

ABOUT OLA GJEILO's

***SUNRISE:
SYMPHONIC MASS FOR CHOIR AND STRING ORCHESTRA***

By Kira Zeeman Rugen

At first listen, the music of Ola Gjeilo (pronounced Yay-lo) comes across as agreeable to the ear: simple, straightforward, easily evoking beautiful emotions. On the second or third listen, the complexity and multiple dimensions of his writing unfold. The density of the various compositional elements jumps out of the framework. Philosophically, Gjeilo seems to have a desire to create an atmosphere in which the listener can experience music that is direct and pleasing.

'There isn't anything wrong with dissonance, as conflict and discord is a natural part of life and necessary for all positive development and maturation. And in most areas of society, conflict is something we very much want to resolve. But in a great deal of avant-garde art, the goal seems to be to stay in the conflict itself, which to me becomes a way of just inflicting the listeners with our own neurosis. Dissonance and high chromaticism is important to explore; the Modernists were brave to delve into parts of the human psyche that are dark and edgy, but I do think they got somewhat stuck in that. A lot of art pushed audiences away for some time. I think people naturally and instinctively want to experience transcendence, resolution and the feeling of redemption, joy and peace that the resolving of discord can yield.'

Sunrise: Symphonic Mass for Choir and String Orchestra was commissioned in 2007 by the combined Majorstua and Nova chamber choirs. The world première took place on November 2, 2008 in Oslo, and included a 24-piece string orchestra, conducted by Tore Erik Mohn.

When approached for this commission by Mr. Mohn, Ola Gjeilo already had a strong desire to compose a Mass. In the case of the *Sunrise*, from the initial point of conception, the forces at his disposal were the greatest source of inspiration. One of his preferred sonorities is the combination of choir and orchestra, and with that palate in mind, the inspiration for *Sunrise* came easily.

Text

Gjeilo considers himself a 'symphonic' composer in that he often aims for a lush, orchestral sound, however small the performing ensembles are. In choral music, this also means that the music is ultimately more important to him than the text. However, he approaches his craft from a spiritual perspective and wants to share universal and humanistic experiences in the realm of his music. One needs to look no further than the names of each individual movement for an illustration of how spirituality plays a role in the work. The text comes from the Ordinary of the Mass: Kyrie – *The Spheres*, Gloria – *Sunrise*, Credo – *The City*, Sanctus & Agnus Dei – *Identity & The Ground*. While Gjeilo set the meaning of the Latin text respectfully and observes the traditions that masses are expected to exhibit, his overall vision for the piece lies within the titles of the work, only loosely related to the meaning of the Latin. In so doing, he reveals a structure outside of the text; a metaphysical journey from the heavens to earth. The intent and the story in his Mass are expressed through the way in which the music comes across sonically.

The Spheres – Kyrie

Gjeilo has a talent for creating aural pictures and there is a visual component to the music he writes. In the case of the Kyrie, Gjeilo named it *The Spheres*. That title is represented in the way he evokes an atmosphere that sounds like ‘floating in space, in deep silence, between stars and planets.’

In the beginning, using expressive swells, the texture of each overlapping chord inches in and fades away, only to allow the next chord to crescendo, each time a new syllable is added to the line. Eventually nine measures into the work, the syllable “e” is sung, to finally finish the first complete utterance of the word *Kyrie*. The following excerpt is an example of the dovetailing technique in the first movement, using only two of the vocal and string parts:

Figure 1:

In this drawn-out approach of the first twenty two bars, the most important, and as Gjeilo puts it, “main theme,” of the Mass is introduced.

The musical score for Figure 1 consists of two staves in 4/4 time. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics 'Ky' and 'e'. The bottom staff is a string line with lyrics 'Ky' and 'ri'. Dynamics are indicated by *p*, *mf*, and *pp* with hairpins. The music features overlapping chords and swells.

Theme 1:

The musical score for Theme 1 is a single vocal line in 4/4 time. The lyrics are 'Ky - ri - e - e - le - i - son'. The time signature changes from 4/4 to 3/4 and back to 4/4.

