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Graduate recital in composition

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GRADUATE RECITAL IN COMPOSITION

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Music

Denzel Washington
University of Northern Iowa
May 2019

This Study by: Denzel Washington

Entitled: Graduate Recital in Composition

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Music: Composition

Date

Dr. Jonathan Schwabe, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date

Dr. Nancy Cobb, Thesis Committee Member

Date

Dr. Rebecca Burkhardt, Thesis Committee Member

Date

Dr. Jennifer Waldron, Dean, Graduate College

This Recital by: Denzel Washington

Entitled: Graduate Recital in Composition

Date of Recital: 5 February 2019

has been as meeting the thesis requirement for the

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ABSTRACT

This graduate composition recital took place on 5 February 2019 at 8:00 pm in Davis Hall. The compositions on the program included: *Washington Variations* for Solo Violin, *Utopy* for Alto Saxophone and Piano, *Freedom Concerto for Clarinet Quintet*, and *Four Songs on Liberty*. This abstract will summarize the structural, rhythmic, and harmonic conception of each work.

Washington Variations

Washington Variations, the most recent composition on this program, began as a short one-movement work for the Composition studio recital on November 2018. After the premiere performance, I decided that the music needed a second movement that was faster and developed more of the musical themes presented in the first movement. My aim for this composition was to develop thematic materials and explore the intricacies of the violin.

The form is a theme with free variations in two movements. In the first movement, one motivic idea is transformed into interesting, and unique derivatives while maintaining the integrity of the motivic material.

Example 1. Full Theme of Movement 1



The first and second movements are contrasting in tempo; the slower first movement introduces the principal motive that is accompanied by pedal tones on the open G and D strings. Following the introduction, the theme incorporates the primary motivic gesture after the introduction. The theme transforms over time by being manipulated with varying rhythms and transpositions. The texture and color changes when the violin executes extended techniques to vary the theme. I incorporated my experiences studying Bach partitas, Paganini caprices, and the works of Stravinsky. The second section begins with flourishing passages that loosely outline the motivic idea which cadences on repeated eighth notes. This is followed by a variation of the theme from the first movement which also serves as the principal theme of the second movement. This section also features more violin techniques that are virtuosic in nature and create a variety of textures.

The harmonic structure of the work starts and ends in D major. The majority of the slow section is centered in D major, while the second section is primarily based in G major. The key areas freely change between different variations. Broadly speaking, the first section is predominantly in D major and visits the key of E major, G major, and C major. The transitions are facilitated by the notes of the motivic idea which are all naturally present in each of the previously mentioned keys. This movement also situates itself harmonically based on the G, D, and A strings on the violin. These keys facilitate flexibility in performing double and triple stops on the violin. The second section is less dense harmonically and the harmonic rhythm is generally slower than the first section. The variations are more governed by texture and techniques rather than by tonal shifts.

Where there are tonal shifts, they are achieved by linear transformation rather than by functional progression.

The most important thing to take away from this composition is that the violin is a versatile instrument and can create many different sounds to facilitate the complex variety of development present in this theme and variation.

Utopy

The second selection on my recital was performed by Mr. Christopher Dickhaus, Professor of Saxophone at UNI. He approached me to write a composition for alto saxophone and piano in the fall of 2017. I took up the offer, but struggled to create a title for this new work. While talking to one of my friends about my dilemma she offered the word *utopy*, which means a perfect place or idea or very closely related to the word utopia. I fell in love with the word and decided to create this composition surrounding the idea of a utopia. This is not written to exalt the utopian ideal but to create a soundscape of what a utopia might sound like. This work was premiered at the March 2018 regional NASA (North American Saxophone Alliance) convention at Cincinnati Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati, OH.

The formal design of this piece is a modified ritornello form consisting of eight sections. The first and last sections are similar and function as the opening and closing of the piece. The other six sections alternate between soloistic and cadenza-like passages in the saxophone part, and sections where the piano and saxophone are in conversation with one another. Several of the cadenza passages are played into the body of the piano, with

the sustain pedal depressed. The vibrations of the piano strings from the saxophone create a unique atmospheric effect. This composition is freely tonal and centers on Ab. Freely tonal refers to how the harmonies are circular in progression and do not necessarily rely on the tonic-dominant relationship to move the music forward. The piece also fully incorporates and uses the interval of a third to develop ideas and form harmonies and melodies. The first full representation of the thematic material is heard in the saxophone in the second section.

Example 2. *Utopy*: Thematic Material 2nd Section

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G-flat major. The first staff begins at measure 26 and contains a melodic line with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic marking. The second staff begins at measure 32 and continues the melodic line, also marked mp. The notation includes various note values, rests, and phrasing slurs.

