

## ABSTRACT

### Prophecy

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Throughout this paper I will provide analytical insight into the various compositional elements that constitute my capstone master's project for orchestra, *Prophecy*. Utilizing examples from the score as well as those of composers greater than myself, I will focus on five major elements of the work: namely, its conceptual origins, thematic/harmonic content, formal structure, orchestration, and significant compositional influences. In doing so it is my hope that the reader might gain a more comprehensive understanding of the work, the creative processes behind its production, its musical makeup and architecture, and its place in the modern orchestral repertoire.

Prophecy

by

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A Thesis

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Conception of the Work

#### *A Waking Dream*

The genesis of this work may best be described as an unexpected haunting between the hours of 1 and 2 am, as I lay in bed on some frigid night in December of 2019. Just as I began to slip into a full release of the day, a single clarinet chirped in my ear. I barely noticed, for this kind of occurrence was not anything new: often, when between states of awake-ness some peculiar musical idea will happen upon me without consequence. This time, however, the lone chirping persisted, and grew more agitated, until it was joined by a second clarinet, with a similar urgency to its tone on a sporadic and even panicked repetitive gesture. Still drifting, a third, fourth, and fifth clarinet were added to the fold, until finally I was jolted awake in a pitch-dark room that (in my mind, of course) resounded with what sounded like a frantic flock of birds. So powerful was this musical apparition that I immediately shot up and grabbed my iPhone to relay this experience through the magic of a voice memo; I could not let something so compelling (albeit terrifying) slip away. Although I did eventually fall asleep that night, the impression made by such an otherworldly experience remained in my head in the coming days and served as the germinating idea for my orchestra piece.

#### *Goal for the Work*

After further deliberation, I came to the unfortunate realization that most modern orchestras simply aren't built for "clarinet flocks" of the scale to which this haunting

musical idea required. Thus, I modified the idea, but retained much of its original essence, beginning the orchestral work with a lonely clarinet on chirping, grace-note-heavy and tonally ambiguous melodic material. And instead of a second clarinet, I chose a solo bassoon to partake in a kind of contrapuntal dance with the clarinet, until the two voices grow so agitated that their crescendo has no choice but to bring about a forceful entrance of the orchestra, with sustained dissonant chords in the strings and an aleatoric woodwind ensemble soaring above with freely played sweeping gestures. Although a bit of “tweaking” was needed to make this idea practical for the standard orchestra, I will do everything in my power to recreate this chorus of clarinets in some future avant-garde project. At this time, however, my main intention was to build on more of the “spirit” of this idea in order to create a dynamic orchestral work with highly contrasting styles, elaborate orchestration, thrillingly challenging scalar gestures, and inventive colors. In short, my goal was to showcase the awe-inspiring versatility of the modern orchestra via a gripping, ever-changing and even theatrical one-movement piece. Furthermore, I wanted to push myself compositionally, allowing my imagination to guide the way without inhibition, and to give even an advanced orchestra an exhilarating challenge.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Thematic and Harmonic Content

#### *Thematic Origins*

I first had the idea to create a twelve-tone matrix for the derivation of my melodic/thematic content. This I did, and although I was pleased with the various iterations of my row, I began to feel creatively constricted. This, of course, directly contradicts the true function of a matrix; therefore, I came to the conclusion that for the purposes of this piece, “less is more.” Therefore, I cut it down to a hexachord, and chose the brightest, most “biting” notes and intervals I could. The resulting six-note chord, and my main motif, was C-E-B-F#-C#-G. This series of notes was perfectly suited for the overtly bright quality for which I was aiming, both in terms of melodic content and its resulting harmonic texture. Serving as the basis for the entire work, the theme shows up numerous times, in various transpositions and instrumentations. Its first iteration is at the very beginning in the solo clarinet and is then echoed by the bassoon at a half step up in measure 11. Shortly after the forceful entrance of the orchestra, the cellos and violas take the theme in measure 26, transposed down a major 3<sup>rd</sup>, and develop it further, all the way to measure 38 at the onset of the wild three-measure crescendo. The theme once again appears in measure 48 on a low G, serving as an undercurrent that brings the orchestra to a crashing halt in measure 52. The motif is recycled in a myriad of ways throughout the rest of the piece, at times fragmented or slightly modified. One instance of this is in measure 151, where I gave the high violins a rather dramatic melodic line to glide on top



of a restless, highly agitated and thorny string texture below. The motif here is once again transposed upward, and this time undergoes a kind of dissolution, becoming something altogether new while still retaining prominent melodic elements previously used (e.g., the grace note figure so prevalent throughout). The motif's most powerful iteration can be found starting in measure 223 at the climax of the piece; for, even in the midst of total orchestral mayhem, all four horns are instructed to play the "full-flowering" of the theme as loudly as possible with their bells in the air, leading to a high F that sustains through the final crescendo of the piece. Fragments of the theme are then used for the last time within the fabric of the slow string chorale (most obviously by the basses in measure 249).

