Three Landscapes For Orchestra

Nathan D. Raught

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THREE LANDSCAPES FOR ORCHESTRA

A Masters Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Music

By
Nathan Raught
May 2016

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THREE LANDSCAPES FOR ORCHESTRA

Music
Missouri State University, May 2016
Master of Music
Nathan Raught

ABSTRACT

Three Landscapes for Orchestra is a three-movement orchestral suite, with music composed based on corresponding artworks. Each movement is inspired by an abstract painting by Samantha Keely Smith. Stylistically, the focus of these pieces is on color and mood, and the emulation of the atmosphere and emotions elicited by the source material. As such, the music either takes a literal approach to musical representations of certain aesthetic features, or an abstract approach wherein the music conveys a similar emotion or mood as the painting. Musically, the approach taken is an amalgamation of Late-Romantic, twentieth century, and twelve-tone styles, with influences from composers such as Gustav Mahler, Benjamin Britten, John Adams, and Arnold Schoenberg.

KEYWORDS: music, orchestra, suite, instrumental, art, painting

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Dr. Michael F. Murray
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

A Masters Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Music

Approved:

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INTRODUCTION

"Ocean waves crash atop foreboding bodies of water, plumes of fire seem to battle clouds in the sky, and swirling storms shield distant secrets just over the horizon. Smith refers to her paintings as ‘internal landscapes,’ part of an ongoing examination of an externalized inner conflict.\(^1\)

As a composer who is primarily interested in composing music to accompany visual media, I often prefer to have a visual source of inspiration for my pieces, as opposed to working from purely abstract ideas. Thinking of Modest Mussorgsky and his *Pictures at an Exhibition*, I looked for art in a variety of styles and time periods, and by chance stumbled upon an eye-catching piece by the contemporary abstract painter Samantha Keely Smith. Her oil and varnish paintings are visually stunning works that she describes as internal or emotional landscapes. It was from this description that I formed the title of my thesis.

From my interpretation of her art, it was not difficult to understand how the term landscape was appropriate, yet the intended connotation of the word may not be immediately obvious, and must be made clear. The paintings are not depictions of physical landscapes, nor does my music solely attempt to capture the image of landscapes; rather it seeks to represent an overall mood, or an internal landscape of the mind as one reacts to the emotions of the piece.

I perused her online gallery to pick three pieces to use as inspiration for my music. I planned to write an orchestral suite of three movements, so I selected three paintings that I liked the most, with an eye to assembling a selection with the greatest variety and contrast between the three. There is plenty of contrast between her works, yet there are also many that are similar in palette and mood, thus it was important that I tailor my selection to allow myself divergent creative directions for each.

Bringing these paintings into an acoustic sound world was an exciting challenge and a new process. There was no linear path to follow, so I could interpret the work as literally or as freely as I wanted, and I could explore the different features and colors of each piece at whatever pace I saw fit for the music. Since they were chosen from works completed over a span of several years, there is not necessarily a particular order for the performance of the pieces.

ANALYSIS

Shift

When I first saw *Shift* (Figure 1), I thought of the ocean. While the painting does not explicitly depict a physical body of water, it does bear a striking resemblance. Much of the music I composed for this piece was inspired by the constant ebb and flow of the sea, a motion closely linked to the painting. In this way, I used the imagery of the painting as a starting point for setting the mood of the music.

![Figure 1. Samantha Keely Smith, *Shift*, 2012, oil and varnish on canvas, 60” x 72” (reproduced with artist’s permission).](image)

The piece begins with a nebulous introduction section in a simple binary form. The orchestral forces employed at first are rather small; flutes, horns, harp, viola, and three solo violins. I wanted a smaller, more intimate setting for the first few bars, to reflect the tranquil nature of the piece. The music in this opening section is intentionally murky, with no clear beat. This quietly leads into the next section at rehearsal mark B. Here I wanted a bright, sparkling effect to represent the curious specks of light in the middle of the painting. My eye was quickly drawn to these when I first saw the image, so I felt it was important to the structure of the piece that this material came after the introduction. For these bright, seemingly distant pinpricks of light I combined pizzicato strings, glockenspiel, piano, and the high winds, all playing in staccato bursts. I was pleased with the contrast in timbre and mood between the two sections, in part because the shift in sound reflects the title of the piece.
I began writing this piece with the material starting at rehearsal mark D (page 17), and it is here I introduced one of the main melodic motives, which I would later lead into in the end of the preceding section. To accompany this, I wrote a quiet, brightly pulsing ostinato with harp harmonics and pizzicato viola. I would later use this combination in the final movement, *Brightness Falls*, in order to subtly unify the work as a whole. Here, I wanted shimmering tone blinking off and on to represent the lights in the previous section fading away as the music grew into something much larger, and the aspect of the water takes over.

