# FOREVER'S SILENT SONG <br> FOR <br> CHAMBER ORCHESTRA <br> AND <br> MEL ZO-SOPRANO 

## THESIS

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## By

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Webb, Lisa A., Forever's Silent Song for Chamber Orchestra and Mezzo Soprano. Master of Music (Composition), August, 1986, 65 pp., 11 illustrations. This work is a setting of two poems by E.E. Cummings for chamber orchestra and mezzo-soprano soloist. The approximate durations of the first and second movements are respectively seven and one half, and six minutes. The music was inspired by the poetry and attempts to highlight the cyclic syntax which hallmarks Cummings' style.

The first poem ("pity this busy monster, manunkind,") presents a sarcastic analysis of the progress of society. The compositional techniques used in the first movement involve elements of ostinato and fragmented motivic development to punctuate the penetrating message of the poem. The second movement ("these children singing in stone $a^{\prime \prime}$ ) offers a marked contrast in texture and is a peaceful resolution to the agitated frustration of the first poem.

Chromaticism is an essential element in defining the melodic and harmonic style. The vocal writing is largely declamatory and presents the vocalist with challenges of tessitura, intervallic complexity and extended technique.

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## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

## Elements of Form

The first movement is set to the following poem:
pity this busy monster, manunkind, not. Progress is a comfortable disease: your victim(death and life safely beyond)
plays with the bigness of his littleness
-electrons deify one razorblade into a mountainrange; lenses extend
unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish returns on its unself.

A world of made
is not a world of born-pity poor flesh
and trees; poor stars and stones,but never this fine specimen of hypermagical
ultraomnipotence. We doctors know.
a hopeless case if-listen:there's a hell of a good universe next door:let's go.

The music uses the poem to define a through-composed formal scheme (Fig. 1). The poetry describes mankind as an entity destined to fall prey to its own progress and points out the fact that the future looks bleak unless man reappraises his situation. Cummings chides man for
${ }^{1}$ Copyright 1944 by E.E. Cummings; renewed 1972 by Nancy T. Andrews. From COMPLETE POEMS 1913-1962 by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
failing to recognize his plight and scathingly proposes that all of mankind is doomed to selfishness and conceit. The second half of the poem mourns for a world that has been devastated by mankind's "progress," and it even abandons all hope at the end.


Fig. 1--Formal Scheme (I)

In an attempt to portray the enormity of mankind, the introduction opens with dense and expansive textures. Much of the harmonic vocabulary throughout the movement is a mixture of secundal, polychordal and quartal sonorities, which are often expanded by octave displacement. The
example (from the introduction) is reflective of the harmonic style of the movement (Fig. 2).


Fig. 2--Harmonic style and "progress" motive

The material in the horns (measure 3 of the above example) forecasts the first important motive in the movement. Recognized easily by its durational pattern (short-long), this motive represents "progress" and is used symbolically throughout the movement. The first entrance of the voice signals the close of the introduction and is characteristic of the accusatory nature of the poem (m. 7).

After the introduction the first formal division (the A section) opens with an ostinato in the bass. The tritone interval at its outset, coupled with an avoidance of pitch duplication, produces an asymmetrical, martial character. The rhythmic patterns are continually displaced, as if accompanying a corps of marchers periodically missing a step. The first four pitches of the ostinato make up the second important motive of the movement, "manunkind" (Fig. 3).


Fig. 3--Ostinato showing "manunkind" motive

The pitch, $E$, was chosen in order to pay homage to E.E. Cummings and provides a pitch center throughout the movement.

The bass ostinato (Fig. 3) gives way to a new, delicate ostinato in the violins (m. 27) which is derived from the "progress" motive. This subsection (marked "mysteriously") depicts the dream world out of which man has made a reality through his delusions of grandeur and conceit. The key phrase, "plays with the bigness of his littleness," is a bitter reminder to man that he is not always the paragon of virtue he thinks he is. Fragmented usage of both "progress" and "manunkind" motives is evident here, both in isolation and in various combinations. The section reaches a midpoint at the word "razorblade" with a snap pizzicato which is representative of the author's effort to awaken mankind before it is too late.

The closing portion of the $A$ section becomes progressively agitated with solo winds and strings taking part in dense counterpoint culminating in a musical pyramid (m. 48) symbolizing the word "mountainrange" in the text. The voice is woven into the orchestra at the close of this section ending with an emphatic punctuation containing the highest note possible for all involved.

