

Short description of the Human Rights' Oratorio and each of its 19 parts

Introduction

The Oratorio in its entirety is some 75 minutes long. Its 19 parts are organised in 2 sections, the former slightly longer than the latter section.

- The 1st section consists of parts 1 – 13; it is around 43 minutes long and divided in 3 subsections.
- The 2nd section, parts 14 – 19, ~26 minutes and subdivided in 2 subsections.

The Human Rights Declaration itself consists of an introduction (called a Preamble) and 30 articles. The text used in the Oratorio is the original Declaration itself, United Nations resolution no. 217 from 1948. I have deviated from the original words only as described here – e.g. I have “emancipated” it since the original text contains some slightly outdated wordings. By emancipating it I mean that I have added “she” and “they” where the Declaration actually reads “he”. At first I was working on making one part for each article but I decided that was not desirable – one deliberation was simply that it would have become too long. In choosing which articles to combine in one musical part, and which to keep on their own, I was led by a combination of the content in the text (on the one hand) and by purely musical choices (on the other).

Throughout the declaration the most common words are “Freedom “ and “Everyone”. I gave each of those words an interval as an identifier – from which their respective melodies could develop. The “freedom interval” is established as one of the major musical cornerstones in the 1st part. This will turn out to be one of the factors which creates unity throughout the composition. The music is continually changing based on the text – the music wishes to always underscore the text – whereas these smallest common denominators fulfil the unifying role. For those interested there are other documents on this topic available on the website.

Some words about each part

Section 1 – parts 1-13

The first section is divided in three subsections. It vocalizes the Preamble and the Articles 1-21 of the Human Rights Declaration. It is around 43 minutes long.

1st subsection (parts 1-5, 15 minutes)

In both of the first 2 parts there is in fact a tonal centre, but these are slightly obscured. And those two parts also do not end on a resting-point. This is to create a feeling of ambiguity, not settling or even unsettling, perhaps some slight unease. Such that the road ahead is not yet revealed.

In the introduction, the Preamble, of the UN Declaration a few of the words are rather technical. E.g. "Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations...". Important as those statements are, those words do not as such explain the Human Rights. I decided to leave some of those parts of the Preamble out and focus solely on the words which pronounce the Human Rights. The vocalize, in Part 1, is a melody which I had started to work on for those – now omitted – words. So when I left those words out that melody revealed itself to me and became the beautiful vocalize which is now heard.

The parts of the Preamble which I did use in the Oratorio are the parts which talk about the Human Rights themselves. Such as e.g. "... it is essential that human rights should be protected by the rule of law...". This Preamble is one of the longest parts and requests the participation of all the singers and the full symphony orchestra. The text, I felt, needs this long period to reflect its pondering nature. The music conveys a feeling of expectation – not yet fully knowing where we're going. Among other musical inspirations it draws upon the Javanese gamelan rhythmical cycles, so called Gonggan cycles, as well as using the Indian Asawari scale. Additionally it makes use of an organum (but on the "wrong" bass note). In this fashion, in the microcosm of the score itself, there are several musical styles from many different time periods and geographical areas represented and melted into one piece. Representing inclusion and diversity. One of its rhythmical figures will also be picked up and form the outset of the 16th part.

The 2nd part puts music to the most famous words of the entire Human Rights Declaration – "all human beings are born free and equal". This part introduces the text treatment paradigm which will dominate the Oratorio. Clear and fast delivery of the words, music to underscore – and certainly not overshadow – those majestic words. The words are all about everyone being equal and that everyone should be able to work together. This part is set for three of the soloists (mezzo-soprano, tenor, bass) and the choir in fiercely individual melodies yet intimate vocal weaving. Also, the second part calls for narrator. This is one part where I have emancipated the text – whereas the original text talks about "brotherhood" I have expanded it to also encompass "sisterhood". For the rhythmical aspect the inspiration is First Nation pow wow drumming.

