

Whirlpool Galaxy

The Whirlpool Galaxy, also known as Messier 51a (M51a) is a spiral galaxy, like our own. It lies in the constellation Canes Venatici (or Hunting Dogs) and is 31 million light years away. It interacts with the nearby dwarf galaxy, and so it's often studied to understand galaxy structure and interactions. The sounds you'll hear in the next piece are sonifications by NASA of data picked up through the Chandra X-ray Observatory. The sonification moves around the spiral galaxy like the second hand of a clock. Each wavelength of light is mapped onto a different pitch, with brighter lights sounding like little flashes, and the extending arms of the galaxy – which are long lanes of stars, gas and dust – sound at higher pitches than the centre core, as if singing upward into the stratosphere of space.

So this is not, obviously, what stars sound like – more what and where they are like. But I still find it fascinating. Humans have believed in a “music of the spheres” for centuries, and this is one very beautiful way to consider it – and its reflection of human imagination. (And to capture that mystery in words, I thought haiku would be a good choice.)

Can I soar just once
Into that starry whirlpool
that river of light

eternally still
yet spinning in sharp flashes
on the face of night?

Can it be that sound,
colour, hand and mind combine
in stellar music

where harmonics shine
where scientists write poems
and telescopes sing?

Take me with you, out
to the highest brightest reach
of your singing arms

and there glimpse, perhaps,
the first shimmering note of
immortality.