111 bars.

While in most works the path "from chaos to light" is marked by struggles and obstacles, something different appears in Denisov's work: peace marks this music from beginning to end. The composer wants to present the inspiration of the intellect, the calm contemplation of an elderly person. The shadows of *p* and *pp* dominate the work; *dolce*, *dolcissimo* and *espressivo* are characteristic. The complicated rhythms (9/8, 11/9, 5/4, etc.) do not awaken any chaotic steps, on the contrary, they even inspire a well-balanced world of thoughts. From time to time, beautiful harmonics create resonances of extreme sound richness (Lips, 1996).

The title "From Dusk to Light" portrays the passage from dark environments, related to the profane and the dark, to environments of purity, light and brightness. In music, these environments are personified by the pitch of sounds, that is, low-pitched sounds associated with dark environments and high-pitched sounds related to luminous environments, close to the divine (Kouprovskaja-Bruggeman, 2011).

In "From Dusk to Light", Edison Denisov seems to contrast different textures: melody (on the bass) with ornamental accompaniment on top; very free counterpoint in which the melodic lines are rhythmically quite free, which makes it difficult to notate when there are two overlapping lines, giving very complicated rhythms but which should sound very simple and fluid; moments of homophony (Bochmann, personal communication, 2010).

According to Lips (2009), each bar presents its rhythmic difficulties. The slow development of the piece is based on the nuances of *piano* and *pianissimo*, which create the image of a light that continues to shine. Denisov (1995) clarified that all conflicting rhythms are not mathematical, but rather underline the freedom and independence of polyphonic lines. To some extent, they are 'improvisation'.

## 2. Interpretative analysis of the work

Looking at the texture, it appears that the work is composed of three different sections and another that combines those three. On the other hand, sections A, B and C are also undergoing mutual influences throughout the work. The dynamics are concentrated in small sound volumes, although the *f* dynamic appears three times, the second of which represents the climax of the piece (bar 66). The *legato* articulation, always present, unifies the material developed on both keyboards. Below is shown a schematic picture of the structure of the work "From Dusk to Light" (fig. 2).

A	In a <i>tranquillo</i> , <i>poco rubato</i> tempo, and in dynamic <i>p</i> , a polyphonic texture is presented with 2 and sometimes 3 voices. The lower voice appears first, in an upward movement and contrary to the upper voice. Duration of 6 bars.
B	Bar 7: 4-voice homophonic and polyphonic texture, in <i>pp</i> dynamics and in a flat pitch wave. Predominance of triplets. Duration of 1 and a half bar.
C	Bar 8 (middle): Canonical imitation with trills, dynamic <i>p</i> . Duration of 2 and a half bars.
A	Bar 11: Return to the first motif, but now in parallel movement of the voices and in a polyphonic texture, sometimes with 4 voices. Duration of 6 and a half bars.
C	Bar 17 (middle): In <i>f</i> dynamic the canonical imitation with trills reappears. In bar 20, in dynamic <i>pp</i> and texture with 2 voices, canonical imitation uses elements from section A. Duration of 4 and a half bars.
B	Bar 22: Return to 4-voice homophony with a predominance of triplets, but here in a downward movement. The section ends with an accompanying melody, in the transition between bars 23 and 24. Duration of 2 and a half bars.

