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"In a sleepier century": A Work for Chamber Orchestra and Dance

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF MUSIC

IN A SLEEPY CENTURY: A WORK FOR CHAMBER ORCHESTRA AND DANCE

By

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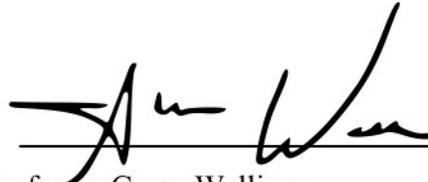
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Dr. Evan A. Jones
Thesis Director



Professor Gwen Welliver
Outside Committee Member



Dr. Clifton Callender
Committee Member

In the spring of 2017, I was contacted by a student in the FSU School of Dance named Mikaila Ware about providing electronic music for a piece to be featured in the annual FSU Days of Dance festival. From the time that I have been an active musician and composer, I have always been interested in interdisciplinary collaboration, and so when given the opportunity to work with a choreographer and dancers I jumped at the chance. During the course of the process of writing music and being involved with the development of this piece (which was performed twice as *Second-Hand Truths* in the Days of Dance festival in April 2017), I became convinced of the power of combining music with dance. The music that I had written was enhanced to a level that I had previously not experienced, and so I was inspired to explore writing a piece of music for a live ensemble that would stretch the boundaries of what I had previously attempted.

This endeavor was greatly supported by my former teacher, FSU Professor of Composition Dr. Ladislav Kubík. After searching for a topic and discussing musical ideas with Dr. Kubík throughout the spring and summer of 2017, it was decided that I would write a piece for a small chamber orchestra and dance, with a projected length around twenty minutes. In this early stage a handful of parameters were decided upon. I chose as my inspiration the book-length poem *The Georgics* by the Ancient Greek poet Virgil¹; while the general style and impression of the poem is that it is a practical agricultural treatise, it is in fact a powerful philosophical allegory about the ability of humans to commune with nature, with themes of properly contextualizing one's experiences (such as simple ideas of "city life vs. country life") and overcoming loss. During this early period I also decided, after much experimenting with different ensembles and subsets of ensembles, that the music would be written for twelve players (either a large chamber ensemble or a small chamber orchestra, depending on one's mindset): flute, oboe, B-flat clarinet, bassoon, B-flat trumpet, two percussionists (one playing

¹ In studying this work, I used the Cecil Day-Lewis translation which was published in 1940.

vibraphone, with the other playing four rototoms, snare, and timpani at various times), and a string quintet (two violins, viola, cello, and contrabass). Due to the inherently pastoral nature of *The Georgics*, these instruments appealed to me, as I felt that the timbres and textures I would be able to explore with them could convey the pastoral nature of the music that I wished to express.

As with many good philosophical and allegorical texts, there is a wealth of material to react to, and *The Georgics* is no different. There is, in fact, a fairly-explored tradition of artistic reaction to this poem and its specific themes. What I have done in reacting to Virgil's text is similar to, for example, Christopher Smart's *The Hop-Garden* (1752), which uses the "agricultural treatise" format of *The Georgics* to give more serious commentaries on personal loss and a sort of pastoral nostalgia. This historical precedent was very important to the development of my thoughts on the project. As a composer, I have always strived to eschew traditional narrative structure in what my music expresses. Rather than approach a narrative as, for example, a journey from point A to point B, I wish to give the image of one moment within that journey. While my work is inspired by Virgil's text originally, the project itself is based on my reflections on *The Georgics* in the moment, and my goal is to represent these reflections and feelings as best I can for myself and hopefully for others². I wish to combine music and dance as a "ballet" in order to convey my thoughts and feelings on the subject as opposed to creating a traditional narrative.

As part of my research, I of course studied much of the literature of ballet music/ dance music as well as many works for chamber orchestra and large ensemble. During the early stages of the process (while I considered the direction that I wanted to take the music in) I looked to works by older established composers for dance such as Leonard Bernstein, John Adams and Igor Stravinsky for general inspiration. Later on, as I became more involved in composing, I listened more to modern

² As part of my philosophy as a composer, I wish to leave as much room for interpretation of my music as is possible; while I have a certain vision for what my music means, I am more than pleased with any different interpretation on the part of the listener.

composers, such as James MacMillan, Jennifer Higdon and Thomas Adès. My multiple discussions of the work with Dr. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, winner of the 1983 Pulitzer Prize in Music and a renowned large ensemble composer herself, convinced me to think of the ensemble as a real chamber orchestra as opposed to a . I especially paid attention to Igor Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks* and John Adams' *Chamber Symphony* and *Gnarly Buttons* as examples of how to work with an ensemble of twelve to fifteen players and handle it musically as a chamber orchestra rather than a large chamber ensemble (as I believe there is a difference between the two in terms of scope).