#### *Other Motivic Devices*

Along with the main motif are several closely related thematic ideas that go hand-in-hand. Most obviously, there are the various perpetual "hiccupping" grace note figures throughout the piece. Glancing at nearly any page in the score one is likely to find a handful of these figures, for through this gesture I have attempted to recreate that chilling idea that came to me in the night—the bird-like chirping that grew into an overwhelming swell and nearly knocked me out of my bed. This grace note gesture manifests itself in seemingly countless variations, giving way to all sorts of jagged, jumpy melodic fragments that reappear in some form throughout the work (for example, compare the start of the 1<sup>st</sup> clarinet's aleatoric line in measure 25 to that of the 1<sup>st</sup> flute and oboe at the pickup to measure 75). Other examples of recurring content include the frequent scalar riffs in both the woodwinds, strings and even, at times, the horns (see measures 185-199); pointed ascending and descending sixteenth-note figures (e.g., trumpets at measure 103,

trombones at measures 116 and 174, and even the percussion interlude from measure 163-174); and energetic glissandi by the harp (mm. 103-105), strings (mm. 176-182), clarinet (m. 203) and horns (mm. 198-199).

### *Harmonic Language*

Fortunately, the very same hexachord that served as the motivic foundation for the piece also informed the harmonic blueprint of *Prophecy*. As stated before, my intention was to write an overtly bright, even strident orchestral work; I wanted a certain jagged-ness to characterize not only the “linear” (melodic) lines but the “vertical” (harmonic) fabric as well. The basic framework of the notes C-E-B-F#-C#-G is comprised of a major third, followed by a series of open 4ths (if you descend, or fifths if you ascend) and a tritone. The makeup of this hexachord characterizes perfectly my pursued harmonic aesthetic within this work: bright, striking, open harmonies mixed with a hint of consonance and crunchy dissonance. For the dissonant effect I largely used major 2nds, at times employing the “flat 9,” while seldom writing minor 2nds (save for the most outrageously dissonant sections in the piece, e.g., just before the climax). I chose these intervals for their “bite” and their uncommonly bright character: I wanted the dissonance to have a staggering, though not off-putting, effect. Take, for example, the opening string chords from measure 24 through 40 (there exist plenty of open fourths, fifths and major seconds); or, in a spot less obvious in its harmonic construction, the trombones’ punctuated sixteenth note texture from measure 116 to 120 (plenty of dissonance abounds, yet not one instance of a minor 2<sup>nd</sup>). In the final, somber string chorale, I wrote my most tonal and consonant harmonies as a respite from the chaos that ensued just before—for I felt that by this time the listener was due a sentimental reprieve!

## CHAPTER THREE

### Formal Structure

#### *A One-Movement Work in Four Parts*

It was not necessarily my intention to compose any particular number of distinct “sections” within the piece; I only knew I how I wanted to start and end the work, and that it would be approximately ten minutes in length. Otherwise, I would simply “let the cards fall as they may.” The result was a single movement of music that may best be divided into four succinct, albeit continuous, sections. The general arch of the piece seems to follow a straightforward enough template: an initial idea (introduced by the lone clarinet), taken through a bit of development and transformation as the music builds toward a most rapid and boisterous climax, followed by a slow and sublime consolation with a harkening back to opening material.

#### *A Closer Look*

More specifically, the first section comprises measure 1 through 55. Its character is rather jarring and its function expository. The sudden entrance of the orchestra at Rehearsal B was so written to jolt the audience out of their seats, not unlike how I was jostled out of my slumber that fateful night in December of 2019. After the main idea is repeated by the cellos and violas, the orchestra gains momentum and bounds toward an abrupt halt, giving way to the start of the second section in measure 56. For the next forty measures the orchestral texture takes on a more ethereal tone created by an unsettling piano pattern and grumbling, muddy undercurrents in the bassoons and trombones,

decorated by short melodic “pops” from around the orchestra as variants of the original motivic material are passed around among instrument families. At measure 82 a sudden transition commences, leading toward a miniature orchestral outburst in measure 88.

From here the piano pattern reenters, and the music dies down to a low whisper.

