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SYMPHONIC FANTASY: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Tyler Turcotte

University of Kentucky, tftbass78@gmail.com

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Tyler Turcotte, Student

Dr. Joseph Baber, Major Professor

Dr. Michael Baker, Director of Graduate Studies

SYMPHONIC FANTASY:
DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Music in the
College of Fine Arts at the University of Kentucky

By

Tyler Turcotte

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Joseph Baber, Professor of Music Composition

Lexington, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

SYMPHONIC FANTASY: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The following piece is a three movement, twenty minute orchestral work in a Romantic style whose primary goals are accessibility and beauty. In the process of writing this piece, I learned that strong and memorable melodies are the key to a successful composition - taking influence from Henry Mancini and early Japanese video game composers, this work takes a central melodic theme through a series of variations to demonstrate the power of harmonic and orchestrational recontextualization. Rhythmically, the work utilizes techniques from the Minimalist and Progressive Rock traditions to strike a balance between rhythmic complexity and melodic focus. The three movements are meant to represent three steps towards self-actualization - Explore depicts curiosity and open-mindedness, Engage demonstrates the merits of focusing on one's craft, and Wonder represents the value of feeling awe towards the world even if it is not easy or simple. Ultimately, the work moves through a wide variety of moods and textures throughout its duration while staying focused on the central theme until the end, with the goal of creating a listening experience that is both rich and memorable.

KEYWORDS: Composition, Classical, Orchestral, Romantic, Symphony, Melody

Tyler Turcotte

Name

04/22/2019

Date

SYMPHONIC FANTASY:
DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

By

Tyler Turcotte

Joseph Baber

Director of Thesis

Michael Baker

Director of Graduate Studies

5/7/2019

Date

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LIST OF ADDITIONAL FILES

I._Explore_(Live).mp3	MP3 19 MB
I._Explore_(Mockup).mp3	MP3 19 MB
I._Explore_(Score).pdf	PDF 400 KB
II._Engage_(Mockup).mp3	MP3 11 MB
II._Engage_(Score).pdf	PDF 332 KB
III._Wonder_(Live).mp3	MP3 16 MB
III._Wonder_(Mockup).mp3	MP3 16 MB
III._Wonder_(Score).pdf	PDF 261 KB

Introduction

In Spring of 2017, I decided to change my degree focus from Performance to Composition. I have been doing both for 14 years, but it took me 12 to figure out that I find composition and analysis to be a much more fulfilling venture. When I started anew as a composition student under Dr. Baber and Dr. Holm-Hudson, I already knew that melody was my weak point as a composer, and that my melodic weakness was the primary element keeping my music from moving beyond mere imitation and background noise. With this in mind, I knew that my thesis composition would be both more successful and more beneficial to myself as a composer if it was extremely focused on melody and melodic craft.

Looking back, I'm am unsure as to why it took me so long to realize that melody was the most important part of music, and the weakest part of my own. My very first musical memories came from early video game soundtracks, which are, despite their (admittedly charming) technical limitations, absolute treasure troves of beautiful, memorable, and unpretentious melodies. From my exposure to Koji Kondo's iconic themes for The Legend of Zelda and the simple grandiosity of Nobuo Uematsu's Final Fantasy scores, among many others, I should have found that common melodic thread earlier on. Oddly enough it didn't really click until 2018, when I heard what I find to be some of the most emotionally direct and unpretentious music ever written: the music of Henry Mancini.

In Mancini's music I found not just a plethora of heart-wrenching harmonic progressions and devices but also an air of absolute simplicity. His melodies are rarely syncopated, even more rarely chromatic, and always undeniably memorable. And perhaps

with equal importance to the intrinsic value of these qualities, I found (through friends, family, and Youtube comments) that everyday people absolutely loved his music. It doesn't take a theorist to tell you that Moon River's melody is unforgettable, or that Two For the Road can immediately put a bittersweet smile on your face. These were songs that, while not being pedantic or demeaning, really touched people in an immediate but still deep way. What more have we to ask of music?