The 3rd part also starts with a fleeting glimpse of a tonal centre – and again it eludes us. It is the soprano-solo with woodwinds, marimba and string orchestra. The text candidly spells out different ways in which we are all equal and so I chose to ask the soprano to do just that. Fast, clearcut delivery.

The 4th part is 12-tone so there is certainly no tonal centre. The music is a bit cumbersome to reflect the words – e.g. the issue of eradicating slavery in this world. Here all the four soloists are singing with a large chamber orchestra accompanying them. At the outset the strings and the drums act as "the slaves", employing intense hard work.

In the 5th part we get an easy, clear cut and joyous tune which ends on a tonic as clear and crisp as a cold winter's day. It is a duo for soprano - tenor, with chamber orchestra and a special role for bass-marimba and bass-clarinete. High-pitch voices, low-pitch solo instruments. As is always the case in

this Oratorio the music is an interpretation of the text – which here says that “all are equal in front of the law”. After this message is conveyed, musicians as well as audience get a short breather – the concentration is allowed to relax for just a few moments.

2nd subsection (parts 6-9; ~14-15 minutes)

The 6th part of the Oratorio talks about that everyone must get a fair and public hearing in case they are summoned to court. This stress on the public hearing gave me the idea to make this a choral solo. The choir sings to a string orchestra plus harp and tuba; and a solo role for cor anglaise. It starts with an orchestral pianissimo until the bass leads the way picking up the words – and soon everyone else also fall in.

The 7th part indicates that everyone must be considered innocent until proven guilty. Reflecting on those thoughts I wrote a piece where one of the singers – representing the individual summoned before a court – receives choral response by the other soloists. Here there are heavy accents on powerful words like “innocent”, “guilty” and “trial”. The four singers are accompanied by a chamber orchestra.

Part 8 picks up on the calm, quiet, silence and safety of the statement that “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with privacy, family or home”. The basic musical material is the background vocals of the part 6. But now those background vocals are broken up in parts, fleeting in and out of each other forming clouds. The broke up structure obscures the words, though, so we need a narrator to clarify it to us.

This came to me in a dream. When I wrote the Oratorio there were a few problematic parts – one of them was this 8th part. Working on the 6th part the background vocals were so beautiful, and one evening I went to bed with the feeling that I did not use their full potential. I then dreamt their full potential and woke up with this “cloud” of music in my head. The music which is now heard – the background vocals in part 6 but now forming a floating cloud of voices. I literally went up, that night, to my desk and scribbled it down before I went back to bed. Luckily, this time I was able to understand my notes when I woke up in the morning.

This “cloudy” aspect... that’s something I lived in the middle of when studying with Xenakis. Unlike his clouds of pizzicati and glissandi, here it is the words that are clouded – which triggered the need for narration. On that note... one possibility is to have a narrator throughout, reading the words at suitable places in between the music. Whereas narration will certainly help to clarify the message it also means the concert will be a bit longer.

The 9th part talks about everybody’s right to freedom of movement and right to a nationality. Here I have made space for solo roles by two of the less often heard instruments. The viola and the triangle. Again this is to make a musical statement in the microcosm of the orchestration. A statement to indicate inclusion, and co-existence, of two diametrically opposed minorities. Diversity and equality. Further to that the words are sung by all four soloists with a chamber orchestra. Again I emancipated the text rather a bit, completing the statement of “his” with “hers” and “theirs”.

Parts 8 and 9 are to be played “attacca”, i.e. without a pause between them. The 9th part, on the other hand, concludes the 2nd subsection – so thereafter there can be another short breather.

3rd subsection (parts 10-13; 13 minutes)

Introducing the third subsection the 10th part (= 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 (contradicting the waltz 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. But then it sounds 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 in that sense it expresses unity and wholeness. Family = the smallest unity (whether or not divorced). If anyone who reads this text is lost by now - just ask me, I will happily explain the music theory aspect as well. It is sung by the "lower solo singers", the mezzo-soprano and the bass, with choir and chamber orchestra.