The longest and most enthralling portion of music occurs from measure 96 to 238, during which some of the most expressive, grandiose gestures occur within every instrument family. Throughout this section is a recurring idea involving cascading, punctual trumpet figures, sparkling pitched percussion, fanfare-like supporting material in the brass, and wild harp glissandi. This recurring idea, a kind of ritornello, effectively splits the music into virtuosic “episodes” showcasing the various instrument families in a quasi-concertato fashion (including a solo percussion section). At Rehearsal K the ensemble suddenly hushes to allow for a dazzling, prickly woodwind trio to take over, leading to one final build toward the climax of the entire piece in measure 223. Here, everything including the “kitchen sink” is thrown in, as the fullest iteration of the trumpet ritornello unfolds above several distinct and highly contrasting textures among the families while all four French horns, with bells in the air, blast the most complete rendition of the main theme. The music moves to its final, more serene section via a gradually retarding percussion transition, which gives way to a kind of string “chorale,” still making use of the main motif within the texture. Finally, the return of the lone clarinet, as well as that same unsettling piano pattern from the second section, takes the music to its ultimate conclusion as the slowly pulsing strings fade away.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Orchestration

#### *Instrumentation and General Approach*

While *Prophecy* does require a considerably advanced and highly adventurous ensemble, my goal was to write for a relatively standard orchestral constitution. It is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two B flat clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns in F, three trumpets, three trombones and bass trombone, tuba, timpani, three percussion players, piano, harp, and strings. Hoping to explore the orchestra's wide range of expressive possibilities, each family of instruments "has its work cut out for it," and is given a decent helping of advanced, at times quite challenging, material. This goes for the conductor as well, what with the numerous sudden tempo changes, rhythmic ambiguity and busy (sometimes chaotic) interplay among all voices across the score. Just as my approach to linear (melodic/thematic) material emphasized the "gesture," my orchestral writing emphasized the latent timbral and textural potential of the modern orchestra. In the following section I will give several examples that indicate my affinity for color creation and textural exploitation.

#### *Timbre and Texture as Dominant Musical Elements*

Early on in the conceptualization process a compelling idea occurred to me, seemingly out of the blue: a sparkling, awe-inspiring and fearfully majestic brass coronation ornamented with bright pitched percussion. Instantly upon hearing this idea in my head I knew this was how I would begin my most urgent and expressive section of

music. This idea serves as a kind of “ritornello” throughout the fast section, first appearing in measure 103. With no melody in sight, this dominating material is most notably characterized by its overwhelming timbral effect. The trumpet material consists of falling chromatic sixteenth-note figures that overlap one another; the horns and trombones are given syncopated blasts on open, dissonant chords; and the cascading glockenspiel, along with the piano, alternates with the triangle above a repeating harp glissando. My preoccupation with timbre and color manifests itself in a number of other places. Take, for example, the material following Rehearsal I: While the (purely rhythmic and textural) pointed trombone figures gradually rise, a series of connected glissandi in the strings slides further and further upward, culminating in a collective shriek of high-pitched violin harmonics and screaming woodwinds, and punctuated by ethereal piano material. Beneath these “screams,” a restless, buzzing chromatic line in the low strings rises and falls nervously.

Other instances of textural predominance can be found from measure 76 through 81, as well as from measures 149 through 162. In the first example the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> bassoons alternate on sextuplets based on a 19-note pattern (resulting in unbroken continuity), while the contrabassoon, far below, rises on a foreboding sixteenth note pattern and the trombones growl unsettlingly. The second example involves the string section directly following the second iteration of the brass and percussion “ritornello.” In similar fashion to the raucous brass texture from measure 126 to 139, the majority of the strings are given highly rhythmic, sporadic and “jumpy” material, creating a dithery, agitated texture over which the 1<sup>st</sup> violins may soar melodically. Although the primary motif is indeed utilized here, my chief focus for this section was to effectively construct a

rustling, restless string texture untethered by melodic or functional harmonic restrictions; yet even this texture is by no means arbitrary in its intervallic distribution (for I wanted to remain true to the piece's overall harmonic/intervallic milieu and worked to avoid careless clashes among the moving parts).

