

Human Rights' Oratorio

Perhaps surprising to some, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights had never before been set to music. In fact I did not know that when I started composing music on those texts. It only occurred to me later in the process that it had not been done, that it had never happened before.

I tried many different forms when writing. At one point I was sketching a song-cycle (for a few or several singers and with various instruments), at another I worked on it as a symphony with singers as an extra to the orchestra. I tried spoken word with rhythm (rap, in fact) as well as spoken word without rhythm. And several other musical forms, and combinations thereof. In doing so there were several melodies that presented themselves to me – here and there a contour though as yet without a shape. I do still have the piece of paper in my notebook where I jotted down that “of course, it’s an Oratorio” once that concept had suggested itself to me. For some reason I instantly knew it was going to be between 1-1½ hour. I knew I was going to use the original 1948-text – being universal, not restricted to one area or country or part of our globe, and in this way in fact the only text of its kind. Once I knew it was to become an oratorio I started to pan out the various segments, using the melodies I had already and chiselling out more of them. It might sound straightforward when I say it, now, that it is scored for symphony orchestra, mixed choir and 4 soloists (soprano; mezzo-soprano; tenor; bass) – but there were several other options along the way. As it is now, it vocalizes the Preamble and the 30 Articles of the UN Declaration, dividing the text into 19 parts in logical and/or fittingly long portions.

Intention

I wrote the Oratorio with the intention that the text will be sung. Whereas this might seem an obvious statement the declaration is not poetic, does not rhyme and has no rhythm at all. Possibly, perhaps likely, that is the reason that the text had not before been set to music. For me, however, it seemed a necessity that this text can be sung. People should have melodies to sing-a-long on words like “All human beings are born free and equal...”. Nothing wrong with the Oratorio’s that are already written, of course not, but this text needs one too.

Adding to the above, one reason that I chose a symphony orchestra is that there is no other ensemble which can play – live – such a broad combination of styles. The versatility required reflects the intention – see below – to include multiple or even innumerable kinds of music influences.

Each vocal score demands something new from the singers. A lyrical part is followed by a section which is much more disharmonic or even hoarse. An ideal set-up and one which would be very befitting to the words, would be a choir in which all the soloists are also a part. For each solo perhaps another of the choir members, i.e. a choir made up of singers who can all take on the role of the soloist. This of course takes a very good choir. The difficulty, the virtuosity, lies in fact not so much in each solo as in the versatility itself.

Those values in musical practice

I took the words and intentions of the declaration with me into the writing. Based on the text I made choices on keys / modi / tempi, the orchestration and so on. I sought to reflect the central values (such as equality, emancipation, freedom, et cetera) in my compositional decisions.

A few examples...

1. In many oratorios, and for that matter operas, the solos are the most virtuoso pieces – giving the singers the chance to show-off and bring down the house. The solos here (one for each of the 4 soloists) are fairly short, on the contrary. Not unimportant at all, each solo vocalist gets to sing the text of an article and all the words in every article are very important – so the solos are also important. But the solos are relatively short and not too imposing. Instead the ensemble work (duos, trios, quartets) and the choir-works are the progressively longer and the more virtuosic parts. I thus aim to reflect that the really difficult thing is to ensure that everyone is enabled to work together; communality. In fact it's not that hard to do one thing brilliantly on your own, once. What is really hard is to build a sustainable and balanced socio-economic system where everyone get more or less the same fair chance; inclusion. I quite realise that this aspect might not be audible to an audience on the first listening – but it is there for those who might look for it.
2. For instrumental solos I often chose unusual instruments. The triangle has a very prominent role, the bass-marimba and the bratsch (or viola) have solos... indicating inclusion of minorities. This might be more directly appealing to an audience, though you will have to be able to know the difference between a viola and a violin before you would realise this. The triangle, though, I expect will be obvious – and it is the intention that its solos can be very playful moments.
3. One cannot adopt influences from all musical genres on earth in 75 minutes. But there are many traditions included here. E.g. first nation / pow-wow style drumming; Indian ragas (e.g. the first part using asawari mode); Javanese gamelan-inspired periodic organisation; hints at Coltrane chord substitutions; 12-tone indeed as well as sonata form and many more influences from what is referred to as classical music; one or a few pop song kind of melodies as well as an aria who's melody could have been part of a Monteverdi early opera. Inclusion. Global reach. Multi-cultural and multi musical, the magic musical blender.
4. The 16th article of the declaration states that everyone has the right to build a family. Here I chose to start the music off as a bridal waltz – which in some cultures is a common way of advertising the formalisation of a family bond. But then the article reads on to state that everyone – also – has the right to unbind such a relation; i.e. to divorce. So I write a counterpoint to the wedding-waltz, a straight 4 beat whereas the waltz is a 3 beat. Creating a bit of a thorny theme whereas the waltz is singable – such that the music reflects both these sides. Momentary it sounds like a happy song, and then like a boat about to sink. Technically speaking in fact it is all in 4/4 with a heavy overlay of triplets such that it sometimes sounds like a waltz. Moreover it's all 12 tone - 3 times 4 is 12, so unity / full circle. Family = the smallest unity (whether or not divorced). If anyone who reads this text is lost by now - just ask me, I will explain the music theory aspect as well.
5. There is potentially an opening for the one single function who never gets a heroic spot in oratorios; the choirmaster. In a few places spoken word is required to clarify the text. That could be used so as to allow to move the choirmaster into the spotlight – i.e. emancipation for the choirmaster. Still, the text could also be read by one of the soloists – or by an actor or other non-musician. E.g. a stand-up or a spoken word artist. Incidentally, in olden days those were called... orators.

6. The text is very serious, and so is, not seldom, the music - but just before it gets too serious now and again it explodes into a few musical jokes. The text never does that – it remains fittingly grandiose and full-voiced throughout. So does the music nearly all the time, though I do take the liberty to make a small joke now and then. Just so as to offer the audience the chance to a flat-out laughter.

So all in all... by writing this score I claim that one can indeed write music which reflects said values. Not hap-hazard, as in "there are five musicians of colour in our symphony orchestra" (which can of course in itself be a good thing), but one can do so in a structural and forward thinking manner. One can write orchestral music which will bring about (in its core) equality, freedom, sisterhood and brotherhood, all those good things which the declaration states. An oratorio which is, indeed, making or bringing about democracy. That is the task I set myself, and as such that is very much a political act - writing it is in itself a part of the further development and implementation of the Human Rights.

And it is to set an example, to show one way in which it can be done. For everyone else to do the same in their own way, in their own microcosm, in their own world. In their creations. Such that democracy and Human Rights continue to grow from beneath, generation after generation.

Anders Jallén

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Amsterdam, the Netherlands, August 13th 2022