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SINFONIA CONCERTANTE IN E

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

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ABSTRACT

The "Sinfonia Concertante in E" was written about my journey overcoming a visual impairment as a college student in a global pandemic. It represents the struggle in the first section, while the second section is a lament for things I don't have (not being able to drive or see facial cues), while also representing my unusual but awesome African connections I made during the height of Covid. The third and last section is a big party for having overcome the visual impairment. The accompanying paper describes the processes, as well as my life story and how I got to this point.

VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY May 2024

B.A. in Music – Mahurin Honors College Graduate

Honors CE/T: *Sinfonia Concertante in E*

Greenwood High School, Bowling Green, KY May 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine, for a minute, not being able to drive. Imagine not being able to see nonverbal social cues. Imagine not being able to hand write very well. Imagine being a college student with all of this going on. Most people think of college students as independent individuals who can drive themselves to different parties, friends' events, and can write their homework pretty easily. However, this has not been the case for me. I have had to adapt to my disability. This has not been all bad, however, as I have found my own niches that I've been able to explore. This "Sinfonia Concertante in E" aims to explore all of that, and more, and evoke the emotions I was going through as a college student with a visual impairment during a global pandemic.

I have done extensive research on musical repertoire on overcoming disability; however, the only other pieces are two pieces by Tyler Mazon (a hearing-impaired composer), "Shut Out", and "N.D.", for wind ensemble. Other than that, there's nothing specifically about overcoming a visual impairment.

ABOUT MY LIFE

I was born in August 2001, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and was diagnosed with septo-optic dysplasia, meaning that my optic nerve wasn't fully developed when I was born. What that means is that I have a hard time seeing things that aren't up close.

This has impacted my life in multiple ways. For instance, I have to type everything on a computer, because my hand writing is very large and it's hard for me to see to write. Physical education classes were hard for me because I couldn't see if a ball was coming towards me.

I also have to use a cane to get around from place to place. Due to my vision, I can't see except for a few feet directly in front of me, and there've been times where I've tripped over a stair that I didn't see, so the cane has helped me get around independently and safely.

That has also meant that I've had a harder time interacting with other peers. Because I cannot see facial cues, I can't always tell when someone's being serious or not, because their tone doesn't always indicate whether they're sarcastic or not. I have also had to explain to people that they have to explain things to me rather than point.

The hardest part for me, however, was seeing all my friends get drivers licenses and knowing I would never experience that same sense of independence they would. I would always be at the mercy of other people when it came to rides, whether it's using relatives, friends or ride-sharing apps like Uber or Lyft.

My first encounter with playing music was when I was two or three, when I was given a little keyboard. My parents say that one day I started playing “Twinkle Twinkle” out of nowhere, and I also started playing along to songs on the radio. From that point on, I was always passionate about music.

When I was about six years old, my family moved to Bowling Green in time for the start of kindergarten. That was when my disability really became apparent. At that point, I met my wonderful Teacher of the Visually Impaired, Mrs. Jennifer Murphy, who would go on to inspire me and so many other students and who I am eternally grateful for getting me through the public-school system. She helped me get the equipment that I needed (computers, magnifiers, front seating, and more), but most importantly helped me learn to advocate for myself.

The next few years were pretty uneventful other than that I was taking piano lessons. Back then, I learned most everything by ear, because due to the physical nature of sheet music, I wasn’t able to see it, and with magnification it was really cumbersome. That worked for a few years. Then, in the fourth grade, I received an electronic drum set, which led me to joining band in the sixth grade. Playing in the band was really fun, and I made a lot of new connections that way. Percussion was interesting for me in that there are a lot of interesting instruments to learn. Mallet instruments were by far the hardest for me, because I had to see the small bars in order to hit the right notes, so I naturally gravitated more towards the drums, cymbals and auxiliary instruments. I grew to love percussion so much that in the eighth grade, I dropped piano for a few years and decided to focus on percussion and composing. However, the high school I was at had a really big concert band with 17 percussionists, so it created an “every person for themselves”

mentality as far as getting to play, which really hampered my abilities to grow as a percussionist.

In the eighth grade, I started composing on an iPad app called “Music Studio”, which enabled me to hear what I was playing on the internal keyboard in the app, and then assign the part to a specific instrumental sound. My earliest “compositions” were not great, but eventually, I somewhat got the hang of it, and in my senior year of high school, was asked to write a piece for the band’s percussion section. At that point, I had to get an actual musical notation software, and I ended up choosing Sibelius because of its monthly subscription. As much as I’d love to say that the premiere was a hit, there was no premiere, because the spring concert was supposed to happen after the world shut down in March of 2020.

