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Desert Storm
(Asifat Al Sahra)

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, Graduate Department of Music, in the University of Toronto
Abstract

Desert Storm (Asilat Al Sahra) for orchestra is a contrapuntal composition in which the melody and counter melody are based on an Arabic mode called the nahawand. The nahawand mode is similar to the Western natural minor scale ascending, and to the harmonic minor descending. The unique characteristic of this scale is the final descending sequence of seconds.

The opening of the piece introduces three intervals which become the basis of the non-contrapuntal sections, as well as the 10-beat rhythm called wazn aqsaq sama'i which is omnipresent throughout the entire composition, resulting in a sense of relentlessness. Following the opening section, the piece moves into a non-contrapuntal, bi-tonal section dominated by pizzicato strings, before transitioning back into the contrapuntal material. Following this, the next section creates a wash of sound, before pulling the other instruments into the storm and arriving at the piece’s first climax. The climax itself uses the major 3rd, the 2nd interval introduced in the opening. In the calm after the storm, the harp is first introduced, carrying both melody and counter melody, before being unsettled by a “ticking” sensation created in the rest of the orchestra and using the tritone, the 3rd interval introduced in the opening, as if counting down towards the next storm to come. The piece ends in a dramatic and sudden climax, recalling the same chords as the previous climax, but slower and with more foreboding than fury.

The meaning behind Desert Storm can be seen in layers, the outermost of which is how the music depicts the sensation of being trapped in a sand storm. Sand storms begin with the wind picking up, then escalate into a suffocating and relentless force. Using bi-tonality, the layering of many parts on top of one another, and the relentless underlying rhythm gives the sensation of a lack of clarity, and also of the uncontrollable and unstoppable violence that is wielded by nature. Aside from this, I feel Desert Storm to be a reflection on life in the Middle East - every situation is complex, unclear, and constantly on the verge of explosion, where one storm ends with the clock already ticking towards the next one. It was my desire that through this piece I would explore some musical elements of my own culture, but approach them from a classical standpoint, working with them not in the way that an Arabic musician would, but as a Western classical composer.
Instrumentation list:

1 Piccolo
2 Flutes
2 Oboes
1 English Horn
2 Clarinets in Bb
1 Bass Clarinet in Bb
2 Bassoons
1 Contra Bassoon
4 Horns in F
3 Trumpets
3 Trombones
1 Tuba

Percussion 1 - Timpani

Percussion 2 - Triangle, Suspended Cymbals (4 different sizes - 20" 19" 18" 17")

Percussion 3 - Temple Blocks, Wood Blocks

Percussion 4 - BassDrum

1 Harp
16 Violins I
14 Violins II
12 Violas
10 Celli
8 Double Bass

Duration: 11'30"