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THERMALS (2012)

Program notes:

As a child, I thought of vultures as exotic animals, cartoonish residents of arid deserts. I later realized that turkey vultures are among our most common (though by no means uninteresting) birds. Since then, watching them soar in graceful circles has become something of a pastime for me; of particular fascination is their ability to glide effortlessly with only occasional beats of their wings. Through vultures and other soaring birds, I learned about thermals, air columns that form over warm parts of the earth's surface. Since the warm air in the thermal column is continually moving upwards, vultures are able to take advantage of this by flying in a spiral pattern, ascending with minimal effort high into the sky to search for carrion. *Thermals* is a musical impression of these air currents – a continuously moving, shifting mass of sound – meant to evoke the “vehicle” these remarkable birds use to create the magic of their gliding, soaring, and spiraling patterns through the sky. Two things are worth noting from a technical point of view – firstly, the pitch material for the piece. Essentially all of the melodic and harmonic material for this piece is derived from the opening chord, simplified to F-A-B-E: basically a major 7th chord with raised 4th. That tritone allows for the prevalent use of the Lydian scale (i.e., major with a raised 4th) which is the basis for the plentiful runs throughout the piece. Secondly, *Thermals* is a rondo – the opening theme, which I think of as “gusting” motive, becomes the refrain, reappearing in various guises several more times throughout the piece as the material is developed. I had no intention of writing a rondo when I sat down to start this piece, but there you have it – music with a mind of its own. Like the air columns which give the piece its title, the music is unstable, unwilling to settle down and get “comfortable” – instead it continually rises, falls, occasionally soars to stratospheric heights (thanks to the characteristic *altissimo* of the saxophone), spirals and circles in repeating loops, and eventually dissipates as the air cools, the column disintegrates, and the vultures descend to find a roost for the night.

Performance Notes: The most common articulation in this piece is the tenuto mark (-). For the most part, I use this mark to show separation of notes, rather than accentuation. When slurred, this indication is meant to suggest *portato* playing – separate but slightly connected. It is important not to accent such notes too heavily, but rather to give them full value without a sharp attack. The slap tongue used in mm. 111-130 is meant to be of the “melodic” variety – pitched and generally as *piano* as possible, except in mm. 125 and 130, which are both *sforzando*.

Instrumentation: Saxophone Quartet

Duration: 9 minutes

Premiere: Pioneer Saxophone Quartet (Angela Space, George Weremchuk, David Pope, and Lynn Klock), at the World Saxophone Congress XVI, St. Andrews, Scotland, July 12, 2012.