A	Bar 24 (middle): reappearance of section A, with new rhythmic elements. Performed in <i>pp</i> dynamics and in a flat pitch wave, it culminates in major chords. Duration of 11 and a half bars.
C	Bar 36: Again, the canonical imitation with trills, in dynamic <i>pp</i> and in a slightly more agitated tempo. Duration of 3 bars.
D	Bar 39: Return to the initial tempo. Section with influences from sections A (aesthetics), B (material - triplets) and C (construction). The texture widens (up to 6 voices) and the average pitch drops to the lowest note on the left hand keyboard (E1). Duration of 11 and a half bars.
B	Bar 50 (middle): Homophony return to 4 voices, in dynamic <i>pp</i> . Duration of 4 and a half bars.
C	Bar 54 (middle): In a slightly more agitated tempo, canonical imitation returns in dynamic <i>pp</i> , but now without trills. Duration of 5 and a half bars.
D	Bar 60: Returning to the initial tempo, this section predominantly combines influences from sections A (initial texture) and C (canon and trills). With a maximum polyphony of 3 voices, it starts from the mid to high register in crescendo. After a few hesitations, the pitch reaches the peak at bar 66 in <i>f</i> dynamic. New oscillations move the pitch to the low register, before rising again to the high register. The final part is influenced by section A, preparing its reappearance. Duration of 27 bars.
A	Bar 87: Reappearance of section A in the initial tempo. In a quiet environment with 3 voices, the bass register goes up to the middle register, adding up to 5 voices and then descending on the tone until the note E1 on the left hand keyboard. Duration of 25 bars.

Fig. 2: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (schematic picture)

Section A is predominant, reappearing in its initial form or influencing the presentation of the remaining sections. The homophony of section B represents moments of rest during the execution of the work, in contrast to the tension caused by the dense texture of the almost permanent rhythmic discrepancies between the two keyboards.

After a presentation of sections (A, B, C) in the form of a mirror, a new section (D) is added later that merges the previous three. This is followed by a sequential exposure of sections C and D, first interspersed with section B and, finally, with section A (fig. 3).

bar:	1	7	8½	11	17½	22	24½	36	39	50½	54½	60	87
section:	A	B	C	A	C	B	A	C	D	B	C	D	A
			mirror					sequence					

Fig. 3: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (mirror and sequential presentation of the sections)

Throughout the work, in low or high pitch, it is also evident that the composer has used a small motif of three notes with a half-tone followed by a tone (C#-D-C; B-C-B Flat; A-B-A Flat), which allows the creation of a kind of scale that can have an effect in both upward or downward directions (fig. 4). This minimalist motif represents a signature of the composer's name, with the acronym EDS (Kouprovskaja-Bruggeman, 2011).

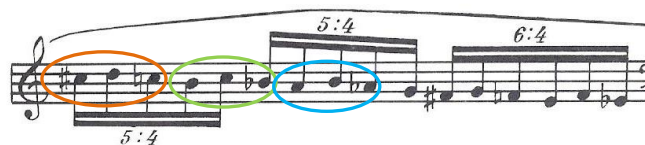


Fig. 4: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (small three-note motif)

Following, the structure of the work “From Dusk to Light” is presented in more detail and the resources used with the accordion with a converter system are highlighted.

The beginning of the piece starts with a quiet melody in dynamic *p* in the lower voice, in the low pitch, which expands upwards and is harmonized by small rhythmic figures in the upper voice in an opposite movement, that is, in a downward direction (fig. 5). In this **section A**, the initial motif appears in a very simple and natural way to a voice, to which a second voice is superimposed.

The first twelve notes correspond to a complete serial presentation. The text becomes more complex, both rhythmically and in the construction of small branches that emanate from the main voice.

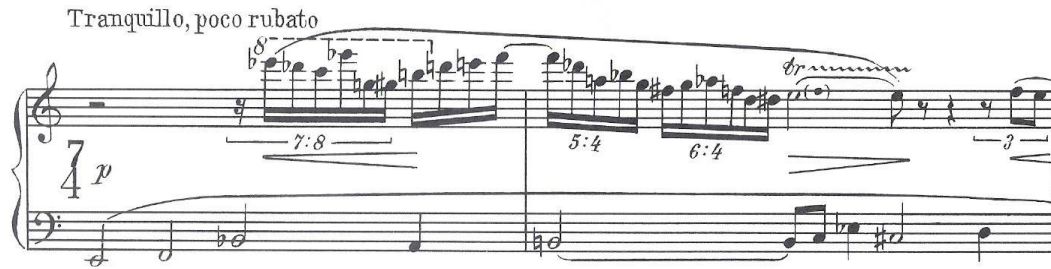


Fig. 5: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (initial exposure - section A)

In bar 7, a first homophonic moment appears, presented in 4 voices and in a dynamic *pp*. **Section B** also highlights the predominance of rhythms with triplets, in the upper and lower voices (fig. 6).

