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Kyle MacDonald
Western Kentucky University, kyle.macdonald638@topper.wku.edu

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OLYMPIA: A MUSICAL COMPOSITION FOR WIND ENSEMBLE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Kyle MacDonald

* * * * *

Western Kentucky University
2012

CE/T Committee:

Professor Michael Kallstrom, Advisor

Professor Gary Schallert

Professor Nathan Phelps

Approved By

_____

Advisor
Department of Music

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ABSTRACT

Olympia is a one movement musical composition to be performed by a wind ensemble. Written for the composer's honors capstone project, Olympia is an exploration into the world of composing for large musical ensembles. The main theme, heard in the trombone solo at measure 40, is the proverbial "voice in the wilderness" that heroically comes out of chaos and is heard throughout the piece in different forms. Starting in short score with piano and percussion, the piece was then orchestrated into the final version. Written in the fall of 2011 and the spring of 2012, Olympia was rehearsed and performed by the Western Kentucky University Wind Ensemble for a premiere on April 27th, 2012.

Keywords: Capstone Experience, Thesis, Music, Composition, Olympia, Wind Ensemble

Dedicated to Dan Stokes and Kyle Ray,

who showed me the joy of music

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I would like to thank the Honors College for the continued intellectual and financial support it provides for scholars at Western Kentucky University. I am indebted to the Honors College for the Honors Development Grant I received to purchase the Finale Music Notation Software on which I created my project.

Additionally, *Olympia* could not have been performed without the help of my peers in the WKU Wind Ensemble who played it magnificently as well as offered many suggestions as to individual parts. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and support that is necessary to complete a project like this.

VITA

December 13, 1990 . . . . . Born – Goshen, Kentucky

2009 . . . . . North Oldham High School, Goshen, Kentucky

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Music (Liberal Arts)

Major Field: Religious Studies

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All musicians play music. Some musicians also write music. Some of those musicians write music for band. For most of my life I have been comfortably in the first category of music-playing musician. While attending Western Kentucky University, I made the leap into the second branch, that of composer-musician. I found great enjoyment in writing cello solos, piano duets, and trombone quartets. But to stretch my abilities, I found that I wanted to jump into the third group and compose a piece for a large ensemble. The piece I created is *Olympia*, an eight-minute composition for wind ensemble.

This piece was written as a response to the atonality, serialism, and twelve-tone compositions written throughout much of the 20th century. Whereas one can appreciate the different nature of these forms of music, they are not necessarily enjoyable to the ear. My goal in writing a piece for a larger ensemble was to create something that my peers would enjoy playing, and that concertgoers would enjoy listening to. This process has produced a very pleasing and rewarding result. In the following pages, I will describe how I arrived at the end result of *Olympia*, as well as some of the challenges included and a musical analysis of the piece.

CHAPTER 2

THE COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

One of the hardest parts of writing *Olympia* was embarking on something I had never tried to accomplish before. I took a composition class in the spring of 2011 in preparation for the start of this project in the fall of 2011. I also took weekly lessons with Dr. Michael Kallstrom, professor of theory and composition at WKU as well as my project advisor.

Choosing to write the piece as one long movement as opposed to a few shorter ones, I started with a blank score on Finale Music Notation Software and nothing else. Looking at a large empty score, I was immediately overwhelmed by the scope of the project on which I had embarked. Thankfully Dr. Kallstrom set me on the right path by suggesting I start in a smaller score of only piano and percussion.

By working in short score, the ideas came much more quickly. The piece began to take shape as an up-tempo composition full of texture and life. After composing roughly twenty measures in short score, I started orchestrating what I had into a full band arrangement. Starting with the standard instrumentation for a wind ensemble with the one at WKU in mind, I added a few instruments such as soprano saxophone and contrabassoon that would add interesting timbres and depth to the composition.

At the beginning of the process I focused much more on notes and rhythms than the expression of those aspects. Using Finale Music Notation Software, I was able to quickly make progress thanks to the nature of the program, allowing you to immediately listen and critique the music you wrote.