One final example in which both gesture and textural/timbral effect were given prevalence is found between measures 200 and 214. Here, high above a steady snare drum line and occasional tom-toms, the piccolo, flute, and clarinet each independently exclaims its own spritely, agile scalar and arpeggiated figures, resulting in a playful composite texture with glittering colors. Underneath the frolic, the bassoons and cellos take turns on low, rhythmic and grumbling descending figures not only to provide a sense of phrase structure and cadence, but to add a balancing timbral element to the high frequencies above—an element best described as menacing or even downright monstrous. These descending gestures are punctuated by a low, rumbling timpani roll, providing further equilibrium to the simultaneous extremities throughout the section.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Significant Compositional Influences

#### *Excerpts from Other Works*

It is an immensely difficult task to give only a select few examples of other composers' works that have had a transformative impact on my own writing, but for the purposes of this paper I find myself inescapably constrained. Therefore, in this final section I will provide excerpts from works by four composers whom I greatly admire and whose style I sought to emulate whilst retaining my own distinct compositional voice. They include Christopher Rouse, Scott McAllister, John Williams, and Arnold Schoenberg. Unfortunately, for copyright reasons, I am unable to display excerpts from the orchestral score of Mr. Williams' piece, but will instead provide the piano reduction as a rudimentary visual aid to the specific ways in which *Prophecy* was influenced by this giant of a composer.

Figure 5.1 is an excerpt from Arnold Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. I had the pleasure of analyzing the second movement, "Vergangenes," for an Analytical Techniques project last year, and learned about Schoenberg's calculated approach to motivic development. However, there was another element from *Five Pieces for Orchestra* which impressed me: the sparkling high woodwind figures found in the first movement, "Vorgefühle." One of my favorite orchestral gestures, I obviously incorporated this idea in myriad iterations throughout my own work for its stimulating, theatrical quality.



The image shows a page of a musical score for Arnold Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Movement 1: "Vergangenes." The page is numbered 8 in the top left corner. The score is for a full orchestra, with parts for woodwinds, brass, and strings. The woodwind parts (Kl. Fl. I. II., Gr. Fl. I. II., Ob. I. II., Engl. H., Kl. I. II. in A., Kl. III. in D., Bkl. in B., Kbk. in A., Fag. I. II. III., Kfag.) are prominently featured with high-pitched, decorative figures. The brass parts (Kl. I. II. in A., Kl. III. in D., Bkl. in B., Kbk. in A., Fag. I. II. III., Kfag.) also have high-pitched figures. The string parts (Kfag.) are at the bottom of the page. The score is written in a complex, atonal style, with many accidentals and a high density of notes. The woodwind parts are particularly active, with many rapid passages and high-pitched figures. The brass parts also have high-pitched figures, often in the upper register. The string parts are more active in the lower register, with many rapid passages and high-pitched figures. The overall effect is one of intense, decorative complexity.

Figure 5.1. Decorative high-pitched woodwind figures from Arnold Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Mvt. 1: "Vergangenes."

Figure 5.2 is a brief excerpt from the first movement of what is perhaps my favorite piece of all time, Christopher Rouse's *Symphony No. 3*. While there are simply too many elements within this piece which have had a massive impact on my composing to list here, one of my favorite orchestral devices employed by Rouse is the sweeping gesture in the strings. Rouse achieves this unique effect by combining various chromatic, octatonic and auxiliary scalar lines within each of the string parts, offsetting them rhythmically and at various intervals, primarily according to range. The pitches are not in any way the important factor; rather, it is the enthralling *gesture*, the rapid, blustery, gusting motion of the string section that creates brimming anticipation for what comes next. I knew I wanted to write similar sweeping gestures in *Prophecy* to achieve this dramatic effect.



Figure 5.2. Sweeping string gestures from Christopher Rouse's *Symphony No. 3*, Mvt. 1.

Figure 5.3, while not a full orchestral score, depicts the beginning of John Williams' *Five Sacred Trees: Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra*. This piece has had an immeasurable impact on me, especially in terms of orchestration. However, the opening theme to the first movement, along with the prevailing "Old World" idiosyncrasies abounding throughout the movement (e.g., the spirited grace note figures and heavy rhythmic element) seem to have imprinted themselves in my mind and worked perfectly with my "chirping clarinet flock" idea. As a result, this style, characterized by an abundance of jumping grace note figures and an uncompromising rhythmic emphasis, served as a predominant musical element throughout *Prophecy*.

# THE FIVE SACRED TREES

Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra

(for Judith Le Clair)

SOLO BASSOON

JOHN WILLIAMS

## I. Eó Mugna

The musical score for the opening of 'The Five Sacred Trees' by John Williams, featuring a solo bassoon part. The score is in 4/4 time and includes various musical notations such as dynamics (f, p, sf, mf, cresc.), articulation (ten., quickly, deliberate, poco, poco accel., roll.), and phrasing (freely, Quasi Cadenza). The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 4, 7, 10, 12, and 15 indicated. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Figure 5.3. Opening material from John Williams' bassoon concerto, *The Five Sacred Trees*. "Old World" style characterized by grace note leaping figures and a strong rhythmic emphasis.

Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the powerful impression made upon my compositional voice by my teacher, Scott McAllister. For, when I realized I wanted to be a composer (well before applying to the master's program at Baylor University), I listened many times to my favorite of his works, *Aquillae*, for orchestra. I learned more from this piece than I can succinctly put into words, but perhaps my strongest takeaway from the work was the compellingly emotional effect of ending on a slow, solemn note. Indeed, I have yet to find a more moving ending to any large-scale piece than the simple, sublime and deeply felt string chorale that closes out such a finely crafted and dynamic work for orchestra. As I previously said, I knew how I wanted to

start and end my piece: for I knew I wanted to end on a somber, emotional tone. Figure 5.4 contains an excerpt from the final section of McAllister's *Aquillae*.

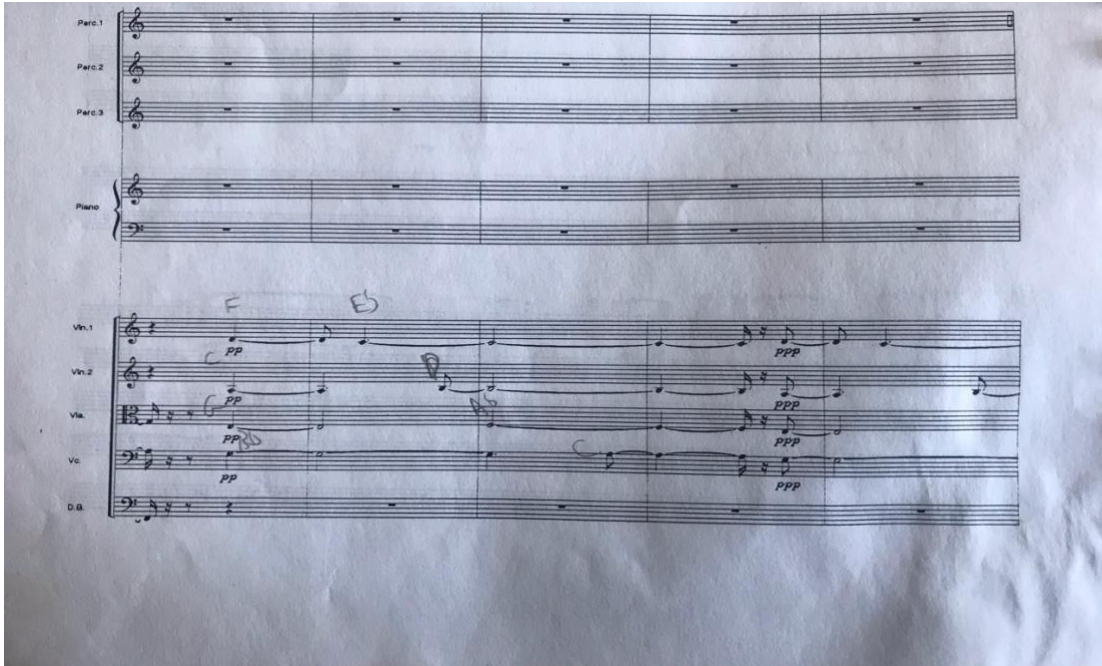


Figure 5.4. Final section of *Aquillae* featuring an emotional texture of pianissimo strings.

### *A Final Note and Conclusion*

Concerning the ending to *Prophecy* it should also be noted that many decisions regarding style, rhythm and even tonality were heavily influenced by a rather peculiar piece of music from my childhood. My father has one of the greatest voices of anyone I have heard, and when I was but a freshman in high school he completed a CD of some of his favorite songs. My piano teacher and mentor at the time, Seth Ward, produced the album, arranged the tracks and even composed an original song for *Live in Your Love*. The opening track, “Healing Hands,” remains to this day one of my all-time favorites (not to mention, I got to play the opening piano part). Throughout the song, Seth’s powerful instrumental arrangement, along with our friend Joey McFarland’s haunting violin

playing, and my father's vocals are more than enough to bring one to tears. But the postlude, an original addition written by Seth, is what makes this opening track utterly transcendental. In E flat major and featuring delicately pulsing strings underneath Joey's deeply emotional, soaring solo violin, this postlude has remained in my head through the years, and my own string "chorale" at the end of *Prophecy* pays tribute to one of the most significant pieces of music in my life. My hope is that I have done a sufficient job of effectively integrating these and so many other compositional ideas, styles and methods I have learned over the years into my own work. I suppose I will never be wholly satisfied with my finite abilities as a composer, but therein lies the joy of musicianship: It is our great privilege to better ourselves day by day. For, in the words of Ludwig van Beethoven: "Then let us all do what is right, strive with all our might toward the unattainable, develop as fully as we can the gifts God has given us, and never stop learning."

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