With my goal of melodic development in mind, framed by the unpretentious directness of Mancini's music and my own prior interests in rhythmic complexity and rich harmony, I took the Fall 2018 semester off of school to create this piece full-time. My direct goal, as written in September of 2018, was as follows: "To create a beautiful and exciting composition that demonstrates the breadth of my musical knowledge and leaves the audience invigorated and refreshed. Melody drives the entire work, and rhythm plays an equally important role without sounding too much like film scores. I want to aim for coherence and range simultaneously, much like my favorite soundtracks."

I set out to accomplish these goals by basing the piece around one central melody. This is a common technique in the romantic tradition (all the way back to the *idée fixe* of *Symphony Fantastique*) and in soundtracks of all kinds, but video game soundtracks in particular make use of this quite often, and have created some of the most musically powerful experiences in my life.

I. Explore

The melody was actually written months before I started on the piece while improvising at the piano, but when I sat down to work on the thesis it felt like a perfect

fit. The melody itself makes no effort to hide its simplicity, using primarily step-wise motion, a very clear rhythmic character, and only one chromatic pitch outside of A major. The 6/8 meter gives it a gentle lilt and a singsong-like quality, lending to an air of simplicity and memorability, particularly as I have used it in the first movement. The lack of chromatic motion, as well as the tendency towards the pentatonic tones of the scale, makes the melody very flexible, which made it possible to recontextualize the melody with a wide variety of harmonic accompaniments. The most obvious example of this is in measure 131 of the first movement, where the low brass play the original melody nearly verbatim to a completely different effect due to the strange underlying harmony.

I learned the lesson of using a primarily diatonic melody from Mancini, but I borrowed the idea of developing the melody by presenting it in new contexts from video game soundtracks. Frequently while transcribing the greatest and most memorable video game pieces, which would feel magical and harmonically rich, I would find that their melodies were entirely diatonic while the accompaniment provided all of the harmonic interest. This really clicked as I was writing the piece, and I made sure to keep all of my melodies as simple as possible in order to capture the feeling that those pieces would give me. This choice also kept the melodies flexible, making it much easier to craft a satisfying recontextualization of familiar material.

That being said, I found that setting out on a purely melodic venture became fatiguing after a time. While I clearly wanted melody to function as the core of the piece, I realized the need for sections that were purely harmonic to create periodic breathers in the torrent of melodic material. This is not an unconventional or original idea, as countless works from Bach to the present will embark on lengthy harmonic sequences

and transitional passages to move to new keys or simply prolong a section. However, I paid deliberate attention to the durational balance between these harmonic breaks and the melodic sections, keeping them brief and to the point with the goal of keeping the listener engaged. This planning is most deliberately apparent in the first movement, but also takes place on larger scale later in the work.

I also paid close attention to tempo, acknowledging the contemporary difficulty of keeping listeners engaged for more than the duration of a pop song while staying in a single tempo. The first half of the first movement accelerates into a quicker tempo through the transition section at measure 60, setting up a brighter version of the main theme, before slowing back down at the transition in measure 106. Dr. Baber advised me once that speeding up is easy and almost always successful, but slowing down has a tendency to be uncomfortable and challenging to pull off. With this in mind, I deliberately planned the transition and decelerando from measure 106 to 115 to feel open and metrically unclear (most evident in the triplets in the vibraphone), as opposed to the punctuated eighth notes that led the accelerando in measure 60. The lack of metrical clarity makes the reduction of the tempo more subtle, allowing the clear return to the original tempo at measure 115 to feel significant and instantly identifiable.

Structurally, the first movement has a fairly unconventional form. I originally planned on calling it a Theme and Variations, but the music felt too exploratory and had too much melodic material to fit into that style. I instead consider the form to be a modified loop with an introduction and a coda, essentially playing out as ABCDA'B'C'D'E.

Table 1. Measure numbers for the form of the first movement

Section	Measures	Section	Measures
Introduction	1 – 9	A'	115-148
A	10 - 40	B'	149 - 165
B	41 - 66	C'	166 - 174
C	67 - 82	D'	175-182
D	83 - 114	Coda	183 - 224

I took inspiration for this structure from video game music and its intrinsically looping nature. If you pick up a CD for a video game soundtrack, what is presented as two hours of music may actually just be one hour of music with a loop added to each track. While this may initially seem like laziness, I have found through my years of running a video game music show on WRFL that hearing a track twice in a row creates a much deeper understanding and appreciation than simply hearing it once and moving on. There is historical precedence for this in the Viennese Society for Private Musical Performances from the early 20th century, where complex pieces of music would sometimes be performed twice on the same program in an effort to increase comprehensibility.

