

2024

The Thing with Feathers for Orchestra

Treyton Blaser
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2024 Treyton Blaser

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hpt>

Recommended Citation

Blaser, Treyton, "The Thing with Feathers for Orchestra" (2024). *Honors Program Theses*. 920.
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hpt/920>

This Open Access Honors Program Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Program Theses by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

THE THING WITH FEATHERS
FOR ORCHESTRA

A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

Treyton Blaser
University of Northern Iowa
May 2024

This Study by: Treyton Blaser

Entitled: *The Thing With Feathers*

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirements for the Designation
University Honors

Approved by:

Dr. Daniel Swilley, Honors Thesis Advisor

Dr. Jessica Moon Asa, Director, University Honors Program

Honors Thesis Reflection - *The Thing With Feathers*, a piece for orchestra

I have known for a long time that in order to complete my honors thesis, I would need to write some sort of “big, monolithic” piece to show my work. Initially, I had decided that I wanted to pursue a path of electroacoustic composition to complete this piece, as this area was, and still is, a field of music composition that I lack general knowledge with. The progress on this piece was rapid at first, yet slowly came to a halt. My lack of familiarity with the processes and options available led to quickly feeling overwhelmed with the scope of what the project could be. After careful consideration of how I could progress, I decided to switch gears to something equally as challenging and overwhelming, if not more so, for a composer - a piece for orchestra. The piece that resulted is titled *The Thing With Feathers*, which is a 3.5 minute work that was written for standard orchestral instrumentation. This includes 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 1 bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 french horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, 1 tuba, 1 timpani, 2 percussionists, 1 harpist, and standard string section with violins I and II, violas, cellos, and double basses.

My experience with the orchestral genre of music is likely just as inexperienced as my time with electroacoustic composition. That being said, I was always drawn to the idea of writing for this ensemble at some point in my composing career simply for the sheer musical possibilities it possessed, as well as the emotional connections I have since gathered with its music. Knowing that I would soon be called on to write for an orchestra, it felt time for me to try and be in one. My school had a band like most other schools, but it did not have an orchestra for students to join. In fact, I had never seen an orchestra play live until I came to UNI and was in my second year of study. All of that being said, I decided to try and prove myself as a classical trumpet player by joining the top classical ensemble for my last year of college. To my surprise, I was accepted, and have spent nearly one entire school year at this point playing in the Northern Iowa Symphony Orchestra (NISO).

Not long into my time playing with NISO, I would find myself completely enamored with many various aspects of the music we were playing. Whether it was my first time hearing string players live, or feeling shocked at the harmonic language of the pieces we were playing, or having the sense of pride I felt when my folder was filled with repertoire from objectively great composers from history, I had found a new passion. Contemporary wind band literature was mostly what I had been used to playing prior to my time at UNI, and it is what I assumed

much of the orchestral literature would be like. That turned out to be wholly untrue. Whether it was Beethoven, Debussy, Dvořák, or Tchaikovsky, I soon understood that the music we were playing was crafted with such care and precision, as these composers took concepts I had been learning about like melodic development and cohesion to a new level in terms of musicality. The wind band pieces I was used to hearing were great in their own right, but felt lackluster compared to the sound that was achieved by the orchestral works I listened to. These pieces were simply beautiful, and they pushed me to keep listening and to find/study new orchestral literature regularly. This literature review and ongoing research will never be finished within my lifetime, but I feel thankful to have discovered it while still young in my compositional career.

An important factor that coincided with this new discovery of orchestra was a class that I took with our orchestral director - Conducting III, the most advanced conducting class one can take at our university. I felt that Dr. Rohde, the professor of this class and the director of NISO, talked about music and expression in a way that I hadn't considered previously. No longer was the conductor's job simply to keep time for an ensemble, but rather to also perform and create music alongside the performers on stage. This called for an amount of active listening and sense of musicality that I had not been familiar with before this class. Dr. Rohde pushed me to focus beyond the simple notes on the page, and rather on the qualities that made this music sound distinct and impactful from what I had been familiar with prior. My understanding of this point is that orchestral pieces call for a far greater sense of character, expression, and interpretation from both the musicians and the conductor alike. This was a quality of the style that I found very attractive, and was something I was drawn to within my research to try and become more familiar with this new genre of classical music.

