

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 this 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

Amsterdam, the Netherlands, August 13th 2022

Human Rights' Oratorio

The Oratorio is an overtly political piece, in that it states this specific UN declaration in music - which has never happened before. Writing 75 minutes of music on those texts is, obviously, in itself a political act.

The Oratorio is written on the text of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights - and indeed therefore called the "Human Rights' Oratorio". It vocalizes the Preamble and the 30 Articles of the original 1948-text. Dividing the text into logical and/or fittingly long portions, I have organised the Oratorio in 19 parts – scored for symphony orchestra, mixed choir and 4 soloists (soprano; mezzo-soprano; tenor; bass).

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

A few examples...

7. 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, 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 it might not be audible to an audience on the first listening – but it is there for them who might look for it.
8. For instrumental solos I am often choosing unusual instruments. The triangle has a very prominent role, bass-marimba, bratsch or viola... 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 it. The triangle, though, I expect will be obvious – and it is the intention that its solos can be very playful moments.
9. 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.
10. 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 is of course a common way of advertising matrimony. But then the article goes 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 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. 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.

11. There is potentially an opening for the one single function who never gets a heroic spot in oratorios; the choirmaster. In a few places there is a need for spoken word, 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.
12. 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 – but I take the liberty to do so as to offer the audience the chance to a flat our 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 democracy.

And setting an example for everyone to do the same in their own microcosm, in their own world. In their creations. Such that democracy and Human Rights grow from beneath, generation after generation.

Intention

I write the Oratorio with the intention that the text will be sung. Whereas this might seem an obvious statement, the fact is that the Human Rights have never been put to music. The text is not poetic, does not rhyme and has no rhythm at all. Likely that is one reason it has never been put to music. For me, however, it seems a necessity that this text can be sung. It is such a pity that people have no melodies to sing-a-long with songs that say “All human beings are born free and equal...” and such wonderful words. Nothing wrong with the Oratorio's that are already written, of course not, but arguable this is the most important text of the modern era.

I have, starting in 2010 / 2011 and working intensely on it since 2019, written melodies for all the articles, such that they can – finally – be sung. The reason that I chose a symphony orchestra is that there is no other ensemble which can play – live – such a broad combination of styles.

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

Draft

The Oratorio is an overtly political piece, in that it states this specific UN declaration in music - which has never happened before. Writing 75 minutes of music on those texts is, obviously, in itself a political act.

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

A few examples...

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 – one common way of advertising matrimony. So is all fair and well, sweet as sugar, then? Well, the same article also states that everyone has the right to unbind such a relation; i.e. to divorce. So I write a counterpoint to the waltz, a straight 4 beat. Creating a bit of a thorny theme, such that the music reflects both these sides. Momentary it sounds like a happy song, and then like a boat about to sink. Technically it is all in 4/4 with a heavy overlay of triplets such that it sometimes sounds like a waltz. In fact it's all 12 tone - 3 times 4 is 12, so unity. Family = the smallest unity (whether or not divorced).

The solos (one for each of the 4 soloists) here are short, fairly simple. Not unimportant at all, each solo vocalist gets to sing the text of an article and all the words are very 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. The aim is to reflect that the really difficult thing is to make sure that everyone is enabled to work together; communality.

For instrumental solos I am often choosing unusual instruments. The triangle has a very prominent role, bass-marimba, bratsch... indicating inclusion of minorities.

One cannot adopt influences from all musical genres on earth in 75 minutes. But there are many traditions included here. E.g. first nation drumming, Indian asawari scale, Javanese gamelan inspired periodic organisation, hints at Trane chord substitutions, 12-tone indeed, a pop song kind of melody, an aria who's melody could have been part of a Monteverdi early opera. The text is very serious, and so is, not seldom, the music - but just before it gets too serious there is a lighter tone introduced. Now and again there are a few musical jokes in places where the text suggests it. Inclusion.

There's a role for the one single function who never gets a heroic spot in oratorios. In a few places there is a need for spoken word, and that is so as to allow the choirmaster to move into the spotlight. Emancipation for the choirmaster.

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 in itself is of course 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 democracy.

The scores are here for anyone to read...

[http](http://)

... and I'm working with some singers and conductors to see how we can get some demo audio on to that website in some time.

Oratorio

Activiteiten

I write the Oratorio with the intention that the text will be sung. Whereas this might seem an obvious statement, the fact is that the Human Rights have never been put to music. The text is not poetic, does not rhyme and has no rhythm at all. Likely that is one reason it has never been put to music. For me it seems a necessity that this text can be sung. It is such a pity that people have no melodies to sing-a-long with songs that say "All human beings, are born free and equal...". Nothing wrong with the Oratorio's that are already written but I find this text to be one of the most important that human kind has ever produced. I have, through the last few years, written melodies for all the articles, such that they can be sung. I have checked the melodies with various singers here in Amsterdam and in other places, as well as choir conductors and other musicians. I have received feedback suggesting various improvements, not the least in some places to improve the delivery – indeed it is important that the melodies are written in a way such that they can be understood by an audience. But now the huge work of orchestration begins. I've come a long way, the melodies have been reviewed by singers, choir conductors and other musician in Amsterdam and from other places. The reason I asked for the feedback was to check the singability, as well as whether the words can be understood when sung like that, and subsequently change and improve my work.

Le Oratorio "Droits Humains" [Les droits de l'homme, parfois appelés droits humains]

The Oratorio is written on the text of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights - and indeed therefore called the "Human Rights' Oratorio". It vocalizes the Preamble and the 30 Articles of the original 1948-text. Dividing the text into logical and/or fittingly long portions, I have organised the Oratorio in 19 parts. It will become approximately 75 minutes long and is scored for symphony orchestra, mixed choir and 4 soloists (smtb).

The 19 parts are available as pdf's in concert pitch display on this website...

The reason that I chose a symphony orchestra is that this is the only ensemble which can play all kinds of music live on stage.

The orchestra is the only ensemble which can handle all styles. Of course a jazz quintet is better in playing ... but a symphony orchestra can do it. Same goes for... and there is no other ensemble which can carry this combination of all these styles

Each vocal score demands something new from the singer. Then there is a lyrical part, then there is a section which is much more disharmonic or hoarse.

An ideal set-up, not a necessity but very befitting to the words, would be one in which all the soloists are also a part of the choir. So, not one soloist soprano, one mezzo, one tenor and one bass. But for each solo another of the choir members, i.e. a choir made up of singers which can all take on the soloist role. 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.