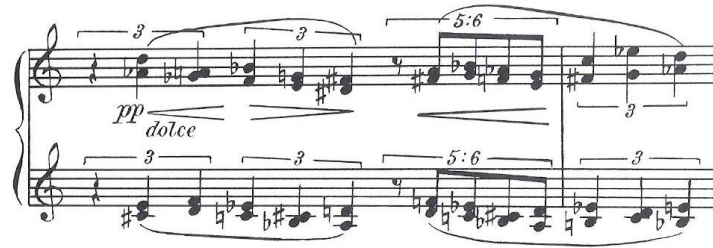


Fig. 6: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section B - homophonic moment)

Following, **section C** appears in the middle of bar 8, with the entrance of two lagged voices, with the same melodic motif and in an imitation with a perfect 4th interval relation between the two voices (G-D, F#-C#, F-C, etc.). This canonical motif (fig. 7) will move downwards, that is, from high to low pitch, culminating in a trill in both voices.

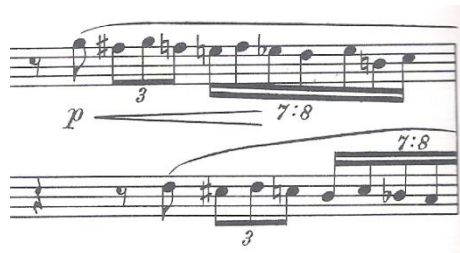


Fig. 7: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section C - canon)

In bar 11, the theme appears on the bottom line again, now starting with G# (fig. 8). In this second presentation of **section A**, the texture in the upper voice will give rise to an ascending and *crescendo* path.

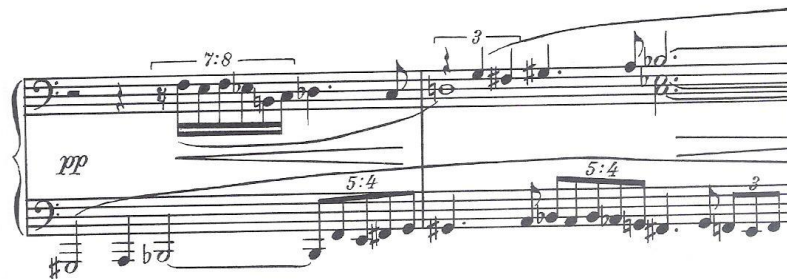


Fig. 8: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section A - second presentation)

The previous section will rest on an A minor chord in the dynamic *fn* bar 17, originating the descent in the form of a phased canon, this time in an interval range of a major 6th (fig. 9). **Section C** will culminate in a trill in a low A, followed by a moment of dialogue between the two voices (fig. 10) with evident influence from the initial section A (repetition of the melodic motif).

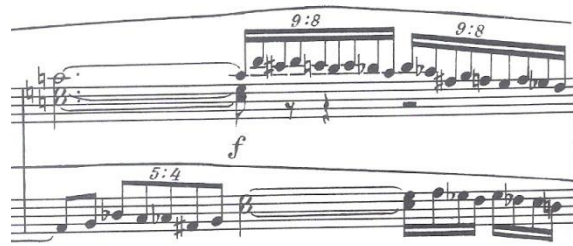


Fig. 9: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section C - canon after resting on the A minor chord)



Fig. 10: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section C - influence of the initial section A)

In bar 22, a small moment of homophony with 4 voices reappears (fig. 11). This **section B** is completed this time with a kind of cadence, where a rest chord on the bottom line is accompanied by a melody on the top line.



Fig. 11: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section B - homophonic moment)

In the middle of bar 24, the presentation of **section A** reappears, which will give rise to a question-answer moment between the upper and lower voices (fig. 12). The texture is performed here with 2 and also 3 voices.