My work, *The Thing With Feathers*, gets its title directly from the inspiring message of Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope is the thing with feathers." Some of my most admired teachers and composers have explained many times how important it is within our creative field to have an inspiration of some sort. My writing is guided primarily by my listening, and my listening has introduced me to all sorts of styles and sounds that orchestras have achieved throughout the last several centuries. That being said, the strongest connection I have felt to a piece of music is when one of our compositional faculty here showed the composition seminar the work of Takashi Yoshimatsu. Specifically, he introduced us to Yoshimatsu's piano concerto, "Memo Flora." This piece was the first orchestral work I had ever heard that I was captivated by during

its performance. In the following years, I would listen to all of his other works, his inspirations, and come to love Yoshimatsu's usage of birds in his pieces. As is common in other areas of Japanese culture, Yoshimatsu makes many references to birds both in the titling of his pieces, as well as the composition of his work. I felt that the piece I wrote tried to capture some of the same emotions and an overall hopeful soundscape that can also be heard in Yoshimatsu's work, hence why I was drawn by Emily Dickinson's poem to title my piece.

The steps to complete this work are largely like any other piece of music with the addition of further complexity due to the amount of players called for in a specific piece, as well as the vast sound spectrum in which "orchestral music" can reside. I started off listening to various performances of orchestral works - whether while playing with NISO, watching the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Symphony Orchestra perform, or listening to recommendations made by my advisor and private instructors. While practicing active listening, I took diligent notes to decipher how the sound was created and what led the composer to potentially make the decisions they made. Not always is this doable, of course, but writing my thoughts was a nice way to generate some ideas for myself in the future, calling on textures that I felt worked exceedingly well, or reminders to myself of what not to do at times. I then took this one step further and started to intensely study scores online of whatever I could find from the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP) website. This gave me even further insight into how these great composers, whom I admire so heavily, composed and developed their ideas as I had the music directly in front of me, no longer relying on my ear alone. This step of score study is one that all of my teachers have emphasized as being one of the most important steps in their compositional career, and something that is never realistically finished in someone's lifetime.

Alongside the score study and active listening, I started to write materials and potential ideas that could be transformed into longer sections and potential melodies/lines that had some sort of agency when heard on their own. This step has, in my writing in the past, usually been one that goes rather quickly. This can be a good thing, as it allows me to get notes on the page faster and potentially spark some new ideas from that process. That being said, it can also be somewhat of a detriment to the writing process, as I don't always give myself enough time to reflect and refine the materials I wrote initially before deciding I should transition to writing in the "true" document. I feel pressured to do this as it can seem like time is being wasted if any of the notes I am composing aren't going in the final draft. This is something I hope to improve at,

and why I felt it necessary to begin my writing from a reduced perspective - only using three grand staves to allow me to write without the entire ensemble with blank measures staring me in the face while I tried to think of new ideas. This approach of using a reduced score is very common among composers, especially for those who write for large ensembles often, as it allows for all of the composer's ideas to fit on a single page without needing to scroll between the 30 instruments that may have individual notes in the final score. It also helps reduce the writer's block that many experience while trying to begin a new creative work, as 3 pianos is much easier to write ideas for, as opposed to the entire ensemble. There can be some thought put into who could potentially play what idea, but the main objective is simply to get notes on to the page, and to worry about the orchestration later. This process was ongoing, and eventually I found that I was drawing ideas from both the reduced score as well as within the ensemble document as well, as I may try and write in that way when feeling inspired, or could choose to go back to the reduction if I didn't want to have the constraints of instruments hampering the notes I was writing. The final product will look just like any other piece of music, being roughly 4-5 minutes long, including proper spacing and expression placement throughout, as well as a title/program notes page to give a brief introduction to the piece.

In the grand scheme of existing creative works, it is difficult to be able to tell the importance of what my work may add to this field. That being said, it is a field that I hope to heavily affect later on in my life, meaning that I must begin somewhere. Because so much of music composition is introspective, and a piece spends likely 95% (in my, and most cases of student composers) of its time in the hands of the composer before being sent off into the wild, this creation is largely a reflection of my own work and a chance for me to see where I am on this front of composing for orchestra. It is by no means my final work for orchestra, and is something that I hope will be a resource for me to look back at in a few years to see how I've grown. On the other hand, the work is still a new piece of music that interprets what could be done for orchestra in a different manner than any other piece in contemporary orchestral literature. This is an important distinction to make, as not all music genres are evolving and expanding in this way, giving me a great pleasure and opportunity to be able to write something for it.

