Steven Snethkamp

Interstellar Arias
(2014)

for Orchestra

13 minutes
Interstellar Arias is a musical contemplation about existence and our spiritual relationship with the universe. Although the work is not programmatic and should be interpreted individually, I like to imagine a disembodied soul at drift amongst the stars. By observing the cosmos, this being attempts to gain a further understanding of life and death, thus increasing their enlightenment and their ability to exist in harmony with all things.

The form of this composition is a hybrid between a multi-movement work and a single-movement work. In one way, Interstellar Arias is composed as a single progression of (virtually) non-stop music. The piece has a continuous expressive curve, which is connected to the large-scale formal structure. And by including reoccurring and developed ideas throughout, this piece maintains the continuity of a single movement composition. At the same time however, there are numerous segments that resemble, to varying degrees, individual movements. Some sections are small fleeting ideas or serve a transitional function, as if traveling between cosmic scenes. Other sections are slightly larger, acting as musical miniatures. Finally, there are some sections that last several minutes and contain elements found in complete movements, such as independent developments. In the end, my desire was to create a form that, like all things, poses a fluid interaction between small and large structures.

When composing this piece I imagined the individual “movements” as a series of scenes: sights, sounds, experiences, and reflections taken from the journey of an incorporeal being. The first scene meditates on the way we see constellations in the sky. Although the locations of the stars seem random, we group them together into shapes. To reflect this, I used controlled aleatory (chance) to create constellations of pitches. These musical “stars” are set over long droning harmonies that embody the vast darkness of open space.

Central to this work are the two “arias,” both which focus on the strings section of the orchestra and have a fairly slow tempo. I imagine these songs being sung by the drifter, expressing their personal struggle with the big questions of existence. The first one occurs about halfway through the piece, with the melody presented in the violas. In this aria, awe seems to be overtaken by loneliness, longing, and desolation.

The second aria is at the end of the piece. It seems to appear out of nowhere, somewhat aloof and undisturbed by the magnitude of preceding events. After further observations and contemplation, this aria speaks from a soul that possesses a greater understanding of the universe; a soul who is more connected and more enlightened. This song expresses wonder and joy, and floats peacefully through space coexisting with the darkness.

Although the arias are perhaps the most significant aspect of this work, they could not exist independently. Other scenes explore time, motion, perception, energy and other forces (like gravity), particles, the creation and destruction of stars and planets, and the interaction of natural structures (atoms, solar systems, galaxies, etc.). Throughout the work, minimalist textures and long sustained harmonies portray the infinite expanse of space. Orbits are reflected in the use of isorhythmic structures, ostinati, and layering. Motoric rhythms propel the music as if traveling on Einstein’s beam of light. Sometimes the music slows down as if perception of time is being altered. Other times, the music accelerates toward punctuated transitions, where stars collide or you are slingshot around a massive sun. In the end, however, I urge the listener not to take my ideas too literally. Please let the music do what it does best: express the ineffable.

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Duration: 13 minutes

The score is transposed.

**Instrumentation:**

- Piccolo
- 2 Flutes
- 2 Oboes
- English Horn
- 2 Bb Clarinets
- Bb Bass Clarinet
- 2 Bassoons
- Contrabassoon
- 4 Horns in F
- 3 Trumpets in C
- 2 Tenor Trombones
- Bass Trombone
- Tuba

**Timpani**

- 3 Percussion:
  - 1: Vibraphone, Marimba, Glockenspiel, 5 Tom-toms, Temple Blocks, Glass Wind Chimes
  - 2: 2 Tam-Tams (medium, large), Suspended Cymbal, Fine Shakers (e.g. Egg Shakers, etc.), Slapstick, Bamboo Wind Chimes, 2 Brake Drums (low, high)
  - 3: 2 Bass Drums (medium, large), Coarse Shakers (e.g. Maracas, etc.), Snare Drum

- Harp
- Piano

**Strings**

* If desired, a fourth player may be utilized. In this case, I recommend dividing “percussion 1” between two players, as it is the most demanding.

**Additional Notes:**

This piece contains a few instances where a ritardando is followed by a subito tempo change. Unless indicated, there should be no pause. Rather, the ritardando should continue to the downbeat of the new tempo. (m.84, 87, 157)

PIANO, VIBRAPHONE: “Ped. sempre” always means that the pedal should remain depressed (all notes ring) until the next indication. Some pedal changes or fluttering (ad libitum) may be incorporated to prevent excessive resonance.

TIMPANI: Using a piccolo timpano may be helpful, but is not required.

PERCUSSION 1: The player must be able to reach the vibraphone pedal while standing at the marimba. The instruments should be close together or nested (mm.38-39).

PERCUSSION 3: It may be desirable to allow the bass drums to be fully resonant in some areas, while more damped in others. Let the music dictate your decisions.

**MUTES:**

- Trumpet 1: harmon, plunger
- Trumpet 2: plunger
- Trumpet 3: harmon, plunger
- Trombone 1: straight, harmon
N.B. Strings: all players gliss to the unis. pitch
molto rit.\[\frac{1}{4}\] = 72 sub.

N.B. It is recommended for the piano and bassoon 1 to listen to the temple blocks. They can simply count sextuplet sixteenth notes \((2+3+2+3)\), then sync with the conductor on beats 5 and 1 of each measure.

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rit. \( \frac{\text{L} = 80 \text{ ca}}{\text{V}} \) \( \frac{\text{L} = 60 \text{ sub.}}{\text{V}} \)

Piccs.

Fl. 1, 2

Ob. 1, 2

E. Hns.

Bb. Cl. 1, 2

B. Cl.

Bsn. 1, 2

C. Bn.

Pno.

Perc. 1

B. Tbn.

C Tpt. 1, 2

Db.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.