The music then moves away from the surface serenity and becomes more emotionally charged, all while maintaining its pulse. The mercurial melody heard in the winds at the start disappears as those instruments take on the role of accompaniment. The main melody, played in the violins first in unison and then in octaves, becomes impassioned yet rhythmically much simpler. Again, bearing the title in mind, I wanted to convey the duality of the sea. While always in motion, the nature of it can range from a gentle pulse to powerful tidal waves. The music comes to a climax at measure 51, and then calms down, once again returning to its earlier tranquility.

Recurring throughout the piece is a particular rhythmic pattern (Figure 1). This gently syncopated figure is meant to impart a sense of the movement of water. Since there are other components to the piece, this is not a constant presence, but it is pervasive, frequently returning in either the winds, brass, or more subtly incorporated into the melody played in the strings.

![Figure 2. Page 12, measure 2, flutes. This rhythmic motive appears throughout the piece.](image)

I spent some time listening to John Luther Adams’ *Become Ocean*, a commission for the Seattle Symphony that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2014. I had hoped to gain inspiration in my approach to writing certain textures to evoke the imagery of the ocean, and while I did find his work interesting, the scale of what he achieved in that relatively lengthy piece made it too slow for me to take away much of value for *Shift*. My most direct source of inspiration was Benjamin Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes*, the *Sea Interludes* in particular. What caught my attention was his use of the combination of harp and clarinet arpeggios to create a sound reminiscent of waves. I borrowed this idea in *Shift* (page 25, measure 92) to great effect, expanding out to the bassoons and piano in measure 95.

In other places I felt this combination was too light a color for the depth and darkness I sought, and to create a larger sense of pulsing waves, I came up with a more original approach, using the strings (Figure 2). This layering of tremolo strings, the sequential introduction of the voices that creates this visible inverted pyramid in the score, creates a texture conjuring the feeling of large waves.

---


There is more to this music than a mere depiction of the sea. The idea of Smith’s work as an internal landscape guided me in my approach in a more meaningful way. For me, one of the most important things for my music to have is a strong emotional pull. I feel the ending I composed should give a sense of the scene’s grandness, finally leaving the listener with the image of a bright, hopeful sky.

Salvage

I selected Salvage (Figure 4) for the suite due to its dark contrast against the calmness of Shift and the bright joyfulness of Brightness Falls. Accordingly, the music of this movement is dark, chaotic, and brooding. At the start of the composition...
process I improvised a melody with alternating minor thirds and minor seconds in a steadily descending pattern. From this I crafted a fairly conjunct melody that cycled through all twelve chromatic pitches, then filled out a tone-row matrix (Figure 5) with the resulting row. At no point did I plan to strictly adhere to the tone row and its forms throughout the whole piece, as the music would be incongruent with the rest of the suite. Instead, I used it as a foundation for the main melodic passages and as a springboard for ideas and melodic development. With the matrix grid as reference, it was easy to quickly test the different forms of the row with each other in various combinations, resulting in polyphonic textures in certain parts of the music (e.g. page 43, measure 100).

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**Figure 5.** Tone-row matrix.

The structure of this movement has three main sections: a slow introduction; a faster, frenetic toccata; and a passacaglia of ten variations. The introduction begins with the cellos playing a darkly plodding melody that is the I₀ seamlessly leading into P₇. The P₀ form is not introduced until measure 11, where the line is split between the bassoon and then violas. Having rows play out across multiple voices, starting in one instrument and completing in another, was inspired by the technique of *Klangfarbenmelodie* I learned about when studying the music of Schoenberg and Webern. The prime form plays in full force at the toccata section (page 30; bassoons, tuba, piano, cellos). This movement, like the last, I did not compose in a completely linear fashion. I began with the toccata, then decided the music should take time to build up to the intensity of that section. Using the inversion of the prime row from the start seemed appropriate given the sinister nature of the music, representing the twisted tendrils depicted in the artwork of *Salvage*.

The twelve-tone method and resulting harmonic language of the music gave it the dark tone it needed, yet harmony is only one aspect of music. Especially for a piece based on a visual medium, timbre would be equally, perhaps even more important for getting the colors right. While my piece is stylistically quite different from the Polish sonorist’s work, studying Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Polymorphia* put me in the frame of mind to consider the families of instruments based on timbre qualities.
Primarily, I wanted abrasive, noisy metallic and wooden timbres. There are multiple ways of achieving metallic timbres in the orchestra. In the strings, I have marked \textit{sul ponticello} in a few short tremolo passages (page 27, measure 11; page 36, measure 55). At measure 65 (page 38) the horns play stopped, giving this part a sinister, piercing quality. The percussion section is much more involved here than in the previous movement, the piano most notably. I took advantage of a few of the instrument’s abilities to produce very resonant sounds. In the toccata, the left hand plays a rumbling arpeggio ostinato in the extreme bass register. The desired effect is a guttural growling sound; the individual notes are not important and should sound muddled. In the movement’s dark conclusion, I have instructed the piano’s strings to be strummed by hand with the sustain held. This disconcerting effect is not often heard in the orchestra, at least in my experience, but I believe it should work well here. The wooden timbres are mostly in the percussion, though I use \textit{col legno battuto} in the strings (page 31, measure 38). Because this technique sounds thin and raspy, I included it only briefly for color. As an additional source of a great wooden, percussive timbre, I included the marimba, which is not used in the other two movements. I thought this instrument was so suitable to the atmosphere I wanted that I had it playing almost constantly throughout the toccata, even solo at times (page 32, measure 41).