This experience, as I've lightly touched on throughout this reflection, is extremely rewarding. Had I not decided to pursue this new field of music composition, I would never have

discovered this incredible body of work. The study and new ways of listening that I have had to learn to apply myself to this genre have taught me a multitude about music that I couldn't have predicted before writing this piece. From a historical perspective, I now have a larger knowledge base to draw from when considering how music has changed over time, and a better grasp on how to explain which changes I've liked versus the ones that I haven't. From a technique standpoint, it is difficult to recognize how my composition has grown since it feels like looking at yourself in the mirror - I do it each day, and it's almost impossible to feel like I've really improved on anything, as it all mostly feels the same day to day. However, when taking a step back and thinking on where I started this process at compositionally, the added difficulties that come with writing a piece for orchestra have surely honed my craft in an immensely beneficial way. In terms of technique, a composer must be much more aware of the textures they are utilizing, and somehow create cohesion in not only the lines and development of the material, but for the entire orchestra, which can be extremely difficult to accomplish when first starting to compose in this style. Other than the technical improvements I have made within my craft, it has also allowed me to work closely with other faculty members to ask them about their experiences with writing for orchestra, and garnered me a professional connection with Dr. Rohde that I hope to call on in the future for NISO to potentially play more of my works, which would be a great honor. The project has been extremely difficult to power through at times while simultaneously navigating the other responsibilities of a student in their last semester. However, it has been a wonderful experience that has taught me so much more than I would have anticipated. I'm extremely grateful to have the opportunity to do this fulfilling and creative work, and I feel proud of the accomplishment for completing this piece and fulfilling the honors requirement.

