Voices From The Margin

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Voices From The Margin

A Symphony for Wind Ensemble
1. Defilement
2. Latency
3. Flight
4. Healing

Loving Dedicated to my best friend and my sister, Liz Wilson and Dee Snyder, and to the millions of abuse victims. I hope this will bring healing.
Introduction

Voices From the Margin is a musical interpretation of the experience of domestic violence, from a victim's perspective (as related to the composer over many hours, by a victim of domestic violence). The four movements include sections that depict 1) the initial abuse, 2) the denial process, 3) attempts to break free from the perpetrator, and the extended period of healing. The movements are most effective when played together, but each movement can stand on its own.

The "Voice" in this program symphony is not a singular one. Rather, her voice—the voice of the victim—is portrayed through a multitude of emotions set to music throughout the program. Along with her voice are the voices of friends and family—too frightened, incompetent, unwilling, or unsuccessful to free the her from the violence—as well as the voice of the perpetrator. The perpetrator's voice, as with those of the other players, is unstable. Sometimes the voice is a cacophony of insults and irrational projections, and at other times her perpetrator is gentle and embodies all the psychological desires she holds.

The "Margin" referred to in the title is also multifarious. "Margin" refers to the limits, often crossed within the minds of victims, to escape physical and psychological trauma. These limits—or margins—are stretched to capacity for the victim during the first phases of the domestic-violence cycle. The victim in this symphony is compelled to use denial and suppression as a means of avoiding the morbid discovery that her partner is not the ideal person she imagined him to be.

"Margin" also refers to the status of domestic violence victims in our society. Psychologically and/or physically isolated from friends and family, the everyday happenings of the "real world" become distant and irrelevant as the victim's world closes in on her. Suddenly her existence revolves around pacifying the perpetrator in order to avoid more violence. Friends, co-workers, and family often sense her withdrawal, but the discomfort with the conflict of her situation or fear of being "intrusive" usually result in inaction. The withdrawal of support and the real or perceived blame of the victim by outsiders marginalizes battered women in a manner unlike any other group in American society.

"Voices From the Margin" is a social symphony of unparalleled roots which exemplifies the spirit of change through art that has been growing in Western culture during the last century. In 1996 Mark Camphouse composed "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night" as an instrumental piece about child abuse. However, utilizing music to raise consciousness of social problems has been largely limited to the genre of popular music.
Defying that norm, the composer, under the instruction of Dr. Michael Kallstrom, set out to write a symphony that would be both a portrait of abuse and a tribute to those who have survived domestic violence.

Movement One: DEFILEMENT

Defilement, the first movement of this symphony, represents the initial phase of abuse. Shock, confusion, and horror are vital emotions for the victim at this point, and the composer has attempted to demonstrate those emotions in this movement. Defilement refers directly to the dreams of the little girl within the victim, dreams about love and romance, dreams which were woven on hot summer days in the cool shade of a tree as she and a friend talked about the future. Such dreams were scribbled in diaries and manifested, at least for a moment, in her partner. But the first put-down, the first shove, or smack, or punch, or sexual assault that her partner delivers, shatters the little girl. Even after a victim escapes, that little girl is the hardest part for her to recover and many victims never find their "little girl" again.

In Compton's words, this opening movement is meant to be a "haunting melody" which often comes after a period of harmony. Notice the use of the gong, triangle, and bells. These three instruments have been used in a variety of ways within the anti-violence movement. The deep, morose sounds of the gong symbolize battered women and are often sounded at rallies in 14 second intervals to acknowledge the beating of a woman every 14 seconds in America. The triangle, dainty and resounding, symbolizes rape. Every minute a rape occurs in this country. Finally, the glockenspiel (bells) is used in this piece to symbolize the death of a woman. Every day, 3 to 4 women die by the hands of their partner.

These and the other percussion instruments act as the abuse. The intensity with which they are struck is indicative of the intensity of violence as it shocks the unsuspecting victim, usually after a period of euphoric romance. These loud, dissonant chords represent the fear and confusion of discovering that the person one loves has degraded, struck, pushed, raped, and/or beaten her.