Theme 1 appears at several points in the Mass and becomes a unifying element. There is a sense of stasis and calm at the mid-point in the movement until the strings come in with the second unifying theme of the mass: a simple ascending scale. Theme 2, the ascending minor scale, is repeated twice, expanding in energy to a double forte.

Theme 2:

The musical score for Theme 2 is a single vocal line in 4/4 time, showing an ascending scale.

At m. 127, a bridge-like section occurs on the text “Domine Deus, Rex Caelestis.” The rising scale of Theme 2 appears once again within the inner voices, adding a great deal of tension to the line. The homophonic chords stack diatonically but the rising scale provides a clash of dissonance that emphasizes a regal and powerful moment.

Once again the minimalist-like chords make an appearance at m. 185 and Theme 3 sounds. This time however, the altos sing a lower octave and there is a sense that the music is further and further away from that sunrise, which began the piece. A solo violin doubles the melody, a texture that foreshadows what will be heard again in “*Identity & The Ground*” (Sanctus & Agnus Dei).

Although Gjeilo would not compare his music or his compositional philosophy with that of Benjamin Britten, he did find Britten’s *War Requiem* quite influential in that he was particularly attracted to the way in which Britten resolved his “Kyrie”, “Dies Irae” and the “In Paradisum” with a somber, and evocative ‘amen’ section. Gjeilo borrowed this approach with his ‘amens’ to close this movement, as well as at the end of the work at the *Dona Nobis* portion of the text.

The City - Credo

The City is the most challenging of the movements in Gjeilo’s Mass because of its driving and relentless construction, and it possesses the most contrast within a movement. Gjeilo felt that the *Credo* text had to be treated with a great deal of detail. He says that this text “is the most powerful and assured text in the mass. ‘I believe’ is a strong statement.” The movement *The City* begins with *stacatti* and accented sixteenth notes in a driven line, akin to the bustle and activity one would experience in a large city.

The opening choral line begins with the men, a lower register in austere contrast to the beginning of the previous movement. The music, now in the key of D-minor, is no longer angelic and floating, but rather heavy, darker and relentless. New thematic material appears in an ascending direction.

Theme 5:

Cre - do in u - num De - um, pat - rem om - ni - po - ten - tem fac - to

Gjeilo continues to expand upon Theme 5 and the driving string 16th notes until m. 45. At that point the sopranos and altos enter with the Theme 6:

Theme 6:

De - um de De - o. lu - men de lu - mi - ne.

Theme 6 is still accompanied with the relentless string part, but the voices begin simply. As the music continues, Theme 6 is augmented with heavier and chromatic harmonies, and at m. 33 it breaks out into SSAATTBB divisi.

Two important sections of this movement occurs in mm. 68-119. They are two very different returns to Theme 1 from the first movement *The Spheres*, tying the entire work together.

Measure 148 brings back Theme 5, but this time the strings are heavier with *tremolos* written atop 16th notes, filling every gap in the music. After a *crescendo*, there is a giant pause written into the music, followed by a spectacular climax of not only this movement, but of the entire work. (While there are technically two movements after *The City*, Gjeilo connected them as a single movement, though separated textually. The two last movements, *Identity* and *The Ground*, work through elements of resolution. So, in the method of dramatic construction, the climax occurs during *The City*, two movements before the end of the work.)

Gjeilo begins this climactic section by once again revisiting the Theme 1 from the first movement, but this time, he augments the pulse so each note is a whole note in length. Underneath, the strings provide “a fast, unforgiving, and relentless accompaniment.” The long-held augmented lines of the choir float with a balance of energy against the fury of the strings.

The string writing is the most difficult part in this movement. It is dense, filled with tremolo, fast-moving lines, ever-shifting keys and accidentals.

