

The Orphan of Tulsa

Introduction and Purpose

The date was June 1, 1921, when “Black Wall Street,” the name fittingly given to one of the most affluent all-Black communities in America, was bombed from the air and burned to the ground by mobs of envious whites. In a period spanning fewer than 12 hours, a once thriving 36-block business district in northern Tulsa lay smoldering, a model community destroyed, and a major African-American economic movement resoundingly defused.¹

The Orphan of Tulsa gives a musical portrayal of a fictionalized orphan's first day after the Tulsa incident. Many of the compositional techniques acquired through my studies and experiences as a composition student of Dr. Stephen Blumberg are employed in this composition. My purpose for composing a work for this instrumentation is to explore orchestral scoring techniques in composing music which depicts dawn, morning, afternoon and evening.

The Composition

The Orphan of Tulsa is a three-movement work scored for a chamber orchestra consisting of flute, clarinet, horn, trumpet, percussion, piano and solo strings. The three movements are representative of morning, afternoon and evening, the three divisions of a day and the movements are to be performed without pause, seamlessly connected by short transitions.

The sudden awakening of the orphan at dawn is represented by a minor 2nd dyad (A/Bb) struck in the lowest octave of the piano. The strings, portraying the veil-like mist of morning, enter immediately following the piano on the same two pitches voiced in high harmonics.

¹ Ron Wallace and Jay Wilson, Black Wall Street: A Lost Dream (N.p. 1995)

The gradual ascent of the morning sun is represented by slow rising figures in the wind section that end with the minor second interval, and the strings' upward glissando.

Arpeggios, slowly rising out of the lowest register of the piano, hand percussion, and birdlike gestures from the flute complete the depiction of morning. The pitch material is unified by short rising figures in the winds and strings in which the first intervals or last intervals are minor seconds.

After dawn, the slow unfolding of morning in the first movement is symbolized by a flute and double bass duet, with a background commentary by the other instruments playing figures that foreshadow the next movement along with paired voicings that look back to the opening section. The imitation between the flute and bass is one of the main characteristics of the duet, with shorter and faster note values simulating the increased activity that often occurs during the transition from morning to noon.

The focal point of the second movement is polyrhythmic interplay, depicting the high activity of noon. The meters, $7/4$, $5/4$, and $3/4$, are used to represent the orphan's instability in search of a safe haven. The melodic and rhythmic figures are written in a four-four time signature but in such a way as to suggest the above meters. Some of the melodic rhythmic figures are cyclic. The movement culminates with an intense polychordal tutti that melts into the final movement.

In the final movement the use of the piano as a solo instrument provides a new texture and tone. The material for the piano is a blend of lyrical melodies, percussive single notes and chords and it is designed to convey the child's journey through friendly and unfriendly terrain. Following the piano solo there is an energetic percussion solo accompanied by an antiphonal exchange between the winds and strings. At the climax

of the solo, the winds and strings move by half steps in linear isolation to provide a pointillistic background texture leading to a dramatic closing section and a return to the texture of the beginning of the composition.

Compositional Process

A different compositional process replaced my usual compositional process of developing harmonies from a synthetic scale and through composing from beginning to end. Instead the compositional process began with a written description of how the music would portray the three segments of a day and the experiences of the orphan.

The written description of the general musical activity of each movement and its sonority gave me an overview of the entire composition, and instead of through composing, I was able to compose music for a later movement or section while working on the preceding one. In this way I was able to achieve a foreshadowing effect by presenting fragments of motives from the second movement in the first movement.

Harmony

The harmony of the strings and winds in the first movement is a mixed interval harmony made up of minor and major 2nds, 3rds, 4ths, 7ths and augmented 4ths. There are two-part melodic statements of various intervals but the most frequently used intervals are 3rds, 6ths, 4ths and augmented 4ths. The piano's harmony is a polychordal type of harmony found frequently in jazz. These chords are inverted triads superimposed over three notes usually arranged in perfect fourths.

When the multiple layers of harmony sound together in the different instrumental families, it makes for a very complex sonority with a dense texture.