Part 11 is the Bass solo, with woodwind quintet, harp and percussion. It tells us that "Everyone has the right to own property". Whereas the declaration also includes a statement that "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property" I have again taken the opportunity to emancipate the text. I changed the "he" to "their" – which can be understood as the singular gender-neutral "they" or the plural "they". The melody, as well as the accompanying 16ths, will come back in other parts later on in the Oratorio.

As for vocal choices, this being the bass solo. One of my best friends, a bass singer, had just bought a house when I started to write the Oratorio. I had to think of him, and them, when I wrote it.

The 12th part is a trio (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor) with chamber orchestra. It talks about everyone's "freedom of thought and conscience". The music ran out of my pen when I sat down to write one day in October 2018 – I had triplets in my head (reflecting the rhythm "freedom of thought") and the main body of the music seemingly entered the paper without me doing much about it. The music is slow moving, thoughtful, as we can be when it concerns matters of conscience and our deepest beliefs. Reminiscing – with a bit of blues and jazz here and there.

The above parts 11 and 12 are performed attacca.

The last part of the 3rd subsection, and the last part of the first half, is part 13. The words from Articles 19-21 talk about the freedoms of opinion, assembly and to democratic elections. The music wants to reflect this by being driving, forceful and assertive. Whistles and cymbals call to action and three of the soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano and bass) ensure us of our "freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". It continues with lots of energy throughout, whereafter musicians as well as audiences are offered a pause. I did not plan this, it's the result of the energy flows, but this pause is on the Golden Ratio.

Pause

Section 2 – parts 14-19

The second section is divided in two subsections. It vocalizes the Articles 22-30 of the Human Rights Declaration. It is around 26 minutes long.

1st subsection (parts 14-18; ~15 minutes)

The second section starts with part 14. The text, Article 22 of the Declaration, talks about the right to social security. A bit later it also talks about what is indispensable for “his dignity” and “his personality”. So again we are confronted with the view of the late 1940's – and again I took the liberty to emancipate the text to also include “her” and “their”. The latter, just to reiterate, intentionally used to indicate either gender-neutral singular or plural.

Coming back after the pause, this music starts off with mysterious, almost otherworldly, sounds. The bowed vibraphone in a minor second dissonance, enhanced by the double basses in an unusually high register (using harmonics). As a first surprise of many to come. The singer, this is a solo for the mezzo-soprano, sets things straight – marking the tempo by a declamation style melody. The tempo is deliberately held slow for the melody to keep the intensity, to hold it back, until a cadenza-like melisma is let loose. A long melisma on the word “free”. Throughout though, this is a very searching piece of music. Again that comes from the text which talks about the need for everyone to be able to freely develop themselves. Just like the melisma is allowed to freely develop *itself* at this point in the music.

As such the melody, as well as the 16th and therefore the melisma itself, come from the 11th part and will also play a fundamental role in the concluding part 19.

Part 15 is the last of the choir solos and this time they sing with the full symphony orchestra behind them. The text, Article 23, talks about the right to work and to equal pay. This piece is deliberately made somewhat cumbersome, so as to hint on how it feels when you *have* to work. There are some dissonant sections which create an uneasy feeling, and some rhythmical transformations giving the whole piece an unbalanced aura. Perhaps confusing or even irritating for the listener. A bit like life can be on an uphill struggle workday.

The hi-hat is off beat throughout the piece. Except on the last note, when everything is allowed to just “sink down on the couch” as if after a long working day. And it then ends in - slightly weary but still - harmony and a feeling of “yes, we got through it”.

And then the 16th part comes as a delightful relief... after all the cumbersome work everything is beautiful (and also short) when the article 24 asserts we get paid vacation. The music is similarly light and springlike, to again convey that feeling. It is the tenor solo, with woodwinds, strings and a solo role for the French horn. The main rhythmical pattern heard in the beginning is derived from the 1st part – the Preamble – of the Oratorio.

The three parts 14-16 are to be played attacca.