After finishing a rough draft of *Olympia*, there was still much work to be done. I had written three great themes that were in three very different sections that each sounded complete on their own. My problem was that none of these sections related to each other, and because of that, I did not have a complete piece of music. I pondered the relation of the three themes and found a way to work previously stated melodic and rhythmic material into each section to create a smoother whole. I also added a lyrical introduction that brings in variations of some of the themes heard later in the piece.

After getting notes on the page, I had to think of how the music would balance in an actual band setting. While Finale does a respectable job of letting you hear a synthesized sound of what you have entered, it does not do justice to what it might sound like outside of a computer. Looking at my work, there were many spots where I rearranged where I had the melody and rhythmic figures to ensure that each would be heard without overpowering the other voices. Also during this process I added dynamics and articulations to give the piece a soul and a style. Without either of these, *Olympia* would have been a group of notes without being music.

After finishing composing and editing *Olympia*, it was time to give the piece to the band to rehearse and perform.

CHAPTER 3

REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE

While the composing process took most of the time of this project, rehearsal and performance were crucial elements to the completion of *Olympia*. Performance is essential to every piece of music. Less-performed music is not always valued as highly as those pieces that are constantly on concert lists. Part of why I chose to write a piece for wind ensemble is due to Director of Bands Dr. Gary Schallert's guarantee that it my piece would be played on a concert. The WKU Wind Ensemble started rehearsal three days a week on *Olympia* in March 2011 for a premiere on the April 27th concert.

After the first read-through of this piece I had spent countless hours on, I was equally excited and anxious. It was incredibly gratifying to hear something you've worked tirelessly on played on actual instruments instead of a computer's sythetic alternative. At the same time I was immediately taken aback at how the ensemble did not play it up to Finale's standards. That is to say, a computer may not have the emotion of a live musician, but it plays the notes without fail every single time. I had to remind myself that the goal was not a perfect sightread, but a quality performance.

Rehearsal provided many challenges that, in hindsight, should be expected. While to me, there was only one way to interpret the notes in front of me, fifty-five

of my peers disagreed. I had to realize that no one else in the room had spent as much time as I had on this piece and therefore would not immediately gain the subtleties of the music that I was expecting. As I played in the ensemble during the piece, I had to trust in the conductor that he heard what needed to be fixed without me alerting him. Dr. Schallert asked me whenever he was thinking about the musical direction of the piece and also had me come stand in front of the ensemble at times to check for balance or other issues.

Rehearsal of an unpublished, yet-to-be-performed work also provides unique opportunities to edit the piece as you go. Dr. Schallert and I met a number of times to discuss the balance of a section, the rhythm of a line, or the orchestration of a melody. The notions of my own piece evolved each time we played through it in rehearsal. Each missed note by a peer provided me with insight as to the challenges of that line in the piece. The first printing of the parts was not the last, as I changed a few parts multiple times by changing some melodic lines and adding others. Part of the challenge of actually printing out parts is that you accept that what you have down is what you want. I am absolutely happy with what I have written and ecstatic to hear it played by my peers.

CHAPTER 4

MUSICAL ANALYSIS

The piece starts out with a slow introduction that introduces versions of three themes heard later in the piece. After this introduction, the tempo accelerates, goes into 6/8, and the ostinato rhythms and main theme come in. Following this first main section, the meter changes to 4/4 and settles in to a rock-type groove with a euphonium solo. This second section transitions immediately into a smoother, more lyrical section based around a horn melody. The recapitulation commences with themes from prior sections heard in the flutes and oboe, ending in an exuberant race to the finish. In the following pages, each section is explained in greater depth to provide a more complete experience.

Introduction (1-39)

The piece begins with an oboe and bassoon duet on a variation of the main theme (measure 48) that carries on into a trumpet and horn duet on the same material. The melodic line in the trombone (m. 14) is a glimpse of section two and three (m.152) and is heard throughout the introduction. However the main melodic line of this section is the horn melody (m.23) that is the crux of the third section (m. 172). Also heard in the flutes (m. 25) is the upcoming ostinato pattern from the first

main section. The introduction provides the audience with a calm beginning before accelerating into the first section with the help of timpani and snare.