The first phase of this project was conceptualization and the composition of the musical score. This phase was completed from August 2017 to January 2018. My continued close involvement with the score following that point gave me time to consider how I can continue to improve my craft in the future and as I consider how to become more comfortable making my music work with dance.

The second phase involved working with choreographers Ben Howard and Holly Stone and dancers Casey Copeland, Olivia Hopkins, David Olarte, and Evelyn Washburn in order to begin to process my original conceptualization and thoughts in the form of dance. As I am not a dancer or choreographer, I wanted to carefully select my collaborators so that I could find the right people to complement my work and filter the meanings of the music and my inspirations through their own artistic personalities. While I made notes on copies of the music for myself throughout the process of composing, mainly dealing with general thoughts of shapes, height, speed, and movement (for example, "dancers could be low here" and "dancers could be in a circle"), these notes were about all that I gave to Ben and Holly in their work. Once they began working on choreography and formulating ideas, I watched videos of rehearsals and attended rehearsals, though this was mainly to affirm that I supported their work. I was very lucky to be able to work with Ben and Holly, as they both impacted the piece with their own artistic visions in exactly the complementary way I hoped they might.

The final phase of the project involved the actual production. In the summer and early fall I

gathered musicians for the ensemble and was lucky enough to recruit FSU School of Dance faculty composer Professor Daniel Smith to conduct the piece. Prof. Smith's knowledge of dance was crucial to the success of our ensemble rehearsals and kept things moving smoothly while I acted as an auxiliary component in the rehearsals, answering questions about the score and explaining choices to the performers so as to better help them understand the piece. While I spent time in this period revising the score and parts, a fair amount of my work was in organizing the production. Finding an adequate location for the performance was one of my main goals, as many people had suggested different locations. Interestingly enough, the performance was originally scheduled for the FSU College of Music's Opperman Music Hall and then moved to the School of Dance's Black Box Theatre before it finally was moved to the School of Dance's main stage Nancy Smith Fichter Dance Theatre for the premiere performance on November 10th, 2018. For all of the work done in terms of finding all of the different options I must acknowledge Dr. Evan A. Jones and Prof. Daniel Smith for using their faculty connections to assist me in finding a space.

In addition to the development of the production, I spent time throughout the fall promoting the piece. On October 1st, 2018 I gave a presentation on the production process and a preview of the music at the FSU President's Showcase of Undergraduate Research Excellence, and in October and early November I designed posters on Adobe Illustrator, put together online promotional materials, and was featured on the College of Music "student spotlight" (a slideshow that plays in the hallways in the College of Music's buildings).

I wish to use this experience as a jumping-off point as a collaborator and dance composer from which I can continue to expand and grow my knowledge. I approached this project from a slightly different place than my other dance collaborations, as my concept and music came well before there was any dance involved at all (as opposed to working on both concurrently or writing music to a completed or mostly-completed dance). I plan to continue my work with dancers and artistic

collaborators as I pursue a Masters of Music in Composition following the completion of my undergraduate degree, and so while I understand that this was slightly unorthodox in current dance composition, I hope that it will allow me to have a unique and perhaps more experienced perspective in my future work with dancers and other interdisciplinary collaborators.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude to the following: the dancers (Casey Copeland, Olivia Hopkins, David Olarte, and Evelyn Washburn) and musicians (Aleyna Brown, Courtney Sullivan, Henry Landrum IV, Chris Gonzalez, Brianna Nunley, Mitch Eldridge, Mitchell Martin, Brianna Rhodes, Amanda Hamilton, Joe W. Kovac, and Nicole Mann) who took part in the premiere; Ben Howard and Holly Stone, who choreographed the premiere; Professor Daniel Smith, who conducted the premiere; Dr. Evan A. Jones, Professor Gwen Welliver, Dr. Clifton Callender for serving as the committee members for my honors thesis; Dr. Mark Wingate, Dr. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, and Logan Castro for supporting my work throughout the process of composing and producing this piece; and FSU's Center for Undergraduate Research, School of Dance, College of Music, and Jennie Petuch for ensuring the performance could be properly produced and documented.

The piece is dedicated to the memory of the late Ladislav Kubík, FSU Professor of Composition and my musical mentor.