The second definable section (B) begins with a permutation of the "manunkind" motive. The motive occurs on different pitch levels as if to illustrate the instability of the world due to mankind's "progress." The poem at this point laments these evils and mourns for the
earth and cosmos as victims of the destruction of man. Glissandi are used in the voice and orchestra to depict sorrow and sobbing. Dissonant sonorities containing seconds, tritones and sevenths are used to enhance the movement's emotional impact as well as to generate high energy in order to complement the poem. The final expression of grief in this section occurs in m. 87 as the voice and orchestra end with the lowest note possible.

As if to further punctuate the preceding lament, Cummings' next line of poetry, "but never this fine specimen of hypermagical ultraomnipotence," derisively satirizes the monster "manunkind." The accompanying music (m. 88) begins softly and delicately but is rudely interrupted by the "progress" motive in m. 91. Entrances of the motive are staggered and rise quickly to the highest tessitura in the movement. Perhaps the most emotional usage of the "progress" motive occurs after this point (m. 97), but it is a fleeting moment not unlike the often transitory nature of progress and success. The energy dissipates after m. 97 with more dialogue in the orchestra. The concluding section is representative of Cummings' apathy toward humanity and his proposal that it start over again. The voice delivers the penultimate line ("We doctors know a hopeless case if-listen") followed by
the last ostinato of the movement which is evocative of the martial character of section $A$. For additional excitement, the last statement is spoken by the voice accompanied by scattered fragments in the winds. A final "progress" motive in the horns is punctuated by the piccolo and flute to end the movement.

The second movement is a musical realization of the following poem:

```
these children singing in stone a
    silence of stone these
    little children wound with stone
    flowers opening for
ever these silently lit
tle children are petals
their song is a flower of
always their.flowers
of stone are
silently singing
a song more silent
than silence these always
children forever
singing wreathed with singing
blossoms children of
stone with blossoming
eyes
know if a
lit tle
tree listens
forever to always children singing forever
a song made
of silent as stone silence of
song 2
```

${ }^{2}$ Copyright 1939 by E.E. Cummings; renewed 1967 by Marion Morehouse Cummings. From COMPLETE POEMS 1913-1962 by E.E. Cummings by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

The poem offers inspiration and a possible answer to the accusations posed in the first. The reference to children and song creates a feeling of forever, and the seemingly stone-carved message of hope emerges. (Children have always provided an element of hope for mankind, and often that which seems obvious to a child remains unobvious to adults). The reference to a "lit tle tree" (not a grown tree) also serves to point out that time is forever and that the immortality symbolized by a child's song cannot go unrecognized. (Perhaps "manunkind" would do well to listen to this "silent song.")

The form of the movement is presented below (Fig. 4)


Fig. 4--Formal Scheme (II)

The movement opens with a drone consisting of the interval of a perfect fifth, symbolizing antiquity, immortality and forever. The second movement is centered around the pitch. $A$, in the tradition of tonic-subdominant key schemes (mvt. I uses the pitch E as a unifying factor). Soon after the introduction of the drone, the oboe and flute enter with an improvisatory Arabian-flavored dialogue. The voice follows with a motive named "flowers" (m. 126) on the syllable "ah" and is treated melismatically as if it were functioning as another wind instrument (Fig. 5).


Fig. 5--"Flowers" motive

The first setting of the text also uses the "flowers" motive and is accompanied by the drone which ends the introduction.

The A section begins in m. 137 and utilizes the following melodic material in the voice (Fig. 6).


Fig. 6--"Children" motive

This motive and its various derivatives permeates the section and much of the movement. Strings and brasses are used to provide lush background sonorities to accompany the voice. Fragmented conversation continues among the winds, imitating the mood set in the introduction.

The next section (B) uses the word "petal" as a point of departure into a different texture. The interval of a descending half-step is used as a repetitive motive ("petals") to create a muted texture in the strings. The
vocal writing also contains the half-step as an integral part of the melody (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7-"Petals" motive

The "petal" motive develops into a ${ }_{4}^{3}$ section reminiscent of a childhood song and the section soon ends with the half-step motive on the word "silence."