First Main Section (40-125)

The first main section begins with a rhythmic pattern heard in the alto saxophones and clarinets (m. 40) before being added to more parts as the part goes on. The second ostinato (subsequently referred to as "the ostinato") that comes in with the flutes (m. 44) is heard verbatim (m. 160) and altered (m. 164) throughout the rest of the section and the piece. That ostinato is based on the main theme of the entire piece, first heard in the trombone (m. 48). The melody is then harmonized into a brass choir, creating a call and response mechanism that pervades the whole piece. The call and response idea is furthered with a chorale-like section (m. 68) that provides a brief respite from the energy of the section. The rest is quickly over and the rhythmic patterns return with percussion, adding an influx of energy for the rest of the section.

This section, as well as the piece as a whole, is centered on the juxtaposition of two against three. While much *Olympia* is in 6/8 due to the ostinato, the main theme by itself is in three. The first section and recapitulation also modulate frequently, providing interesting harmonic turns throughout the piece. These aspects provide an interesting rhythmic feel and plenty of energy as well as a challenge for the performers.

Second Main Section (126-163)

The second section is very different from any other part of the piece due to its driving 4/4 pulse and its more stationary key. The two rhythmic patterns set forth by the tuba and bass trombone are continued through almost the entire section. The euphonium solo (m. 128) is a soaring line that is also passed to the horns and trumpets. Trombone 1 enters with a competing rhythmic pattern (m. 136) to the bass trombone, both of which are layered under the rhythmic pattern of the first section played by the upper woodwinds. The section gathers energy as it modulates up a major third to C major and is interjected by outbursts from the saxophones and timpani (m. 147). In the transition to the third section (m. 152), the trombone melody from the introduction (m. 14) is heard as a call and response between woodwinds and brass under a lively clarinet line. This line is repeated under very different rhythmic conditions with a saxophone choir providing a metrical backbone for the clarinets and then flutes.

Third Main Section (164-196)

The third section of *Olympia* commences with another call and response between flute and oboe (m. 164) that echoes the coming horn melody while the ostinato returns in the alto and tenor sax, as well as glockenspiel and vibraphone. The horns enter (m. 172) as more woodwinds are added to the call and response. Underneath this melody is a bit of a percussion feature that trades notes between all instruments of the percussion section. The horn melody is then harmonized and the trumpets are added to the call and response to create a lush, full texture (m. 181) with the low brass sustaining chords underneath everything else. The section ends with a big dominant seventh chord that is added to and altered from a C7 to a D7.

Recapitulation (197-261)

The recapitulation begins as the first section does, but with much more exuberance, as the flutes, clarinets, and saxophones are playing soaring scalar patterns that add to the textured feel. Instead of returning to the main theme, the piece repeats the transitional theme from the second section (m. 201), which then starts a brass fugue-type idea that culminates in an unexpected dominant seventh chord (m. 221). Over this fugue is heard the second section theme, but in the piccolo and oboe instead of the euphonium. The dominant seventh chord immediately resolves into the first clear restatement of the main theme in a trombone soli (m. 222) with no one else playing. The main theme is then altered into two five-bar phrases (m. 236), again with the second theme heard in the flutes and oboes. The piece then comes to its conclusion with a few rhythmic interjections (ms. 248, 253) before reaching its climax with energetic scalar passages in the high woodwinds and a strong cadence in the brass (m. 258).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The idea of this project was to create an enjoyable experience for listeners of this piece as well as to stretch myself as a musician and a composer. I know that I have stretched myself as a composer; this is my most mature work to date and has influenced other compositions I have worked on since. Judging by the reactions of my peers, the piece is a very enjoyable experience to listen to and to play. At times I am very uncertain about my future career path but doing something like this has helped me narrow my focus down for my post-undergraduate career. Composing and playing *Olympia* has been a more rewarding experience than I could ever imagine. It has given me plenty of practical experience and lessons. I have incorporated suggestions from colleagues into other compositions. I have also applied for the National Band Association's Young Composer Mentor Project and plan to enter *Olympia* in different composition contests as well as explore the idea of publication. Whatever the result is, the hours one spends on a piece of music is always well worth it. That gratification is only magnified a thousand times over when the piece is your own.