Fig. 12: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section A - dialogue between voices)

In bar 36, we return to a small episode of imitation between the voices (fig. 13). The trills that also characterize **section C** appear at the end, culminating in the A note. The entire section is performed in the degree of loudness *pp*.



Fig. 13: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section C - imitation between voices)

In bar 39, a new moment begins that receives influences from the previous sections (fig. 14). This is **section D**, which will also give rise to something new in Denisov's speech, that is, in bar 46 there is a need to place the bass register (bassoon) in the instrument in order to achieve the desired octave in bars 49 and 50.

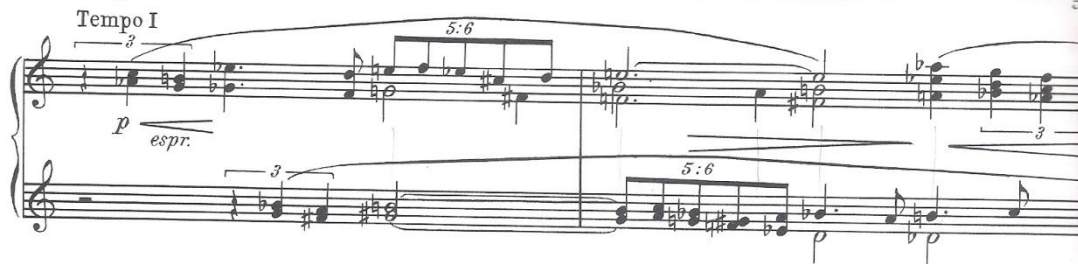


Fig. 14: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section D - start of a new sentence)

From the second half of bar 50, we see another small homophonic moment (**section B**). This short exposure in 4 voices constitutes a resting space for both the interpreter and the listener (fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section B - homophonic moment)

At the end of bar 54, we return to a simple texture with two voices, with small movements in a downward direction, in imitation (fig. 16). In this **section C**, the voices complement each other, leaving open the possibility of small resonances that emanate from the existing lag, although the small phrases end in unison, thus creating common points (fig. 17).

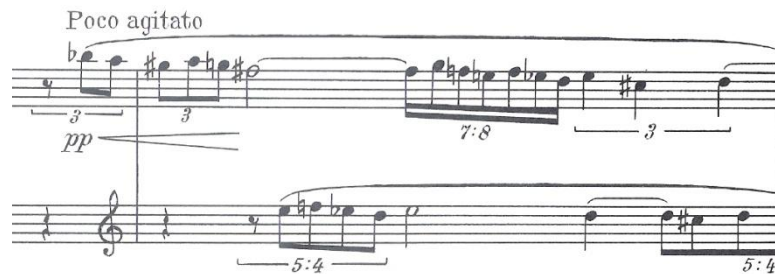


Fig. 16: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section C - simple two-voice texture)

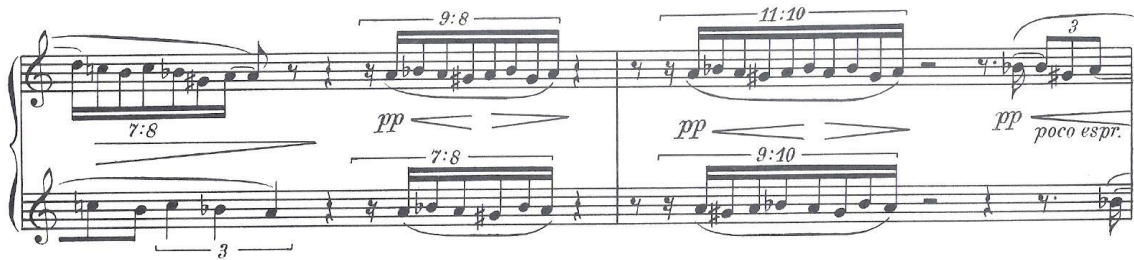


Fig. 17: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section C - moment of complementarity)

In bar 60, we enter a denser texture, although the melodic and rhythmic motifs are repeated at the same distance in a kind of game between the upper voice and the lower voice (fig. 18). It is **section D** again, with influences from previous sections. The motifs of three notes with a half-tone followed by a tone are evident, both in the trills and in the different rhythmic patterns.