Movement Two: LATENCY

Latency is a time when victims wait for the abuser to "get better" or "the magic to return" to their relationship, a time when excuses become plentiful and the victim's work narrows more and more.

The tediousness of the music represents the period after a victim suffers from initial abuse. This period is frequently referred to as the "egg-shell stage" because the victim often becomes more careful about her behavior around the perpetrator. It is not
unusual for victims to blame themselves and insist that if they are a "better partner," a "better child," or "a better wife," the perpetrator will not lash out again. Paralleling the reality of domestic violence, this movement breaks briefly with the rhythmic (ostinato)-symbolizing a second offense--only to return to the tedious rhythms of waiting. Notice the crotales (small tuned cymbals), which Compton refers to as "the groans of the stagnant mind of a victim who has become preoccupied with fear."

**Movement Three: FLIGHT**

The beginning of the third movement represents the victim in flight--not physically, but mentally. The particular cases this piece was modeled after involved a distinct period of denial that grow from the latency. In a flurry of activity the victim often becomes hyper-motivated to fix the situation herself, again believing--erroneously--that her behavior causes the abuse. During the middle of this piece we see her slow down and begin to face the reality that someone she loves hurts her and that this abuse is wrong and seems to be pervasive. This is a painful and difficult realization to the most healthy adult; for a child to understand this is almost incomprehensible. Because of the progressive nature of realizing and integrating their station, this awakening comes in waves that are often followed by more denial.

Flight, for the victim in this symphony, came--in her words--"when I finally had the courage and anger to act. Flight came when I looked in the mirror and saw a hollow face on a body thirty pounds lighter than it should be, when I looked for the little girl and found an old woman. The wrinkles around my haunting eyes--eyes full of fear and without hope--confronted me. There my 'child' stood, diary in hand, soiled and used, bruised and wounded. Flight, for me, meant that one fear was about to replace another;"

For some victims flight comes after their partners abuse their children or some other monumental event occurs that convinces them that they can not help the perpetrators. It comes also when they believe they can still help themselves. But for all victims, flight comes at a high risk. Poverty, scorn, and loneliness are not the only obstacles to leaving an abuser for good, though each is formidable. A long precedent of murdered women, killed during or after their flight, stands as testimony to all who dare to leave a domestic violence situation.

**Movement Four: HEALING**

Themes from the first and second movements are reintroduced, and the composer uses dark and haunting melodies and counter-melodies to represent the dissonance of emotion which often plagues domestic violence victims. Theme three, reminiscent of a Scottish melody, represents the freedom of a safe medium.
Healing is the longest movement because it represents the longest struggle. To be cast back into a world that offered women no shelter and that ignored or excused their wounds is a traumatic experience. Even for those women who summon the remarkable courage to tell their stories, once the audience's eyes are dry and they return to the comfort of their homes, the victims' stories are forgotten—marginalized once again.

For a long time an abused woman wakes in the dark from nightmares. She recoils from casual touch. Smells and sounds remind her of the abuse. Paranoia replaces the gentle ease with which she used to walk among the living. The perpetrator does not only rob her of her faith in others; he robs her of her ability to trust herself as well.

Often plagued by isolation, depression, loneliness, economic instability, and problems associated with single parenting, many victims return to their perpetrators and face further marginalization from our society. Often this marginalization comes in the form of questions like "How could you go back? I would be stronger than that." For the victims who return, often friends and family members who had been supportive disappear from the scene, plagued by feelings of helplessness.

Still, many victims do not return to their abusers. Their path is even less simplistic as they symbolized in this symphony by further recurring themes—struggle to build a new life for themselves. Note the reiteration of the sounds of violence. These sounds are the memories and flashbacks that often haunt victims for years. Hatred, disappointment, and hope are the themes that battle at the end of this movement for a stronghold on the victims. The final chords are chords of survival and perseverance.

A final thought from the composer...

"No single organization offers this hope—alongside practical help and empowerment—more frequently in southern Kentucky than BRASS. My hope is that my children will one day be involved in dismantling of victims' organizations because they are no longer needed. I strongly believe that if each of us has the courage to stand up through our music, art, research, writings, activism, and economic support that we can eradicate domestic violence and rape in one generation. I hope that VFM will give you that courage."
2. Latency