Thus, the form of the first movement tries to find a middle ground between a verbatim repeat and through composition by repeating the melodic framework but recontextualizing all of the material with variations on the orchestration, harmonic accompaniment, and mode, generally leaning towards a darker sound in the latter half. There are some abbreviations, including the “compression” of the secondary theme in measure 149 and the transformation of the bassoon melody in measure 175, but generally the melodic form from measures 115-178 is to be understood as a series of variations on

the melodic form of measures 10-86.

After trudging through all of these dark variations on the piece's melodic material, the piece moves into a rhythmically exciting and uplifting coda. It begins with a triumphant declaration of the B theme, the melody that was most thoroughly transformed during the B' section, extending the chromatic sequence for two extra bars to reach a solid IV – V – I cadence back to A major, accentuated with a *molto allargando*. The following *Jubiloso* section presents the D theme, originally heard in the solo bassoon, stacked on top of the main theme, presented here by the driving strings in a polymetric fashion.

Considering traditional harmonic form, the fact that the first movement ends on an incessantly repeated E chord may seem odd. However, the introduction of the new rhythmic energy combined with the Mixolydian mode that begins the second movement demonstrates the entire conclusion of the first movement to be a set up for the following movement. I chose to not end the first movement in a harmonically conclusive manner in order to emphasize the larger structure of the piece (and to make it less likely that people will clap between movements!). The second movement ends in a similarly inconclusive fashion to further emphasize this point.

II. Engage

Rhythmic complexity has always been a strong point of mine, as I have always been enthralled by mixed meter music from an early age. This is another staple of early video game soundtracks, but also found its way to me through the music of Leonard Bernstein, Bela Bartok, and progressive rock music. With that in mind, I set out on this piece with the intent to reel in this tendency of mine and to be sparing with my use of mixed meter. This may sound odd, but it is a significant personal accomplishment to have

written the first 7 minutes of the first movement (after the introduction) without a single time signature change.

That being said, I had to let it out somewhere. The bulk of the rhythmic complexity finds its way into the second movement, with the primary ostinato being comprised of a compound measure of $7/8$ and a measure of $5/8$ (adding up to $3/2$ or $6/4$). Instead of allowing the exciting rhythms to be self-sufficient, as I may have done in the past, I made sure to incorporate strong melodies as well. The main theme of the second movement draws melodic fragments from the B theme of the first movement, maintaining the lilting compound meter character atop the asymmetrical ostinato figure. In measure 24 an odd combination of timbres presents the main theme, distant and earthy in tone, but they are cut off before reaching the conclusion of the phrase by a one measure elision and a repeat of the second movement's theme. This repetition grows in intensity with the addition of the remainder of the string section, and gradually builds towards an explosive climax, from which the melodic voices begin a slow, somewhat painful descent.

Rhythmically, the transition from the brisk $3/2$ to the more laid-back $7/8$ gradually unfolds from the climactic arrival point. Accented by the toms but also working through the cello/viola ostinato, the accent pattern of each measure gradually expands, from quarter notes to dotted quarter notes to half notes to dotted half notes to whole notes, at which point the accent pattern crosses over two measures. The goal of this expansion is to reach $5/4$ time in a way that feels natural and fits into the clearly established pattern (which, technically, would be accents every dotted whole note, but then the piece would just be back in $3/2$ again). From the $5/4$ time, it only takes a small ritardando to turn a

measure of a quick 5/4 into a measure of a laid back 7/8 - the tempo markings work out to make these measures be of equal duration, effectively creating a unique metric modulation.