See full score below

The Thing With Feathers

For Orchestra

Trey Blaser

♩ = 110 ♩ = 50

Flute 1 *ff*

Flute 2 *ff*

Oboe 1 *ff*

Oboe 2 *ff*

Clarinet in Bb 1 *ff*

Clarinet in Bb 2 *ff*

Bass Clarinet *ff*

Bassoon 1 *ff*

Bassoon 2 *ff*

Horn in F 1 *ff*

Horn in F 2 *ff*

Trumpet in C 1 *ff*

Trumpet in C 2 *ff*

Trombone 1 *ff*

Trombone 2 *ff*

Tuba *ff*

Timpani *ff*

Percussion 1
Marimba *p* *ff* *p* *fp* *ff*
Crash Cymbals *ff* *mf* *swish*

Harp
D C B | E F G A *mf* *mf*

Violin I *ff* *con sord.* *n < pp* *n < pp* *divisi*

Violin II *ff* *con sord.* *n < pp*

Viola *ff* *con sord.* *n < pp*

Cello Solo I *solo* *n* *ff* *mf < fp* *fp < ff* *< mf < f* *mp* *ff* *Gilosi*

Cello Section II *ff* *con sord.* *n* *p*

Bass *ff* *con sord.* *n < p*

The Thing With Feathers

2

molto rit. $\text{♩} = 110$ *A tempo* *rit.*

10

FL. 1 *sub. ff*

FL. 2 *sub. ff*

Ob. 1 *sub. ff*

Ob. 2 *sub. ff*

B♭ Cl. 1 *sub. ff*

B♭ Cl. 2 *sub. ff*

B. Cl. *sub. ff*

Bsn. 1 *sub. ff*

Bsn. 2 *sub. ff*

Hr. 1 *sub. ff*

Hr. 2 *sub. ff*

C Tpt. 1 *sub. ff*

C Tpt. 2 *sub. ff*

Tbn. 1 *sub. ff*

Tbn. 2 *sub. ff*

Tuba *sub. ff*

10

Timp. *sub. ff*

10

Perc. 1 *n* *f* *mp* *mf* *ff*

Perc. 2 *ff* *p* *mp* *mf* *ff* *To suspended cymbal*

10

Hp. *p* *mp* *mf* *f* *ff* *D: C B | E F G A* *D C B | E F G A*

molto rit. $\text{♩} = 110$ $\text{♩} = 50$ *rit.*

10

Vln. I *sub. ff* *n* *p* *senza sord.* *mf* *divisi* *ff*

Vln. II *sub. ff* *n* *p* *senza sord.* *mf* *ff*

Vla. *sub. ff* *n* *p* *senza sord.* *mf* *ff*

Vc. Solo I *n* *p* *f* *mf* *ff* *End solo*

Vc. II *sub. ff* *n < p* *senza sord.* *mf* *ff*

Cb. *sub. ff* *n* *p* *f* *mf* *ff* *senza sord.*

The Thing With Feathers

A tempo *molto rit.* $\text{♩} = 115$

FL. 1
FL. 2
Ob. 1
Ob. 2
B♭ Cl. 1
B♭ Cl. 2
B. Cl.
Bsn. 1
Bsn. 2
Hn. 1
Hn. 2
C Tpt. 1
C Tpt. 2
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
Tuba
Timp.
Perc. 1
Perc. 2
Hp.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc. Solo I
Vc. II
Cb.

mp *mf* *p*

A tempo *con sord.* *molto rit.* $\text{♩} = 115$

n *p* *mp* *pp*

solo *n* *mf* *f* *p* *End solo*

n *p* *mp*

The Thing With Feathers

This page of the musical score, numbered 4, contains staves 22 through 33. The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- Flutes (Fl. 1, Fl. 2):** Both parts are mostly silent until measure 22, where they play a melodic line starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Oboes (Ob. 1, Ob. 2):** Similar to the flutes, they enter in measure 22 with a melodic line in *f*.
- Clarinet in B-flat (Bb Cl. 1, Bb Cl. 2):** Both parts enter in measure 22 with a melodic line in *f*.
- Bass Clarinet (B. Cl.):** Enters in measure 22 with a melodic line in *mp*, which then increases to *f*.
- Bassoons (Bsn. 1, Bsn. 2):** Both parts enter in measure 22 with a melodic line in *mp*, which then increases to *f*.
- Horns (Hn. 1, Hn. 2):** Both parts enter in measure 22 with a melodic line in *mf*.
- Trumpets (C Tpt. 1, C Tpt. 2):** Both parts enter in measure 22 with a melodic line in *mf*.
- Trombones (Tbn. 1, Tbn. 2):** Both parts enter in measure 22 with a melodic line in *mf*, which then increases to *f*.
- Tuba:** Enters in measure 22 with a melodic line in *mp*, which then increases to *f*.
- Timpani (Timp.):** Plays a rhythmic pattern throughout, with dynamics ranging from *mp* to *f*.
- Percussion (Perc. 1, Perc. 2):** Both parts are silent throughout this section.
- Harpsichord (Hp.):** Silent throughout this section.
- Violins (Vln. I, Vln. II):** Violin I starts in measure 22 with a melodic line in *p*, which increases to *mp* and then *mf*. Violin II is silent until measure 22, then plays a melodic line in *mf*, which increases to *f* and then *mp*.
- Viola (Vla.):** Enters in measure 22 with a melodic line in *f*, which then decreases to *mp*. It includes markings for *pizz.* and *arco*.
- Violoncello (Vc. II):** Enters in measure 22 with a melodic line in *mf*, which increases to *f* and then *mp*. It includes markings for *pizz.* and *arco*.
- Double Bass (Cb.):** Enters in measure 22 with a melodic line in *mp*, which increases to *f* and then *mp*. It includes markings for *pizz.* and *arco*.

30

Fl. 1 *ff* *mf*

Fl. 2 *ff* *mf*

Ob. 1 *mp* *ff* *mf*

Ob. 2 *mp* *ff* *mf*

Bb Cl. 1 *mp* *mf* *f* *sub. ff* *mf*

Bb Cl. 2 *mp* *mf* *f* *sub. ff* *mf*

B. Cl. *mp* *ff* *mf*

Bsn. 1 *p* *ff* *mf*

Bsn. 2 *p* *ff* *mf*

Hn. 1 *mp* *f*

Hn. 2 *mp* *f*

C Tpt. 1 *mp* *f*

C Tpt. 2 *mp* *f*

Tbn. 1 *mp* *f*

Tbn. 2 *mp* *f*

Tuba *mp* *f*

Timp. *pp* *mp* *f*

Perc. 1

Perc. 2

Hp.

