

# Gee, Ryan Thomas

## *Or Gadol*: Composition for Orchestra

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Four objectives guided the composition *Or Gadol*. I will discuss the impact each had on the resulting music.

### **1. Venture into new personal territory by composing for a large ensemble.**

Orchestras are a more than a little unwieldy. It becomes an overwhelming task to keep track of so many instruments and achieve a degree of balance in their usage. Consequently, I did all planning for the piece using a short score format of six staves. By confining the visual representation of the piece in this way, the writing process becomes much less complicated and more immediately accessible to the eye. However, I found that while main melodic ideas were important to write into the short score, accompaniment figures were sufficiently subject to change that it was rather useless to write them into the short score. Accordingly, I generally just sketched accompaniment ideas in the short score.

### **2. Achieve tension and release through the overlapping and juxtaposition of tonal and atonal harmonies.**

From an aesthetic standpoint, this technique proved very satisfying. Several moments in the piece contain dissonant, chromatic flurries which very abruptly give way to pleasing, consonant, riffs. The dissonant material acts as an energy ramp of sorts, building tension until the fall-off relaxation points.

Introducing the dissonance naturally was unexpectedly difficult for me. In a primarily diatonic piece of this nature, dense chromaticism so starkly contrasts with the rest of the material that introducing it (the chromaticism) sometimes can have an effect similar to that of sounding a fog horn in a cathedral. If I continue in this vein of composition I will search for ways to introduce the dissonance more gradually.

### **3. Use a Boulez/Shoenberg inspired *klangfarbenmelodie* (tone-color melody) in the context of a minimalist ostinato.**

This particular idea gave my imagination a delightful pivot point. I could (and did) take melodic ideas and ostinatos (repeated figures or “riffs”) in any timbral direction I cooked up, with the sole caveat that adjacent timbres (instrumental colors) match at least to some small extent. The transitions had to sound as natural as possible. Often a marimba or vibraphone takes up a piano ostinato. A whisper-muted trumpet going to flute likewise was a shift I utilized often. My favorite timbral shift occurs at the beginning of the piece, when a loud trumpet riff is taken over by a muted trumpet. I anticipate that this echo effect will be largely effective.

#### **4. Combine text in three different, ancient languages and use the voice as part of the orchestral fabric, not as soloists supported by the orchestra.**

I opted not to use Greek text from the Septuagint. I did, however, utilize Hebrew and Latin texts. Some of the Hebrew text comes from the book of Isaiah. The remaining Hebrew text comes from a short phrase from the Jewish Yom Kippur service. An inspiring phrase, “Zachrenu lechaim, melech hafetz bechaim,” led me to a likeable, rhythmic melody. I use this melody at different speeds and augmentation levels at least ten times in the composition.

The Latin text comes from a medal produced to commemorate the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The phrase reads “*Afflavit deus et dissipantur*” (God breathed and they were put to flight). I appreciated these words as a metaphor and determined to use them as a lightburst in the darker, more dissonant center of the piece. Several times, loud, harsh chords in the orchestra interrupt the singer as she attempts to complete this phrase. Finally, after it appears that the singer has given up trying to sing the phrase, the motion in the orchestra comes to a halt. At this point, the soloist continues again, this time completing the entire phrase which then morphs into melodious, soul-wrenching “Alleluia.”

A more controversial move in this composition involved my elimination of the two soprano’s status as “soloists.” I had originally conceived of an orchestra in which the sopranos were merely an extra pair of instruments. My instructor, however, pointed out that the bestowal of words on a singer’s part represents a certain shift in the conception of the singer’s function, since words command a degree of attention that instrumental lines do not. Compounding the problem is the fact that at other points, the singers sing no words at all, but pitched “doos”. Shifting from singing words to singing “doo” may be an awkward and unnatural thing to do to a singer. As of now, I have not resolved this problem. My inclination is to place the singers in seats with the other instruments, but it really depends on how amenable the performers and conductors are to this notion.

#### **Conclusion**

The composition of *Or Gadol* has been (thus far) an exciting, albeit fantastically challenging task. It was an enormous amount of consistently uphill work with very little coasting, but I hope that a commensurately enormous satisfaction will come of its performance, the realization of which becomes my next task.