During the second movement, short melodic statements in all voices do not create a definable harmonic style. The harmony of the piano score has inverted triads in the right hand and augmented fourths (tritones) in the left along with a combination of quartal chords and tritones. These chords which are examples of jazz influenced harmony are also prevalent in the harmony of the winds and strings in the tutti section at the end of this movement.

The harmony of the final movement is very similar to that of the first movement, the strings and winds are again paired in sixths. However in measure 166, the winds and strings are scored in a full chord, derived from the jazz harmony of the piano.

Melodic Characteristics

As stated earlier the melodic content of the first movement consists of ascending melodic figures. The origin of these figures can be found the octatonic scale, however there is not a complete statement of the scale in this movement. In the imitative opening of the flute and bass duet, the pitch material is derived from the minor second dyads from the dawn section. After the imitation between the bass and flute dissolves, the basis for the melodic material consist of parts of two different octatonic scales.

Rhythm

During the second movement we find three different meters superimposed over the common time by the flute, trumpet and percussion. The flute part is written to suggest the time signature 5/4. A seven-measure pattern in the percussion part implies 7/4 and the trumpet line is in a polyrhythmic 3 against 4.

A four measure bass ostinato composed of half notes gives stability to the opening of the movement. After three statements of the ostinato pattern a feeling of increased

tempo is achieved by means of diminution of the bass ostinato pattern, as quarter notes replace the half notes. The bass motion becomes even more energetic as the note value changes two more times, from quarter notes to quarter-note triplets and finally to eighth-note triplets. A very complex rhythmic sonority is achieved by the addition of quarter and eighth-note quintuplets in the background commentary of the remaining parts.

Unifying Elements

The minor second interval plays an important role in both the harmony and the melodic material. The main pitches or tonal points of the composition are E, A and Bb. As mentioned earlier the minor second dyad of A and Bb is first heard in the piano and strings at the beginning of the piece, and it is also present in the opening statements of the flute. These pitches are also used at the end of the piece in the horn and trumpet, and bass begins and ends the piece with its lowest note, E.

The first statement by the flute in measure 3 can be analyzed as two minor seconds a fourth apart, with the last being B flat and A. Considered the main notes of this movement, these pitches voiced octaves apart, are heard at the beginning of the piece in the high harmonic of the strings and in the first octave of the piano. This dyad is seen again in measure five of the flute as well in the piano in measure 20. Closely following this in measure 21 is a repeat of the flute's initial gesture from measure 3.

Half-step motion in the beginning of the imitative duet between the bass and flute is another example of the minor second interval used as a unifying factor (measures 29-34). The background commentary provided by the other instruments during the duet is suggestive of the second movement and unifies the two movements.

Percussion has a large role in unifying the composition by creating connections between the movements. Entering just after the flute in measure 4, the bongos and triangle often take the foreground as the reverberation of piano's arpeggios float away. Rhythmic continuity in the second movement is provided by a melodic ostinato of half, quarter and eighth notes on the bass and a seven-measure percussion pattern heard throughout the majority of the second movement. In the closing measures of the final movement there is a return to the original texture in which the bongos and triangle play an important role.

Anchoring the entire composition, the bass begins and ends the piece on its lowest note, E. This note is also the first and last note of the duet (m.28-46), and it is also the first and last note of the ostinato pattern during the polyrhythmic second movement. Incidentally this ostinato pattern employed in this "walking bass line" is frequently found in black gospel music.

Piano arpeggios in the first and last movements help give the beginning and ending textural unification. Jazz-influenced chords appearing in the piano in the second and third movements, as well as the fully scored chords in the tutti section, are very important to sustaining harmonic continuity. One of the main notes Bb is the last note of the piano solo.

Conclusion

The Orphan of Tulsa utilizes elements of the African-American musical experiences in a classical setting. The music depicts the three segments of a day by employing orchestrational techniques to create various textures. It challenges the players and the conductor with interesting polyrhythmic writing as it attempts to evoke various

moods. The composition and its subject matter are intended to be interesting to the listeners as well as the conductor and players.

Property of Reggie Graham.