Vln. I *mf* *sub. f* *mf* *sub. ff* *mf*

Vln. II *mf* *sub. f* *mf* *sub. ff* *mf*

Vla. *arco* *sub. f* *ff*

Ve. II *arco* *sub. f* *mf* *f* *sub. ff* *f*

Cb. *f* *sub. ff*

The Thing With Feathers

This page of the musical score, numbered 6, contains parts for various instruments. The woodwind section includes Flutes 1 and 2 (Fl. 1, Fl. 2), Oboes 1 and 2 (Ob. 1, Ob. 2), Bass Clarinets 1 and 2 (B. Cl. 1, B. Cl. 2), Bassoon 1 (Bsn. 1), and Bassoon 2 (Bsn. 2). The brass section includes Horns 1 and 2 (Hn. 1, Hn. 2), Trumpets 1 and 2 (C. Tpt. 1, C. Tpt. 2), Trombones 1 and 2 (Tbn. 1, Tbn. 2), and Tuba. The string section includes Timpani (Timp.), Percussion 1 (Perc. 1), Percussion 2 (Perc. 2), Harp (Hp.), Violin 1 (Vln. I), Violin 2 (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello II (Vc. II), and Contrabass (Cb.). The score is written in a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. It begins at measure 35. Dynamics such as *ff*, *f*, *mf*, and *fz* are indicated throughout. The woodwinds and strings play complex rhythmic patterns, while the brass and strings provide harmonic support. The percussion parts are mostly rests.

This page of the musical score, titled "The Thing With Feathers", page 7, contains the following instruments and parts:

- Flutes (Fl. 1, Fl. 2):** Both parts play a melodic line starting at measure 42 with a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Oboes (Ob. 1, Ob. 2):** Both parts play a melodic line starting at measure 42 with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, which increases to forte (*f*) by measure 45.
- Clarinets (B. Cl. 1, B. Cl. 2):** Both parts play a melodic line starting at measure 42 with a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Bassoon (B. Cl.):** This part is silent throughout the page.
- Bassoons (Bsn. 1, Bsn. 2):** Both parts are silent throughout the page.
- Horns (Hn. 1, Hn. 2):** Both parts play a rhythmic accompaniment starting at measure 42 with a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Trumpets (C. Tpt. 1, C. Tpt. 2):** Both parts play a rhythmic accompaniment starting at measure 42 with a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Trombones (Tbn. 1, Tbn. 2):** Both parts play a rhythmic accompaniment starting at measure 42 with a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Tuba:** Plays a rhythmic accompaniment starting at measure 42 with a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Timpani (Timp.):** Plays a rhythmic accompaniment starting at measure 42 with a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Percussion (Perc. 1, Perc. 2):** Both parts are silent throughout the page.
- Harp (Hp.):** This part is silent throughout the page.
- Violins (Vln. I, Vln. II):** Both parts play a melodic line starting at measure 42 with a mezzo-forte (*mp*) dynamic, which increases to forte (*f*) by measure 45.
- Viola (Vla.):** Plays a melodic line starting at measure 42 with a mezzo-forte (*mp*) dynamic, which increases to forte (*f*) by measure 45.
- Cello (Ve. II):** Plays a melodic line starting at measure 42 with a mezzo-forte (*mp*) dynamic, which increases to forte (*f*) by measure 45.

The Thing With Feathers

This page of the musical score, titled "The Thing With Feathers", contains measures 49 through 54. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves for each instrument family. The woodwind section includes two Flutes (Fl. 1 and Fl. 2), two Oboes (Ob. 1 and Ob. 2), two Bass Clarinets (B. Cl. 1 and B. Cl. 2), two Bassoons (Bsn. 1 and Bsn. 2), two Horns (Hn. 1 and Hn. 2), two Trumpets (C Tpt. 1 and C Tpt. 2), two Trombones (Tbn. 1 and Tbn. 2), and a Tuba. The percussion section includes two Percussionists (Perc. 1 and Perc. 2) and a Harp (Hp.). The string section includes Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc. II), and Contrabass (Cb.).

The score begins at measure 49 with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The woodwinds and strings play a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, while the brass instruments play a more melodic line. Dynamic markings such as *ff* (fortissimo) and *mf* (mezzo-forte) are used throughout. The score concludes at measure 54 with a final cadence.

The Thing With Feathers

56

(♩ = ♩) *molto rit.*

Fl. 1

Fl. 2

Ob. 1

Ob. 2

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

B. Cl.

Bsn. 1

Bsn. 2

56

Hn. 1

Hn. 2

C Tpt. 1

C Tpt. 2

Tbn. 1

Tbn. 2

Tuba

56

Timp.

Perc. 1

Perc. 2

Hp.

56

(♩ = ♩) *molto rit.*

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc. II

Cb.