Even as I was composing the first half of the piece, I decided that the tone row was well-suited to a passacaglia, a form I have often been drawn to and have enjoyed using. The bass melody of the passacaglia uses $P_0$ throughout, though it moves up into the higher registers (page 45, measure 118). This adds some much-needed contrast to a piece that is often entrenched in the lower registers. This reprieve does not last very long; the piece ends ominously, almost abruptly, shortly after the final passacaglia variation.

\textbf{Brightness Falls}

The searing brightness and vivid colors of \textit{Brightness Falls} (Figure 6) made it an alluring choice for the final movement of this suite. I certainly wanted a piece that had a more jubilant energy level than the other two. That excited, blissful vitality was the main drive behind my approach to this movement.

The form is more or less symmetrically split up into three structural layers. These layers are directly related to the appearance of the artwork, according to my personal interpretation. The music goes through the layers starting and ending with the outermost surface appearance, the bright yellows and trailing downward streaks. In between these bookends of sorts is the meat of the piece, a more abstract take on the image that is driven by engaging rhythms. In the middle of this section lies the deepest layer.

The first section, the surface layer, starts colorful and vibrant. After the initial burst of sound, representing the bright light near the top of the painting, the orchestration begins sparsely as the intensity slowly builds back up. One of the effects I wanted was an ethereal atmosphere, which is what I was aiming for with the prominent harp line accompanied by the winds. This accompaniment includes one of the main motives of the piece with its descending arpeggios. Too, the melody that starts in the harp has a constantly descending pattern. At measure 18 (page 54), the texture becomes more vertical, but with block chords in a descending pattern, often with disjunct leaps. All of these descending motives serve the purpose of tone painting, capturing the essence of the downward streaks of \textit{Brightness Falls}. 

7
The idea of a descending pattern of block chords continues at the start of the second structural layer (page 57, measure 34), then continues with a homophonic texture. In this material, the syncopated rhythms are driving and sometimes unpredictable, with frequent changes in the meter. There is a frequent use of $\frac{3}{4}$ time, as well as a few interjections in $\frac{2}{4}$ that would be conducted in two (e.g. page 61, measure 67). This section largely avoids the repetitive descending arpeggios of the outer layer, in order to avoid the figure becoming too banal, but the motive makes a few brief reappearances (e.g. page 59, measure 52). I wanted to focus on a lively rhythmic character to add variety to the movement, as the painting itself is visually rather busy.

The middle section of the piece, starting at measure 96 (page 64), represents the innermost layer of the painting. I loved the contrast of this painting’s bright yellows and oranges with patches of the blue backdrop poking through underneath. This aesthetic is what inspired my layer form, since it would be an effective way to translate that visual contrast into an auditory contrast. To get the mix of colors I wanted, I wrote pianissimo sustained strings beneath the glimmering textures of the trilled winds, triangle, and glockenspiel.

After this somewhat slower middle section, the music returns to the rhythmic material, moving quickly out into a return to the surface layer in a final coda. Since the movement is short relative to the other two, I decided to keep it simple. The music in the coda is largely the same as in the beginning of the movement, but at a louder dynamic and with a more robust orchestration, and the piece comes to its triumphant finale in a full orchestral tutti.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGva1NVWRXk>.


FULL SCORE

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo
2 Flutes
2 Oboes
2 Clarinets (B♭)
2 Bassoons
4 Horns (F)
3 Trumpets (C)
2 Trombones
Bass Trombone

Timpani
2 Woodblocks
4 Temple Blocks
Bass Drum
Claves
Crash Cymbals
Snare Drum
Suspended Cymbal
Tam-Tam
Triangle
Glockenspiel
Marimba
Xylophone
Harp
Piano

Violins I, II
Violas
Celllos
Basses

PERFORMANCE NOTES

Trills are to be played starting with the written pitch, trilling with the note above based on the indicated accidental. If no accidental is indicated on the trill marking, it will be diatonic. The trill should persist through the note duration, and across ties where applicable.

For basses with C extensions, lower notes are written in parentheses. If possible, it is preferable that these lower notes be played where applicable.
Passacaglia: Grave, ma con fuoco
Picc.
Fl.
Ob.
Bb Cl.
Bsn.
Hn.
Hn.
C Tpt.
C Tpt.
Tbn.
Tuba
B. Tbn.
Timp.
Perc. 1
Perc. 2
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Cb.
Mrb.
Pno.
Picc.
Fl.
Ob.
Bs.Cl.
Bsn.
Hn.
Hn.
C Tpt.
C Tpt.
Tbn.
B. Tbn.
Tuba
Perc.

Pno.

32

Wood blocks

a2

C

Presto e ritmico $\text{\#} = 140$