In the middle section of the second movement I let myself indulge in a more poppy mood, accented by bright triangle, punctuated melodies, and an incessant 7/8 pulse. The melody in measure 90 can also be seen as a union of the overall main theme with the D theme from the first movement. I wrote this passage not just to provide a more laid-back relief to the intensity of the giant decrescendo passage but also to create a contrast for the suddenly darker mood at measure 98. The material at measure 98 is the real goal of this section – a minor key variation on the main theme, played in a punctuated 7/8 instead of the smooth cantabile from the first movement. The low voices in measure 106 present a responding phrase, drawing again from the D theme of the first movement and leading out of the minor tonality. The snare drum in particular plays an important role here, as its militaristic march turns from an ominous threat into an affirmation of triumph, demonstrating the power of recontextualization in a rhythmic rather than tonal sense. At measure 115 the piece arrives at a giant suspended chord – at this point, all of the upper voices could easily step down a half step to resolve on the overall tonic of the piece, A major. However, the harmony slides to a B major chord instead, revealing the chord in measure 115 to be a predominant of E. This sets up a giant cadence back to the original tonal center of this movement, and all it takes is a tempo change to return to the opening ostinato figure. In a more traditional form, this recapitulation would be an excellent opportunity to repeat the original material before moving to a different key area than the original presentation. However, in respect for the

surely exhausted cellos and violas, I decided to move quickly towards a new ending.

As is apparent for the remainder of the piece, the suspended chord on measure 115 has more importance than just a single fakeout. Atop the return of the ostinato, the winds present a series of parallel sus4 chords that quickly move away from the movement's original harmonic sequence. I took inspiration for these striking chords, as well as the shape of the main ostinato itself, from video game composer Yasunori Mitsuda, whose compositions regularly make use of unconventional chords and arpeggios containing fourths and seconds more often than thirds to create a more magical and mysterious sound while still maintaining strong root motion to keep the tonality grounded and accessible. In my piece, the basses provide the sturdy downward motion while the mode shifts and the woodwinds provide beautiful yet unstable chords above.

The high strings swell in for a final statement of the second movement's theme, soaring upwards for one last melodic breath before the syncopated rhythm, already present in the Tom-toms, takes over completely. The remainder of this movement is pure rhythmic energy, but also serves as a setup for the third movement with the surprise entrance of the organ and a sudden dramatic chord change on measure 145. The unexpected modulation up a half step, using the bVI chord from the previous progression as a pivot, foreshadows the mysterious non-functional harmony that defines the third movement, while the presence of the organ and the enormity of it all prepares the listener for an even more dramatic climax at the very end of the piece.

III. Wonder

The opening of the third movement was deliberately planned as a relief from the frenetic energy that concludes the second movement, but on a larger scale the end of the

second movement and the beginning of the third were meant to serve together as the longest melodic pause in the entire work. Beyond its purpose as a moment of relief, the lengthy meditative organ passage serves as a gigantic setup for the return of the main theme in measure 20, effectively serving as an extended predominant chord. This extended passage without a strong melody was also designed to make the listener miss, or even long for, a melody to return, making the gigantic climax at measure 27 all the more satisfying.

As the title implies, however, this movement was not meant to be so direct. The chromatic harmonic passage presented by the brass starting in measure 30 serves to again prolong the delay of the melody's full return. The dramatic strings and driving timpani propel towards the triumphant brass chorale in measure 51, which gives the listener another taste of the main theme before making yet another diversion back to the tonal center of D, which began the movement.

Zooming out to the work as a whole, I was inspired to use the organ by Saint-Saen's *Symphony No. 3*, particularly the Adagio movement. While that piece is often remembered for its grandiosity and bombast, I found the Adagio, with its rhythmically simple melody and enigmatic chordal colorations, to be the most striking part of the work. I kept this atmosphere in mind while writing both the opening of this movement and the middle passage starting in measure 60 (originally written to be played by solo organ but arranged to create more interest). I also took inspiration from the finale to Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, particularly the penultimate molto meno mosso passage defined by a sense of uneasy peace while still being driven by the timpani's steady pulse.

