

Brian Skutle- “Sonic Contemplation”

“Sonic Contemplation” was originally begun in December 2000 as a work for viola and electronics- what I hoped might be my entry in a viola composition competition being held at Georgia State at the time. It wasn’t completed in time for that (in truth, it was barely started), but so strong were my personal reasons for writing the piece that I continued to work on it over the next semester in my composition lessons. As I graduated in May 2001, I was still at work on it, but as the weeks progressed past graduation, my progress stopped, as well as my composing in general (from May 2001-December 2003, I would only complete three pieces). During that time period “Contemplation” was one of four incompleting pieces I would work on, this time rewriting the piece for trombone and electronics, since my main reason for the viola- the competition- was long since over (plus, my 10-plus years playing trombone myself made it a favorite instrument for me to write for, and a personal one), but, well, it remained incomplete. But thoughts of finishing the piece remained with me, and in April 2006, when- during a similar period of life contemplations and self-reflection- I returned to the piece with a) more experience as a composer; b) more life experience to draw upon; and c) the clear-eyed objectivity of being five-plus years removed from the experiences that inspired “Sonic Contemplation” in the first place.

That in itself might suffice to explain “Contemplation,” but it is only half the story. The experience that inspired “Sonic Contemplation” was the time from March 2000 and beyond when my grandfather- with whom I was very close- was diagnosed with cancer, eventually passing away in July 2000. My grandfather was greatly supportive of my desire to pursue music over the years, and- I’d like to think- understood why I felt I had. I had lost my three other grandparents about ten years before, but the additional time to form that bond- and the emotional maturity that comes with age- took their toll, as did the extra stress coming from being a full-time student. Between my 4th and 5th year at State, I spent a total of ten weeks in Ohio- where he lived, and where I grew up- visiting every day, and assisting with what I could. Never have I been so consciously close to death- emotionally, it was devastating. But I am grateful for that time, if for no other reason than that it allowed me to say goodbye to someone whom I came to see as a third parent over the years.

In its’ tone and musical theory, “Sonic Contemplation” resembles my “Five Stages’ Suite,” written in 1999 for an eclectic chamber ensemble, with each of its’ five movements depicting musically the five stages of grief. More subdued musically than the more-rhythmic (and overtly melodramatic) “Five Stages,” “Contemplation”- with four pre-conceived sections presented in a continuous stream of musical thought- nonetheless shares one theoretical idea with “Stages” in that I use only six of the twelve available pitches (and their various octaves) throughout the duration of the piece; none of the six from “Stages” are repeated here. The goal with “Contemplation,” though, was to remain fundamentally harmonic in pitch selections while challenging the inherent limitations of such a mindset to create a piece both classical in tone and form and contemporary in sound, resembling ambient soundscapes of mine both early and more recent. It is the most personal musical story- both in its’ origins and style- I feel I’ve ever told. Thanks for listening. –Brian Skutle (April 9, 2006)

My “Ideal” for “*Sonic Contemplation*”

With “Sonic Contemplation,” my goal is to create a musical work with the dramatic impact of film music, minus the sentimentality of many scores. What I hope to achieve musically is a work that is both complex yet beguilingly simple in its’ sound, experimental and bold in compositional craft yet accessible to listen to, and a work that ultimately leaves an impression with the listener. The mood should be unsettling, sad, frustrating, and- as the title implies- contemplative, with only the end bringing a glimmer of hope and relief for the future.

“*Sonic Contemplation*” Narrative Outline

Section I- The beginning of the ordeal- all of the electronic elements are introduced in varying textures and rhythms. As I first learn about my grandfather’s illness, grief begins to set in as we hear the first expression of the theme in the trombone. A sudden addition of stress on top of everything I’ve already felt starts to set in, exemplified by the added complexity in the rhythmic voices. At this point my thoughts are affected, but because it is still a situation I’m distant towards- though the emotions are highly personal and deeply felt- the full effect of the news hasn’t hit me yet. The sustained electronics remain fundamentally harmonic underneath- only later will real dissonance be felt. The section ends on a note of “optimism”- if you will- and a series of primarily major progressions as I prepare to finally see my grandfather for the first time since the ordeal started.

Section II- It is difficult to see my grandfather like this. Though I’ve had other family members die in the past, never did I confront it so upfront, for good reason. The theme is first heard in the lower electronics, and as new voices enter, only fragments are heard as the soundscape grows denser. Seeing family too little visited is a comfort, but when I get home, alone, my real feelings present themselves. Fortunately there are new friends to confide in and the diversions of the occasional movie that allows for an opportunity to either confront or escape from my feelings. Emotionally, my focus is exclusively on my grandfather for the three weeks I am up in Ohio. Worry and sadness are the order of the day- not the healthiest way to live emotionally, but what else is left when you are physically isolated from everything you can go to for solace? Even favorite hobbies don’t feel so urgent anymore, and artistically, you feel paralyzed. As I prepare to come home, however, one final emotional blow hits as we discover his condition is terminal, causing an outburst of sadness and anger not easily dulled by a return home, and a brief reprieve.

Section III- The reality of my grandfather’s health now a fact, this section begins with a motif new to the piece, a variation of a theme from my “Five Stages’ Suite,” is played by the trombone as the sustained electronics continue their dissonance from the end of the last section; it will remain that way throughout this section. Similar to the second section, visits with family and friends are comforting, but even some of these feel hollow, especially when the visits are with my parent’s friends, and no one is around I can identify with. It gets harder to see my grandfather day in and day out as his condition worsens. It is during this time I come to realize that this isn’t the same person I knew. The same one who traveled around the world, with stories to tell and pictures to show. The same one who would make frequent stops to visit us, during which we would go out to eat, watch movies, and play cards. The same one who- during my four years of high

school- would make trips to Tennessee, Florida, Indianapolis, and Chicago to watch me perform in both marching and symphonic bands, even if we didn't get to see each other. This wasn't that person- he's been taken from me physically by a disease prepared to take me to a place worse than any other I know emotionally. This is represented musically by ever-complex rhythms in the electronics, with the trombone all but swallowed up- to where it doesn't even bother anymore and just stops playing altogether. It eventually subsides, to where just the sustained electronics are left as my grandfather passes away.

Section IV- The loneliest section of the piece. You have things you want to communicate, but so do other people. Yet you don't communicate, even though it is the most healing of actions we as humans are capable. You wander through the days and weeks since the loss, putting on a happy face for the sake of others while deep down maintaining feelings of grief and anger deep down that begin to eat away at you. The trombone is alone in a good part of this section. Its' thoughts verge on mundane repetitiveness, but there's few other ways to describe ones thoughts at a time like this. But as has been said by others, time heals all wounds, even when they are caused by the death of a loved one. Gradually, the desire to communicate gives way to an outpouring of emotion. The electronics return in the end to help with the catharsis. The pain will obviously never go away, but the intense after effects of death gradually give way to acceptance, and the realizations that the little things can be overcome, as well as the big things that can- at first- make you feel that shellshock all over again. The piece ends with major progressions- both in chords and melody- in both the trombone and electronics. The past is now exactly that- in the past. Gone but never forgotten. Just like the memories of a loved one you cherish. For John Mitchell, from his only grandson- thanks for listening. –Brian Skutle (April 12, 2006)