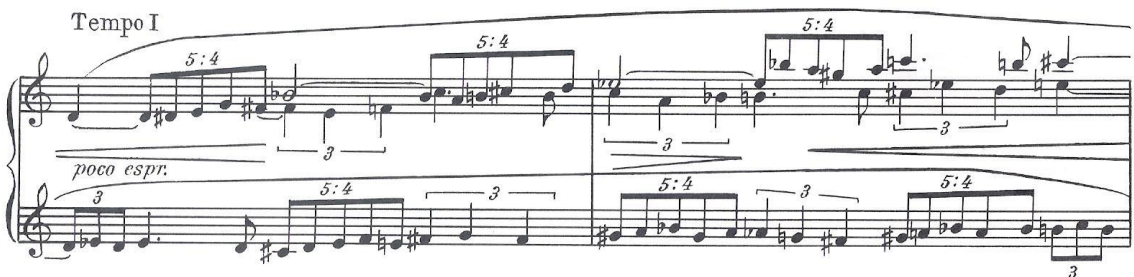


Fig. 18: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section D - dialogue between voices)

This game will be accentuated from the end of bar 65, that is, while one voice moves on a kind of scale, the other voice performs an accompaniment function with long trills (fig. 19). The *crescendo*, which extends to bar 67, ends in a great tension moment made with trills and sharp rhythmic figures, in *f* dynamic and in the upper octave (climax of the piece).

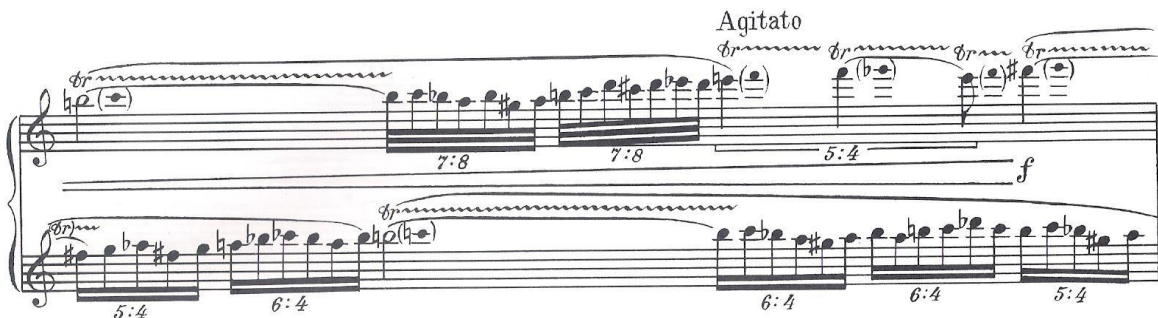


Fig. 19: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section D - climax of the piece)

Then, a descending path begins over several bars. In bar 76, in dynamic *ppp*, the texture becomes more complex with a very free counterpoint, in which the melodic lines are rhythmically independent, making notation difficult and giving rise to complicated rhythms (fig. 20).

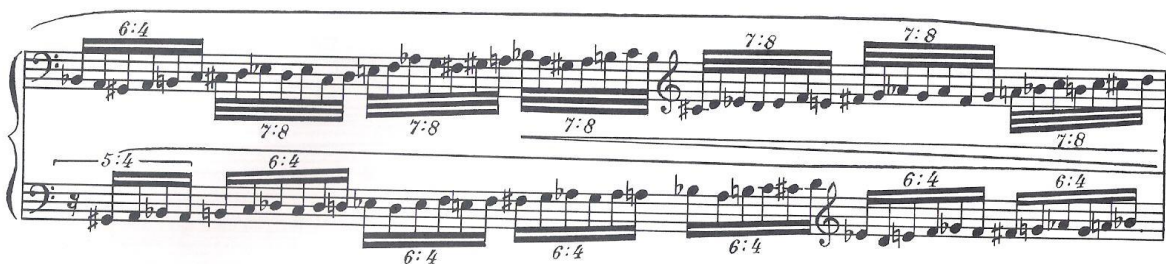


Fig. 20: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section D - free counterpoint)

From the second half of bar 83, small isolated groups appear and are executed in dynamic *pp*, in a clear influence of the initial section A, which make the transition to a kind of reexposure (fig. 21).

