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Stories for Orchestra

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STORIES FOR ORCHESTRA

By

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ABSTRACT

Stories for Orchestra is a suite for large orchestra cast in three diverse movements that are entitled “Cortazar,” “Lovecraft,” and “Song of the Valar.” As the title implies, the work was conceived with programmatic elements in mind and attempts to convey a sense of narrative in each movement. While the music explores many different affects of compositional style, there are emphases on polyrhythmic techniques and motivic unity throughout the entire work.

“Cortázar” was inspired by the work of Julio Cortázar and particularly his story Axolotl. The author is sometimes categorized as a “magical realist” and his stories often combine elements of the fantastic in mundane settings. This movement is constructed from two basic elements: rhythmically diverse polyphony (first heard in the winds), and a descending chromatic motive (first heard in the solo violin). The form of the work bears some resemblance to a Baroque fugue. The opening section can be considered as analogous to a fugal exposition in that the primary melodic material is introduced as well as a gradual increase in polyphonic density. The second large section (mm. 30-64) alternates between contrapuntal activity and “episodes” for the winds and pitched percussion. The polyphonic motives are ultimately overwhelmed by the aforementioned chromatic descent. The culminating gesture of the piece is a “spectral” chord based on the harmonic series that dissipates into a single pitch held by the solo violin.

The second movement, “Lovecraft,” draws from the works of H. P. Lovecraft who is widely considered to be one of the most influential American horror and science fiction writers. His works often combine compelling narratives with intellectual undertones of philosophy and metaphysics. The movement is in three broad sections that display the basic outline of a sonata form. The first section presents three primary ideas: a polyrhythmic opening for the full ensemble (mm. 1-32), a five-note motive that serves as the main source of melodic and harmonic material (mm. 33-73), and a cantabile melody for the violins which is based on the primary motive (mm. 77-114). A central section (at exactly one-half of the original tempo) develops the primary motive and recalls the cantabile theme (mm. 133-174). The final section recapitulates ideas from the first section and finishes dramatic gesture for the upper winds, strings and percussion.
“Song of the Valar” is based on a particular passage from J. R. R. Tolkien’s work *The Silmarillion* that describes a creation myth in which the universe is literally sung into existence. A collection of nine pitch classes (omitting D, E, and F#) serve as the primary material for the first section of the work. Solo instruments serve as narrative voices throughout the opening passages. The previously excluded pitch classes are introduced in succession in the second large section (mm. 31-87). A gradual increase in apparent dissonance and rhythmic activity characterize these measures. The work concludes with a recapitulation of elements heard in the first section and a coda that combines material from both of the previous large formal divisions.

The suite as a whole strives to shows both a degree of independence in each movement, as described in the preceding paragraphs, and a sense that the individual pieces are complementary. Some cyclical elements are employed in the service of this latter goal. For example, the A/G# motive heard in the solo violin in the first movement is recalled in the coda of the third movement. Also, the end of the first section of the first movement foreshadows the opening *tutti* gesture of the second movement. Lastly, “spectral” chords are used in the final gestures of all three movements.

The diversity of *Stories for Orchestra* is largely due to the various influences that were prominent during its creation. The “tempo fugues” of Ligeti had a strong effect on the rhythmic language of the piece as well as use of limited collections and easily discerned motives such as chromatic and diatonic descents. Similarly, the massive spectral harmonies heard in the music of Magnus Lindberg provided inspiration for the similar structures heard in the suite. Non-Western music and jazz played a role in the quasi-improvisational solos of the final movement, while West African folk music served as a model for the percussion writing in the second movement.
INSTRUMENTATION

2 Flutes (2nd doubling Piccolo)
2 Oboes
2 Clarinets in B-flat
2 Bassoons (2nd doubling Contrabassoon)

4 Horns in F
2 Trumpets in C
Tenor Trombone
Bass Trombone
Tuba

Percussion I: Crotales (one octave), Glockenspiel, 2 Small Woodblocks, Small Suspended Cymbal, Hi-Hat (with rivets and tightly closed)

Percussion II: Vibraphone, Marimba (four octave), Bongos, Tenor Drum (without snares), Small Tam-Tam, Splash Cymbal, Timpano (32” or larger), Large Bass Drum, Glockenspiel

Percussion III: Chimes (Tubular Bells), Xylophone, Piccolo Snare Drum, 4 Concert Toms, Small Bass Drum (mounted as a tom), China Cymbal, Castanets, Small Opera Gong, Sandpaper Blocks

Piano (doubling Slap Stick)

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
Contrabass (at least half with extension to low C)

The score is notated in concert pitch with the exceptions of the usual octave transpositions for piccolo, contrabassoon, contrabass, and keyboard percussion.

Duration:
“Cortazar” – 3’30”
“Lovecraft” – 5’15”
“Song of the Valar” – 5’30”
Total – ca. 14’30”
* - Horns 1/3 and 2/4 are "a2" unless otherwise noted.
II. Lovecraft

Rhythmic ($\textit{j} = .136$)
Intense (\(\dot{\lambda} = 68\))
III. Song of the Valar

Steady, with some motion (\( \cdot = 68 \))
* - freely bowed, sempre legato
Insistent (f = 102)

- Fl.
- Ob.
- Bb Cl.
- Bsn.
- Hn.
- Tpt.
- Tmb.
- Perc.
- Pno.
- Vln.
- Vla.
- Vc.
- Ch.
Tempo I (= 68)

Fl.
Ob.
B-Cl.
Bsn.
Hn.
Tpt.
Vln.
Tbn.
Perc.
Picc.

poco rit.
Slower, more intense ( \( \dot{\text{q}} = 60 \) )
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

James Michael David (b. 1978) is currently active as a composer, trombonist, and music educator. His works have been awarded prizes in several competitions including a 2006 ASCAP Foundation Morton Gould Young Composer Award, first place in the 2005 National Association of Composers Young Composers’ Competition, national first-place winner in the 2002 Music Teachers National Association Collegiate Composition Competition, and first prize in the 2006 Eppes String Quartet Composition Competition. He has written commissions for numerous individuals and organizations such as Joseph Alessi (principal trombone, New York Philharmonic), the Columbus State University Wind Ensemble, The Commission Project of Rochester, NY, the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program, and Georgia Southern University. Performances of his compositions have been heard at national and international conferences including the 2005 Society of Composers, Inc. National Conference, the 2005 International Clarinet Fest in Tokyo, Japan, the 2003 World Saxophone Congress, and the 2005 FSU Festival of New Music. As a performer, he served as second trombonist in the American Wind Symphony Orchestra’s 40th season and has been a featured artist at the Eastern Trombone Workshop in Washington, DC. While at FSU, he performed with the University Symphony, Wind Orchestra, Chamber Winds, and Jazz Ensemble I. He has taught courses in music theory, aural skills, and composition at Florida State University and the University of Georgia as well as instrumental music in the Georgia public school system. Mr. David graduated magna cum laude, with honors from the University of Georgia in 2000 and completed the M.M. degree in composition from the same institution in 2002. His compositions are available through Pebblehill Music Publishers and have been recorded on the Summit label. He currently resides in Tallahassee, FL with his wife Cary.