Part 17 is scored for three soloists (soprano, tenor and bass) with choir and chamber orchestra. The text is Article 25 which concerns caring for children. I made a berceuse out of it, and I allow this musical rocking cradle to repeat and repeat and repeat – as one does, until the baby is asleep. The instruments have very busy parts, like parents hastily trying to make ends meet. The text talks about

motherhood and childhood, and again I have emancipated it to also include fatherhood and parenthood.

Part 18 ends this subsection. It is scored for all four soloists, women's choir, percussion, woodwind and string orchestra. In the beginning it becomes a solo for the very low contrabassoon. Again an unusual instrument for a solo role and one of the few contrabassoon solos in the orchestral repertoire. Things move slowly in the lowest segments, and so the solo is very slow, but it dominates the orchestra and holds the tension until it has really said everything it had to say. And then, the soprano lifts off and we fly – on the foundations so clearly outlined by the low contrabassoon.

The Article 26 talks about everybody's right to education and that at least elementary education shall be free. Further it goes on to mention other parts of cultural life and scientific, literary and artistic production. These words are sung by all of the soloists, and at the end a slight return of the choir. Warming them up, as it were, for the grand finale. But first a small breather...

The 2nd subsection consists of only the last part – part 19. With its 11-12 minutes duration it is the longest of any of the individual parts. It settles on the key and bass note where the first parts should have – but did not – settle. In that sense it concludes the arch which was begun at the outset. Additionally, as has been hinted to already, the melody as well as substantial parts of the accompaniment is derived from the 11th and 14th parts. The choir sets the tone right away by singing the word “Everyone” at the outset. In the original text that word is used about 80 times, by far the most commonly used word in the Declaration. Most often it is used to indicate that “everyone” has the right to the various described freedoms. But here, the Articles 29 and 30 talk about that “everyone has duties to the community...”. One such duty is that “these rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations”. It also goes on to assert the “respect for the rights and freedoms of others”. It employs the full orchestra and choir, and all the soloists. There are solo roles for all instruments, even an instrumental fugato with some room for improvisation, as well as an a cappella choir solo and of course many solos for the singers. Until the last notes again point out that this text is about “everyone”.

Three notes on the performance

1. Of course the Oratorio can be performed by 4 soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and bass). But an accomplished choir could also use different singers – all from the choir – taking turns on the musical solo roles. The various parts – i.e. where the soprano sings a solo or duet or trio or quartet – are each time slightly different in character. So different sopranos, indeed perhaps different sopranos from the choir, could sing each of those parts. This is not a requirement at all – and indeed it would take a very good choir – but it would be fitting to the words. I wrote it this way with this idea in mind – as a possibility, an option.
2. The duos, trios and quartets are at least as demanding as the solos. In fact the entire Oratorio is built to underscore that the most difficult thing is to have everyone work together. Each one unique, all working together for the common good, and striving to do so in perfect harmony.
3. A narrator is called for at a few places in the score. However, in fact a narrator could read all the articles. Probably not between each part, but instead on the places where there is a

pause. When the piece is performed in this manner the narration can be carried out by one person – a narrator – or by different persons. E.g. some of the singers and the instrumentalists, the conductor and the choir conductor, could all read an article or a few. However also other involved functions could read an article. The cleaning personnel, the people in the wardrobe or those at the counter if it is performed in a concert hall. The administrative functions who help the choir / orchestra out. Or their librarian, or someone else who has played a main role in the preparations. This is to stress, all the way from writing it and to the actual performance itself, that “everyone” gets a chance to play a visibly important, leading, role. Nothing compulsory at all of course, it should only be if people want to. But, indeed, I would support if this piece is performed in such a way that some “unusual” people get a piece of the limelight and the applause. In the spirit of the Declaration, “everyone”.

So, to the person who has read all of this... I thank you for your attention. I also compliment your endurance and hope you found it a rewarding read. Do get in contact if you want, you will find my email address on the website.

<https://humanrightsoratorio.com/>

Amsterdam, November 2022

Anders Jallén

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Anders Jallén', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.