The mixed meter and floating textures in the middle passage beginning in measure 74 were designed to evoke a more magical form of the second movement. While writing I originally found the finale to be somewhat dreary, especially coming off of the high energy of the previous movement, and couldn't find a satisfying way to move towards the triumphant ending while staying in the moderate tempo established at the beginning. I wrote this transitional passage to bridge the gap between the spacious atmosphere of the previous section and the *maestoso* counterpoint in measure 114, developing the mood and mixed meter of the second movement in a way that blended it into the new air of mystery and wonder that the third movement had created up to that point. This passage is effectively a send-off to all that came before it, with the low voices quoting both the main theme and the D theme from the first movement in measure 94 while the non-functional harmony and exciting ostinatos pay homage to the end of the second movement. The running strings and floating texture also pay homage to the finale from Sibelius' *Symphony No. 5*, another significant influence on this piece as a whole.

With all respects paid, the piece moves triumphantly towards its inevitable conclusion. The organ finally gets to take center stage, presenting (as organ music is wanted to do) an imitative counterpoint variation on the main theme. The melody takes a now-familiar detour in measure 127 – this interruption of the final descending gesture was used in measure 137 of the first movement, preceding the grotesque wind chorale, and again (more subtly) in measure 50 of the second movement, preceding the climax of the first section. This time the mode suddenly shifts to major, subverting the panic that the interruption created in the past, and setting up an enormous cadence to C# major.

(Notably, I also composed a brief *Adagio* movement in C# major for this work,

but decided not to include it as it disrupted the flow from the second movement to the finale. C# can also be seen as a particularly important key center, as it is the first non-diatonic chord heard in the piece (in measure 13 of the first movement) and often finds its way into harmonic accompaniment for the main theme. Further development of this work into a full symphony would certainly center around the balance and relationship between the true home of the piece, A major, and the chromatic mediant-related C# major.)

The gigantic C# cadence doesn't hold strong for long, however, as a disruptive bVI in the bass voices (notably on A) destabilizes the chord, setting up another interruption in the path towards the ending starting in measure 137. This final chromatic passage destabilizes the tonal center one last time, creating a tumultuous space in which to find the way back home. With a fortissimo timpani cadence, the piece finally arrives conclusively at A major.

The ending of the piece was planned near the very beginning of my writing process. I felt from early on that the only proper ending for a piece so thoroughly centered around a main theme would be a direct statement of the theme in its entirety, blown up to the largest possible scale. The final passage of the work is actually the first time since measure 10 of the very first movement that the theme has been heard in its entirety without modification or interruption, and the only time in the entire work that the melody is allowed to fully cadence on A major. The inevitability of a true conclusion becomes apparent in measure 151, where the C# major chord from the original harmonic progression is replaced with a triumphant E7 chord, further accentuated by the addition of the entire wind section to the orchestration. It is the purest, most direct presentation of the main theme in its fully realized form, and thus is the most satisfying way I could think to

end the work.

However, I have never been a fan of wholly conclusive and triumphant endings. From the fading woodwinds at the end of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* to the bizarre strikes at the end of Sibelius' *Symphony No. 5*, I have always been much more interested in endings that leave something uncertain and unresolved than in endings which act as if the piece has reached an absolute end. Thus, the solo oboe from the very first measure returns, dying away from the top of the last melodic phrase until it returns to the note that it began.

Conclusion

I believe that in writing this piece I have accomplished the goals that I set forth back in September of 2018. The unapologetically Romantic orchestration and harmonic language provides a suitably beautiful backdrop for the simple and tuneful melodies, and throughout the work I struck a careful balance between rhythmic excitement and calmer passages to keep it from feeling exhausting or overly long. The piece is 20 minutes long, but through tempo changes and careful transitions it has a structure and flow that keeps the listener readily engaged, even across gaps between movements. I have integrated lessons learned from studying soundtracks without actually sounding like soundtrack music by maintaining a melodic emphasis and creating ostinato figures that move beyond basic arpeggios. Lastly, I have created coherence across the work by developing and borrowing melodic material throughout all three movements, making sure to avoid overuse or lazy repetition but also working to keep the material in an easily identifiable form.

And perhaps most importantly, I think the piece is just plain nice to listen to.

Vita

Tyler Turcotte graduated Magna Cum Lauda with a BA in Music Performance and Music Technology from Transylvania University in 2015. He is currently pursuing a MA in Music Composition at the University of Kentucky.