The piano repeats this idea while the saxophone provides contrast by playing a countermelody. In the third section the instruments are heard in imitation, building tension as they ascend to a higher tessitura. In the faster fourth section a new theme is heard in the piano that is then repeated by the saxophone. The rhythm is displaced between the instruments which creates tension and an energy that culminates in a unison rhythm, leading to an emphatic arrival. The section ends with a saxophone solo serving as the climax of the piece. The remaining sections are a return of previous material in a loose palindromic arrangement (abcd/dcba). The piece ends on a final Ab in the saxophone that resolves the tension created by the piano.

Freedom: Concerto for Clarinet Quintet

Originally written for clarinet and piano in the fall of 2017, this was one of the first pieces that I started writing as a graduate student. I wrote it specifically for my friend Lucas Randall, a graduate student majoring in clarinet performance. My goal was to create a virtuosic work, one that would challenge the technical abilities of the performer. I decided to orchestrate the piano part for string quartet near the end of October 2018 because I believed that the character and style of the music would be more faithfully represented with a string quartet. The decision to score for string quartet allowed for greater timbral contrast, contrapuntal clarity, and more varied articulations.

The concerto is split into three movements; the second and third are separated by a cadenza. The first movement begins with a slow solo cadenza in the clarinet that is followed by a brief introduction that sets the tempo for the rest of the movement.

Example. 3a Primary Theme of First Movement

Violin *mp*

Vln. 7

Vln. 11

Example. 3b Secondary Theme of First Movement

Vln. 16 *p*

passed between the strings and gradually rests on a final cadence that is embellished and delayed by the viola.

The second and the third movements are separated by a clarinet cadenza. The form of the third movement borrows from the jazz idiom by utilizing an extended blues structure which consists of a twenty-four-measure length instead of the standard twelve measures. It also refers to early 20th-century ragtime style, consisting of a highly syncopated melody with a stride-styled accompaniment. This pattern not only provides harmonic clarity, it also lends rhythmic stability and direction throughout the fast-paced movement. Both sections introduce the theme in the violin, closely followed by the clarinet. The first section is straightforward with minimal displacement of the beat. The second section becomes increasingly more displaced, with frequent hemiola between the melody and the accompaniment. This rhythmic urgency is reinforced by the repeating low register figure in the cello. The movement ends with a short clarinet solo, followed by melismatic passages exchanged between the strings, then passed on to the clarinet, which carries the piece to its final dramatic conclusion.

Four Songs on Liberty

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

These four songs are inspired by the powerful and moving words of the Declaration of Independence, quoted above. Specifically, the songs pay homage to liberty which is one of three rights recognized by Americans that comes from God and that no

form of power either foreign or domestic can take away. These original poems focus on the beauty of the idea of liberty and how it should be treasured, sought after, and protected. The titles of the songs are; *Sweet Rings the Sound*, *Harsh the Silence*, *This Not Be the Survivor's Fate*, and *Liberty*. I wrote the lyrics to these songs and scored them for soprano, piano, flute, oboe, clarinet, trombone, and violin. In this song cycle, I sought to choose an appropriate way to underscore my strong convictions regarding the beauty, power, and majesty of the idea of liberty.

The first song characterizes liberty as a force that is far away but will come to those who pursue it. The second song depicts what it is like when liberty is absent. The third song depicts how even in the absence of liberty, people will still hope and persevere until liberty arrives. The fourth and final song portrays liberty as a being, that is meant to be treasured, sought after, and protected. This is similar to how the book of Proverbs portrays wisdom in the first nine chapters.

I. Sweet Rings the Sound

Sweet Rings the Sound from beyond/ All must turn and respond
Those on Earth, Sea, and Sky/ The Harbinger of the new day come

Listen and believe for the time is near/ When all things will be made clear
The sound grows each passing hour/ Blooming, brighter, fuller than a spring
flow'r

It pierces the ears of all who deny/ And soothes those who have hope in their eyes
For a new day soon fast to come/ To complete the work that since begun.

The first song, *Sweet Rings the Sound*, presents the leitmotif representing liberty is presented. The texture and presentation of the leitmotif showcases how the sound in the

distance sweetly rings and brings comfort to those who seek it but is piercing for those who seek to thwart it.

Example 5. Leitmotif of Liberty



The leitmotif is repeated and manipulated to loosely follow the text and appears throughout the first and third songs. The leitmotif is expanded, transposed and varied between the stanzas of the first song. In the third song, the leitmotif returns to recall that idea of liberty.

Text painting (using musical means to depict elements of the text) also occurs during interludes between stanzas. The static melody conveys a contemplative mood that seeks to evoke awe and mystique. The form of the piece is through-composed and guided by the text. Each stanza of the lyric separated by a brief musical interlude. The song ends with a subdued resolution that is juxtaposed with the darker nature of the second song.

II. Harsh the Silence

Harsh the Silence that fills all lives
Bound by shackles barely to survive
Scorned, Abused, made to be a fool
Surely empty with no meaning, just another tool

Harsh the Silence represents the absence of liberty and the void that is left when liberty is taken away or forcefully oppressed. The melismatic setting of this short poem creates a sense of longing with sighing gestures to represent the emotions felt by those

without liberty. The harmonic landscape of this work is more chromatic and less stable, corresponding to the somber character of the text. The liberty leitmotif is noticeably absent signifying the silence, and replaced by an introspective melody presented by the soprano. The song ends eerily with a doubling of the final melody in the soprano and violin performing artificial harmonics.