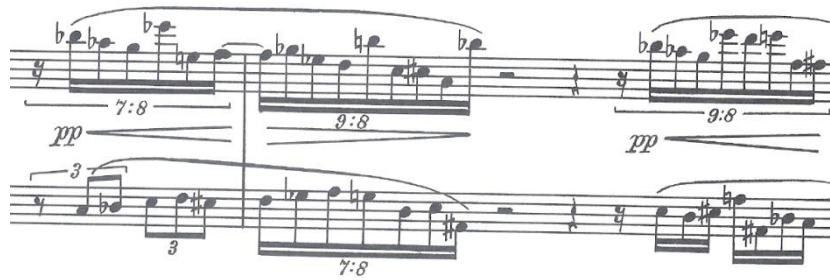


Fig. 21: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section D - influence of the initial section A)

In bar 87, we resume the initial moment (**section A**), in which a melody in the low pitch appears on the bass line, accompanied by the upper voice that now takes on a denser body, foreseeing the approaching end (fig. 22).

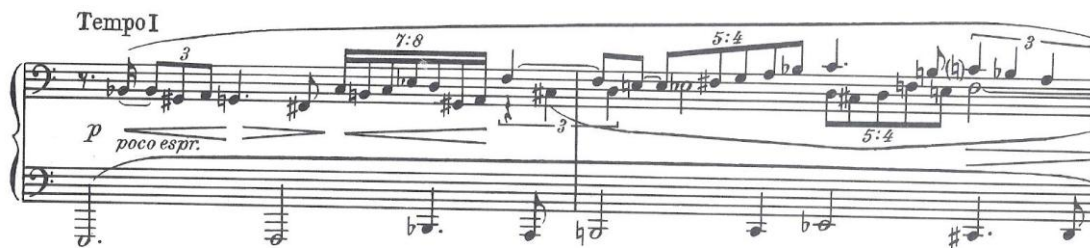


Fig. 22: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section A - presentation of the theme on the bass line)

This moment takes an upward path until bar 92 and then goes down to the low pitch, reaching moments of true polyphony between the voices. This last section will rest, at bar 100, on a low E (lowest note on the left hand keyboard) that will be used as a sustain pedal until the end of the piece (fig. 23).

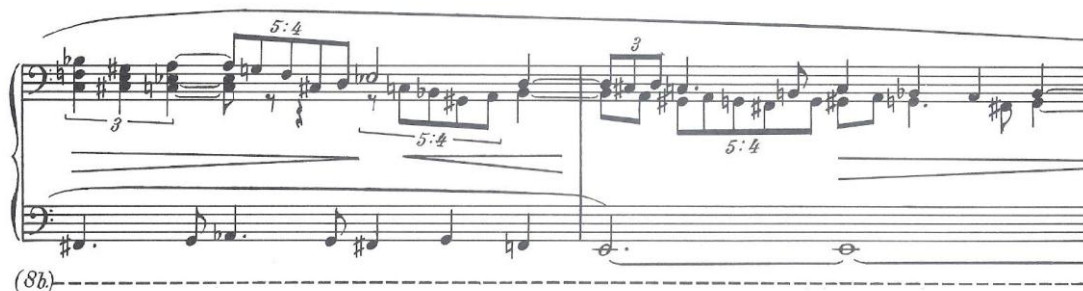


Fig. 23: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section A - rest on the low E note)

In turn, in bar 102, we see a remnant of the first notes of the initial motif of the piece, in a kind of small final coda that will be repeated in the following bars (fig. 24). In this final phase of the work, the opposition between high and low pitch is intense, causing the perception of high-pitched sounds as an environment of purity and inner peace. The sensation is intensified by the *pp*, *ppp* dynamic that demand extra attention from the listener.