When I got to college, I decided to major in music because that was what I had spent my whole life loving. However, I was accompanied by a new set of challenges: not having the same friends as in high school, being forced to navigate through a global pandemic, not knowing how professors would react to my disability, for music classes and otherwise, and more. In my first year on the Hill, I was a percussion major under the instruction of Dr. Mark Berry. When I auditioned, I felt like I was not a very good player, in large part because of the “every person for themselves” mentality at my high school. Dr. Berry helped me improve on mallet technique and snare technique, but the more I learned, I realized there was even more to it than I initially thought.

In my freshman year, I joined the marching band for the first time. Up to that point, I had never been in a marching band, in part because of the fees, but also due to my

vision. I wasn't sure how that would work due to my disability until I came across the front ensemble, the stationary group of percussionists standing at the front of the band.

That first year, I was on auxiliary percussion, and the band, particularly my section mates, took me in like family. I had a blast that first year in the marching band.

At that point in my musical life, I had discovered sheet music on a tablet. That was a game changer for me, as that meant I could enlarge the music as much as I needed, hold it closer, etc., all on an iPad.

At the end of my first semester in the percussion studio, though, Dr. Berry and I had a really enlightening conversation about me switching to piano. His reasoning for that was simple. Every mallet instrument's bars have a different spacing, so even if I were to go from one 5-octave marimba to another, the spacing would not be the same. Plus, there are a lot of minutiae to snare technique that there's no way I'd be able to see. On a piano, the only thing that changes is the action. I auditioned for Dr. Lopes in the middle of the spring semester after working up a couple pieces I remembered from years previous, and before I knew it I was accepted.

In my sophomore year, things were back to business as usual. I had just started my studies as a piano major and was already making more progress than I had on percussion. I had made new friends in the piano studio, who had taken me in with open arms.

I had also made some very unique connections...on the opposite side of the planet. In the fall of 2020, some online friends and I founded the United Freedom Band, which was a virtual concert band made up of people from all over the world who'd record and practice individual parts. They would then send in their recordings which would then

be edited by our editing team to make final YouTube videos. I was in charge of the recruiting, and we eventually had people from all across the world, including sub-Saharan Africa. I got to talking to some of those individuals, and found out that some of them were band directors in various African countries (Uganda, Kenya, and the Republic of the Congo to name a few). When I told them that I was a composer and arranger, they asked if I would be interested in composing and arranging for their groups, so I said yes. While I didn't get paid any money for these experiences, I learned a lot, musically, culturally, and also how to become a better communicator. The diverse musical cultures of Africa have in turn come to inspire me as a composer for my own new works.

In my sophomore and junior years of college, I grew tremendously as a pianist. I played piano parts for the symphonic band, and switched to the keyboard position in the marching band, which was interesting because I had to make my own parts for everything.

At the start of my junior year I enrolled in composition lessons with Dr. Matthew Herman, which enabled me to expand my craft and help me get to where I am today.

PROCESS

In the spring of my junior year, I knew I wanted to write a composition about overcoming my disability. At first, the piece idea was a big symphony for a large orchestra with wordless chorus and organ. I had ideas for leitmotifs for specific instruments (a leitmotif is a short musical melody that recurs throughout a piece and is typically associated with a specific event, mood, or thing). I had ideas of it being a 45-minute piece that involved over 100 people, and I had worked on it over the summer. Part of that was to have a part for piano four hands (with one player doubling on celesta). When I went to ask Dr. St. John about my idea for a piece, he told me the instrumentation needed to be a lot smaller: two or three flutes, two oboes (possibly with one doubling English horn), two or three clarinets, one or two bassoons, two or four horns, two or three trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, four or five percussionists (including timpani), one keyboardist, and strings. At that point I had to rethink everything if I wanted to have it recorded. He also told me that the piece should be under 20 minutes.

In early July of 2023, I had an epiphany moment. I thought it would be a great idea to do a piano concerto for several reasons: soloist against orchestra already has dramatic implications for overcoming disability, it takes less time to rehearse because the soloist should have their part down, and the orchestra's parts would be made slightly easier too. Dr. St. John then told me he wanted to record it November 14, 2023, so I had to get writing!

I started out writing in my usual style, which was early 19th-century Austro-Germanic romanticism. I knew what the structure of the work was going to be: the struggle is announced in the first movement and ends without a clear winner, the second movement is a lament for the things I don't have, and the last movement is a big party for overcoming the disability. However, I didn't know how to properly convey the struggle.

At one point I had over 4.5 minutes of music that I deleted because it just didn't feel right and rambled too much.

Figure 1: Measure 1 flute melody



At the first composition lesson last fall, I showed Dr. Herman what I had so far that I liked, and they suggested that I start work on another movement that I was more excited about, so I started on the second movement lament. For the early part of the movement, I was inspired by Frederic Chopin's A Minor Prelude, as well as the third symphony of James Barnes. I wanted to create a sense of dread, but also sadness, so I started out with low cellos and basses playing an ominous march rhythm, accompanied by a very soft roll on the bass drum and tam-tam. I wanted to build up the beginning section to a "scream" in the brass, representing my feelings boiling over, like they occasionally do to everybody. At that point, it winds back down, until the piano and English horn have a brief duet together, before strings and double reeds take over alternating minor chords a tritone apart.