After a short interlude, the voice re-enters with the "children" motive in a section which resembles the $A$ section in prime form. However, this segment also employs the "flowers" motive and the texture found in the B section (m. 174-5). The drone also makes a short appearance in
m. 177 as an accompaniment to the motivic fragments in the winds. A brief reminder of the "progress" motive from the first movement brings this section to a close.

The climax begins with a wavering monotone in the voice and tremolos in the strings (m. 184). Gradually the texture thickens with the addition of more strings and brasses, but the entire orchestra drops out in m. 192 as the voice delivers the most crucial line of the poem. This melodic material can be traced to the previous reference to the word "forever" (m. 146-7), and is subsequently echoed by the orchestra (Fig. 8).


Fig. 8-- "Forever" motive

Following this emotional peak, the alto saxophone restates the "progress" motive from the first movement. Out of the accompanying chord emerges the drone which has
been inverted to a perfect fourth. The voice presents the final statement of the text (set to the "flowers" motive) amidst fragmented motivic material in the winds.

Aspects of Pitch Organization

The six aforementioned motives play a central part in unifying the work as a whole. Their significance in symbolizing various elements in the text has already been established. All but two motives employ aspects of intervallic symmetry, as can be seen in the following figure (Fig. 9). ${ }^{3}$

| Notive | Set | Pitch_class |  |  |  |  | Symmetry in Work |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| progress | 3-10 | 0 | 3 | 6 |  |  | none |
| monster | 5-22 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 8 | $\mathrm{ABb} C F \mathrm{~Pb}$ EF |
| mank ind | 4-9 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 7 |  | EABb Eb |
| flowers | 5-6 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 6 | none |
| children | 5-34 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 9 | C |
| forever | 4-1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |  | $\begin{aligned} & \text { GG } \ddagger \mathrm{ABb} \\ & V \vee V U \end{aligned}$ |



Fig. 9-- Motive Symmetry

[^0] Atonal Music, (New Haven and London, 1977) p. 179.

Together with the six central motive sets, additional sets 3-1, 3-5, 3-9, 4-5, 4-215, 6-5, 6-26 and 6-212 were used consistently throughout the piece. These sets are found in prominent places in the melodic or harmonic texture of the work, often in close proximity to the motives themselves. The following figure lists these sets and gives their locations in the piece.

| SETS | PITCH CLASS | VECTOR | MOTIVE OR MEASURE NUMBER |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
|  |  |  |  |
| $6-5$ | $0,1,2,3,6,7$ | 422232 | 199 |
| $6-26$ | $0,1,2,5,6,7$ | 421242 | 196 |
| $6-212$ | $0,1,2,4,6,7$ | 332232 | Aggregate of similar |
| $5-6$ | $0,1,2,5,6$ | 311221 | fitches in motives |
| $4-9$ | $0,1,6,7$ | 200022 | mankind |
| $4-5$ | $0,1,2,6$ | 210111 | 19 |
| $4-1$ | $0,1,2,3$ | 321000 | forever |
| $4-215$ | $0,1,4,6$ | 111111 | difference notes in |
|  |  |  |  |
| $3-1$ | $0,1,2$ | 210000 | motives |
| $3-5$ | $0,1,6$ | 100011 | 16 |
| $3-9$ | $0,2,7$ | 010020 | 137 |
| $3-10$ | $0,3,6$ | 002001 | progress |

Fig. 10--Most Used Sets

Set 6-5 emerged from the above list of sets as the nexus set in a series of networks. Below is the central network shown with two related networks.


Key

$$
\begin{aligned}
& -=\text { Strong Relation } \\
& ---=\text { Same Number Sets }
\end{aligned}
$$

Fig. 11--Set Network

In conclusion, the six motives in the work provide an intuitive link with other diverse elements in the work. Although the piece was conceived in a freely atonal style, the pitch structures described above were discovered to play an important role in unifying the piece.

## INSTRUMENTATION

## 2 flutes

oboe
alto saxophone in Eb
bassoon
2 trumpets in Bb
2 horns in $F$
trombone
strings
3 percussion
1st vibraphone, marimba
2nd snare drum, suspended cymbal,
triangle, wind chimes
3rd bass drum, snare drum (shared),
suspended cymbal, tam-tam







- 7 -


















- 25 -



-28.-



- 31.-


- 33.-



































[^0]:    ${ }^{3}$ Set tables from: Allen Forte, The Structure of