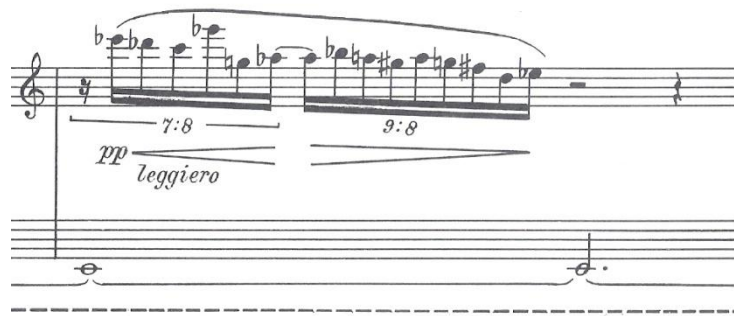


Fig. 24: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (section A - small final coda)

Starting from bar 107, we also witness a three-dimensional environment, confronting three very different levels in terms of texture. In the upper voice a sustained chord, in the lower voice the E key and in the middle voice small wanderings that are motifs previously presented (fig. 25). The bottom lines are performed on the left hand keyboard. The piece ends in a *ppp* dynamic, requiring an excellent balance of pressure exerted on the bellows in order to maintain the three horizons in a level of audible sound.

Fig. 25: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (final presentation)

Following, an analysis is presented on some aspects that stand out in the work “From Dusk to Light”, namely the use of various resources available in the accordion with free bass and converter system.

### 3. The interpreter's point of view

In his work, Denisov writes only for free basses, without any kind of effects, using only some ornamentation (trills). The composer travels through the instrument's pitch from high to low extremes.

In this piece, the composer is omitting the registers. However, the need for a sound balance between the two keyboards in order to achieve real clarity in the performance / audition, as well as the requirement to perform sections in supplementary octaves, guide the choice of registers by the interpreter. Thus, it will be essential to select the most appropriate registers.

Denisov's writing presents innovations, above all in the need to activate the bassoon register (lower 8th) in the right hand in order to execute the musical passage in the intended texture. This moment occurs in bars 49 and 50 (fig. 26).

Fig. 26: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (bassoon register on the right hand keyboard)

At the end of the work, in which there is a three-dimensional environment, there is also the need to combine the two fixed rows of basses with the four rows of free basses, allowing the hearing of very low and high-pitched sounds at the same time on the left hand keyboard.

In order to be able to perform this exposure on the lower lines, a repositioning of the left hand in bar 101 must be carried out (fig. 27). Here, taking advantage of the moments of pause (silence), the interpreter's right hand moves to the low E of the left hand keyboard while the left hand makes the path (jump) to the same E in front of the central C. This repositioning of the left hand will allow the realization of the middle voice that will appear in bar 107.

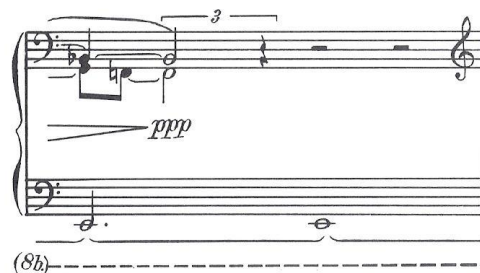


Fig. 27: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (ideal time to reposition the left hand)

The composer also uses, in some passages, a writing that is only possible to perform on the accordion with free bass, given the proximity of the voices between the keyboards (fig. 28).



Fig. 28: Edison Denisov, From Dusk to Light (writing only possible on the accordion with free bass)

The main purpose of this article is to approach the public to the musical work of Edison Denisov as a singular composer in his time. The continuous research on the musical text and the constant work analysis seems to give an important contribute to understand the atmosphere and the creative musical process in the composition field. Indeed, it opens space to connect theory with practice. However, the sense of this research is to widen the future and to encourage the new accordionist generation to be connected with this contemporary music field in order to achieve the high performance level.

*“All my life I've been looking for the light.”*

Edison Denisov

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