Identity – Sanctus

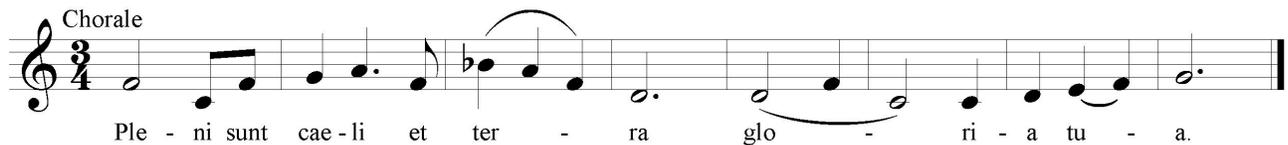
In the Sanctus, Gjeilo brings the exact material from the Kyrie forward. The only differences between the respective sections within Kyrie and the Sanctus are the text and the use of a delicate, warm colored violin solo above the choral line. According to Gjeilo, the solo violin symbolizes the individual and the emergence of a conscious ‘self’; thus this movement is called *Identity*. Gjeilo sets out to compose a work that is evocative and ultimately uplifting, and he pulled from the ‘film’ genre to make his point. The pathos that *Identity* creates is yearning, searching, and acutely pensive. The mass begins in the stars during the Kyrie, and then in the Sanctus, it circles back to the same material to symbolize the individual. It is as if it looks towards the stars, then mirrors what it sees, and only now is self-aware.

The Ground – Pleni Sunt Coeli / Agnus Dei

The Ground is different than any other part of the *Sunrise* Mass. Gjeilo defines it with the terms “resolution,” “release” and “relief.” After all the tension and dark crevices that the music has visited in the work, *The Ground* is the place of absolute peace, tranquility and relief. It is also the point at which one feels that one has arrived and is finally “grounded.” No longer is the music floating in the spheres, rising with the sun, bustling in the city, or discovering the self. The music now depicts being one with humanity and the Earth; herein lays a sense of awareness of everything grounded and real. Gjeilo leaves the listener feeling reflective by completing the journey at a deeper plane, having heard the entire work. Gjeilo says:

“The music of the Sunrise Mass goes from dark and dream-like, to more emotional and dramatic, and eventually warm and grounded. It’s important to me that there is a positive evolution in artistic expressions, to move everything forward. That it has the capacity to help bring us deeper into ourselves rather than the other way. I really do think that’s the main point of art. I don’t know if I in any way am one of them, but I think true artists have the ability to share something very important; to express a deeper connection with something sacred; soul, or God, or nature, or whatever we perceive it as, through art. And I always believed that gift should be used to uplift and remind ourselves of who we really are and what’s truly important in our lives, whatever that may be.”

Gjeilo draws from old music once again, and in honoring J.S. Bach he culminates his work with what he labels the “Chorale.” It is a very simple homophonic piece that also inspired a separate piece (published by Walton Music/Hal Leonard as *The Ground*, for SATB choir, piano and optional string quartet).



The strings create a warm sonority and double the choir part, giving a sense of unity. The song moves along gently until m. 78 when the melody is raised an octave higher and the dynamic extends to a double forte, as the statement and climax is uplifted in a moment of glory.

The work then gently comes to a close into a quiet *Dona Nobis* section. Again, Gjeilo echoes the earnest and profound ideas from Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem* in a slow ‘amen-like’ segment. The work ends with an ascending cadence in E-flat major, hopeful and expansive; a complete resolution.

Sunrise Summary

Traveling from beginning to end aurally through Ola Gjeilo’s *Sunrise*, one could experience the full metaphorical journey from the starry Heaven to Earth, from undifferentiated darkness to solid, warm life, evolving spiritually as a human. Gjeilo doesn’t believe in the value of suffering in itself, without redemption or a deeper compassion that transcends the suffering. But Gjeilo’s Mass certainly creates a beautiful journey that from beginning to end suggests sadness, pain, chaos, drama and conflict. The essence of the Mass includes not only the dark parts of the human psyche, but also the entire spectrum of human emotion. Gjeilo firmly believes his *Sunrise* mass is a journey in which, “The self, having experienced each movement in the work, now has the perspective and understanding to peacefully contain everything it has gone through.”