At that point, I wanted to create something shocking, something that represented the unusual African connection that I had made during the height of Covid, so I went into a happy major section, with piano playing a common African rhythm accompanying a woodwind melody. I showed this to Dr. Herman and they recommended I add some percussion, as what they essentially told me was “an African vibe isn’t complete without some percussion, some shakers and drums. You need to sell it more.” At that point, I gave what the piano was doing to the marimba, and added some shakers.

Figure 2: African theme, m. 160, flute and oboe

The musical score for Figure 2, titled "African theme, m. 160, flute and oboe", is written for five staves. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains measures 160 and 161. The second system contains measures 162 and 163. The Flute and Oboe parts are marked with 'f' (forte) and 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The Piano part is marked with 'f' and 'mf'. The Marimba and Shakers parts are marked with 'f' and 'mf'. The score shows a transition from a key signature of one sharp to two sharps (D major) at the end of the first system.

After that episode, I had to figure out how to get out of it and back to the lament, because I didn’t want that transition to be sudden either. Once I got that figured out, I basically copied and pasted the beginning lament, but in the scream section, I added woodwind and string runs to make it even more impactful than the first one. I wanted to use the same piano and English horn duet as before, but I decided to double the English horn with the viola section to give it some variety. Finally, the brass comes in with chords pulling the listener towards greener pastures.

At this point, early September, it was time to work on the first movement, which was by far the trickiest movement to write. I showed Dr. Herman what I had of the opening theme, and they recommended that my contrasting theme should be in a completely different key and mood, so I went a tritone away from the original key and had the brass play it loudly. However, I rewrote the theme after hearing that some of the brass parts were extremely high in the range for their instruments. Once I got that all figured out, I wanted the piano to have its own soliloquy, a chance to react to having the disability forced on them. The piano quietly comes out of the wreckage that resembled the opening theme, then gradually tries to reassert itself and lead the orchestra towards a restatement of the opening theme. This time goes a little more smoothly for the pianist, and eventually they share a duet with an oboe soloist, which leads back into the brass theme.

Figure 3: Brass theme, m. 20

Throughout this movement, I wanted to create the sense of dueling sides: the disability and the person who must overcome it. To achieve this effect, after the brass theme returns, I created a version of the first theme that acts like it's going to go to the brass theme, accompanied by heavy metal drums. The end of the movement alternates between the two keys every other measure, if not every measure, and finally, it ends quietly with a cello melody that leads into the second movement.

For the third and final movement, I wanted to create a catchy theme that was derived from the “African” theme of the previous movement. I wanted this movement to be victorious and light in nature, so I went to the brightest, most bubbly sounding key I know: E major. The movement opens with a common African rhythm played by drum

set, shakers and djembe, before the big theme comes in. This movement is in rondo (ABACA) form. There was a fair amount of copying and pasting going on for repetitions of the A theme; all I did was change the orchestration and the dynamics slightly. At the end of the movement, I decided to have a short improvised piano cadenza, representing the pianist's victorious celebration over the disability. That movement was done within three weeks, and at that point, it was two weeks before the recording session.

Figure 4: Opening of third movement, m. 203, percussion



Figure 5: African theme return, m. 203, first violin



Now that the piece was officially written, I went back and made a couple small revisions, most notably adding djembe to the “African” theme of the second movement. At this point, I had to go through all the parts and make sure they were readable to the musicians, which was one of the hardest parts of the project for me, as I had to make sure all the page turns were not awkward, make sure the dynamics and all other markings

weren't colliding, and more. Once all that was done, I had about a week to practice my part, as did the orchestra members.

FINAL REVISIONS

After the recording session, I decided to make some small revisions to the piece, based on what I heard that night. The tempo choices that night were different than what I had put in the score, but they were totally valid in their own way, and one tempo change that I implemented after this was increasing the tempo of the “African” theme. That gave it more life and energy, and it increased the shock value of it. I decided to double the horns in various spots, bringing the total from four horns to eight, just to give them a little more power to compete with the rest of the brass.

I made the piano part slightly more virtuosic. Throughout the writing process, I was limited by how well I could play the piano, as I was the soloist. However, now that that was behind me, I decided to make the piano part more virtuosic, more appropriate for a concerto.

I additionally added a part for extra African or Afro-Latin percussion ad lib, during the “African” theme of the second movement and during the whole third movement. While not so much dictating what the extra players are to play, it gives them a rough idea of when to stop, come in, and how loud or soft to play. This is for ensembles who have more percussionists available than the required five for a given performance.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Overall, this has been a wonderful opportunity, and I have become a better composer as a result of it. This has proven to me that I can write a big project under a tight deadline and create an impactful piece. Thank you to Dr. Herman and Dr. St. John for this wonderful opportunity!

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