Example 6. Ending to *Harsh the Silence*

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: "emp - ty with no mea - ning just a - no - ther tool." The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef, marked "arco" and "p". The music is in a minor key and features chromatic movement and artificial harmonics.

III. This Not Be the Survivor's Fate

No! This not be the Survivor's Fate/ Remember the words of the ancient great
Soon to come the sound that frees/ All those who hope and believe

The time be not now to come. But take heart/ A sound from far and away
Will break the grey glooming clouds/ that keep us at bay.

This not be the Survivor's Fate is a strong rebuke to the conclusions reached in the second song, rejecting life without liberty. This song is the most energetic of the four and it seeks to stir the soul to embrace liberty, and to persevere until it is heard far and wide. The song starts with three exclamations of the word "no!" denouncing the defeatism of the previous song. This is followed by a rhythmic ostinato in the left-hand piano and trombone. The right-hand piano and violin provide a countermelody with flowing sixteenth notes. Forward motion is generated by hemiola between the melody and

ostinato. The song ends with a fading away of the intense energy by dropping the instruments out of the texture until the lone clarinet sustains a concert Eb. This pitch serves as the transition into the fourth and final song of this cycle.

IV. Liberty

Liberty how her voice resounds so near/ Freeing all who listen from endless fear
Comforts those who believe in her just cause/ Filling them with wonder and complete
awe.

Liberty, how her heart beats so softly/ Compels man to hold and adore justly
Never forget how sweet and so precious/ That we must protect her from the vicious
Always under attack from those who hate/ All that she stands for hurts their ambitions
Always seeking to end her noble fate/ All must protect her without condition

Liberty, How she stands tall and so proud/ Defended by those who heard her so loud
Stronger now because many now do believe/ Liberty's voice has the power to free

Liberty is the final song and is modeled in the style of a hymn, extolling the virtues of liberty and the importance it holds in the hearts of many people. The optimistic character allows for a final resolution of the tension created in the previous songs. The text is in iambic pentameter and set in a strophic manner. The first stanza is sung unaccompanied and in a declamatory manner. The piano and woodwinds enter on the second stanza providing a homophonic harmony with the melody in the soprano. In the third stanza, the key center shifts from Eb major to Bb minor. The resulting darker harmonic color is accentuated by the trombone doubling the voice. The last stanza modulates from Bb minor to the starkly brighter key of G major, depicting the resolute and hopeful tone of the text. The entire cycle characterizes liberty as a force or a being and the influence it has when it is present and when absent.

This recital features a diverse selection of compositions with different and unique combinations of instruments. *Washington Variations* is a virtuosic solo violin piece that features the violin's many sounds and techniques including multiple stops, pizzicato, artificial harmonics, and advanced bow strokes such as bariolage (a fast bowing technique). *Utopia* explores the unique sounds between the alto saxophone and the piano. This piece features the atmosphere that is created when the force of the saxophone vibrates the piano strings. This composition also utilizes the extended range of the saxophone and explores the colors of this particular tessitura. *Freedom: Concerto for Clarinet Quintet* focuses on the unique interplay of chamber music and the intimacy it provides. The piece focuses on the dialogue between the string quartet and the clarinet. This work also highlights the flexibility and range of the clarinet. *Liberty*, the last composition on my graduate recital is a set of four songs that characterize and personifies the idea of liberty. These songs challenge the soprano to balance with an unusual combination of instruments, and also the soprano's ability to sing in a variety of textures and through unusual harmonies. My compositions on this recital are a portfolio of my style and a representation of my studies at the University of Northern Iowa.

Denzel Washington

Graduate Recital in Composition

In partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the Master of Music degree in Composition
From the Studio of Dr. Jomathan Schwabe

February 5, 2019
8:00 pm
Davis Hall

PROGRAM:

Washington Variations (2018)

Denzel Washington
(b.1995)

Bethany Washington, violin

Utopy (2017)

*Professor Christopher Dickhaus, alto saxophone
Dr. Robin Guy, piano*

Concerto for Clarinet Quintet "Freedom" (2017)

- I. *Largo-allegro*
- II. *Slow*
- III. *Fast*

*Lucas Randall, clarinet
Bethany Washington, violin
Abigail Moore, violin
Gabriel Forero, viola
Kelsey Chidley, cello*

Four Songs on Liberty (2018)

- I. *Sweet rings the sound*
- II. *Harsh the silence*
- III. *This not be the survivor's fate*
- IV. *Liberty*

Taylor Dengler, soprano
James Mick, piano
Bethany Washington, violin
Kim Abeyta, flute
David Thompson, oboe
Lucas Randall, clarinet
Tom Mortenson, trombone
Meredith Tipping, conductor