Elegy at Dawn: for orchestra

by

Shelley Elizabeth Marwood

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts
Faculty of Music
University of Toronto

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Abstract

*Elegy at Dawn* is a twenty-minute composition for orchestra with the following instrumentation: solo violin, two flutes (piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets in B♭, two bassoons, four horns in F, two trumpets in C, two tenor trombones, one bass trombone, one tuba, one timpani, two percussion, one piano, and strings.

The title refers to the composer’s mother (Dawn Judith Marwood) who passed away from cancer in 2011. The work is a tribute to her memory, as well as an exploration and musical interpretation of the different emotions that accompany deep loss. The featured solo violin part embodies much of the emotional grief, and may be imagined as representing the memory or voice of the departed parent.

The work comprises six sections which alternate static and dense string chords with sections of different textures and instrumental colours. The solo violin is prominent in several sections throughout the composition, while in others it quietly soars above the rest of the ensemble. Notable moments in the work include a quasi-cadenza by the solo violin emerging from the low, dark string chords of the beginning; a brass chorale – composed as if set to the text of Psalm 23 “The Lord is my Shepherd” – in section four that begins in the background and gradually gains prominence; and a duet between the solo violin and piano in section five. This section uses free notation, where each instrument is given an approximate timing for their parts. The strings are gradually added, with the conductor giving cues for chord changes and entrances only. The work ends in a high register with all instruments fading out, leaving only the solo violin and piano to conclude the composition.
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Elegy at Dawn score.............................................................................................................................................1
Instrumentation

Solo Violin

2 Flutes (Flute 2 doubling Piccolo)
2 Oboes
2 Clarinets (B♭)
2 Bassoons
4 Horns (F)
2 Trumpets (C)
2 Tenor Trombones
1 Bass Trombone
1 Tuba
Timpani
2 Percussion
  • Vibraphone, Suspended Cymbal, Glockenspiel, Triangle, Marimba, Wood Blocks (2 – low, medium), Snare Drum, Crash Cymbal
  • Bass Drum, Triangle, Xylophone, Toms (4), Tubular Bells

Piano
Strings

This score is in transposition.

Duration: c. 20 minutes
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Program Note

_Elegy at Dawn_ is written for and in memory of my mother, Dawn Judith Minnie (Livesey) Marwood, who passed away in 2011 after her cancer returned. This occurred one month after I began my doctoral degree, and while I am grateful that she could see me start this journey, it has understandably been extremely difficult, the loss affecting me in countless ways.

I knew that I wanted to write my dissertation composition in her honour – and had the title chosen for years – yet I did not know exactly what it would look like. I also knew that it would be extremely difficult to engage the emotions necessary to write an effective, sensitive, and vulnerable work. I discovered that this was indeed true... but also that the composition had ideas of its own on how to proceed.

The slowly evolving, dark, low string chords at the beginning demanded more space and time to breathe. This happened in another section as well. The fifteen-minute idea grew to twenty minutes, and the original idea of an occasional solo violin line became much more substantial. My mother had once told me how much she enjoyed hearing the violin in its high register, so this became an important feature of the composition. This soaring line – often an unresolved major seventh leap – weaves its way throughout the work, at times more prominent than others. When I wrote the duet for solo violin and piano that occurs at the climax of the work, I realized that the violin had in fact taken on the role of my mother’s voice and memory, and the piano (my performing instrument) had become my own voice and was a portrayal of my grief.

Faith was always an important part of my mother’s life, and since my father was a minister we regularly attended church. I became familiar with the words of Psalm 23, and later gained comfort from them in my grief. When I decided to write a brass chorale for this composition, it was clear that it should be set to the text of this Psalm (the first four verses – see below). This chorale begins in the background, amidst remnants of chaos from the previous section, and gradually gains prominence as more instruments join in.

The chorale section leads to the violin and piano duet, which uses free notation. Strings join in on sustained chords, moving somewhat individually in this free section. Winds and brass join and build to a gentle climax of dissonant chords; as it slowly rises into the highest registers, instruments begin to fade away until we are only left with high strings, sparkly percussion, piano, and solo violin. The ending is gentle and mournful, with even the solo violin fading out and leaving the piano to finish the work alone.
Psalm 23 (verses 1 to 4)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul.
He leads me down the right path for His name's sake.
And though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
For You are with me; Your rod and staff, they comfort me.
Performance Notes

Rehearsal P: Each instrument plays the notes in their box, repeating in any order until their cut-off. Everyone begins loud, fast, and agitated; no two instruments need to align with each other, and should indeed have individual tempi. Each instrument gradually slows down, adding space between notes, and applies a *decrescendo* until they are cut-off. *Note:* horns have their parts with two notes to a staff merely for saving space – they should not align exactly.

Rehearsal B1: Solo violin and piano should feel free to play without aligning exactly with the other part. If they observe the approximate fermata timings, they should be able to realign somewhat at each dotted bar line. Notes without a fermata and with standard notation should be played $\dot{=} c.60$.

Rehearsal C1: The conductor cues celli and basses to enter; they should observe the approximate fermata timings, yet may move at their own individual pace and not line up with the other strings.

Rehearsal D1: Conductor cues note changes for string section at appropriate timings. These will line up more exactly yet may still retain some independence from each other. All strings should sustain last fermata until conductor cues and resumes conducting at E1.
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Score is in transposition

Shelley Marwood
Freedly, quasi-cadenza \( \text{c.} \, 50 \)

Senza misura

Solo Vln.

\( \text{Cimbasso} \)

\( \text{Gently flowing} \) \( \text{c.} \, 50 \)
Presto - molto rit.

In each measure, each player repeats their notes within the bar lines until cut off. The order of the four notes may change, and no one should finish exactly with any other player. All should begin fast and agitated, gradually slowing down with the decrescendo as well as adding space between each note. Conductor indicates cut-offs at dotted lines. Every individual player chooses their own rate of decrease and standards, hence no notes per staff remain for spacing.

Presto - molto rit.

Vln. I
Vln. II
C Tpt. 1
C Tpt. 2
Tbn. 1
B. Tbn.
Tuba
Perc. 1
Perc. 2
Presto - molto rit.

At P, each instrument repeats their notes within the bar lines until cut off. The order of the four notes may change, and no one should finish exactly with any other player. All should begin fast and agitated, gradually slowing down with the decrescendo as well as adding space between each note. Conductor indicates cut-offs at dotted lines. Every individual player chooses their own rate of decrease and standards, hence no notes per staff remain for spacing.
[Solo Vln.]

[Senza misura]

Freedly, delicately \( \text{\textcopyright \text{\textregistered} \text{\textcopyright} \text{\textcopyright} \text{\textcopyright}} \) c.60

From 8 to 8 solo and violins do not line up exactly; however, at dotted bars they can realign somewhat. Notes with standard notation should be played \( \text{\textcopyright \text{\textregistered} \text{\textcopyright} \text{\textcopyright} \text{\textcopyright}} \) c.60

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[Unis.]