

Soulström

(2009) Jodie Blackshaw

Overview

Soulström is a 14-minute large-scale symphonic work by Australian composer Jodie Blackshaw, the Australian premiere of which I gave in August 2010. The premiere performance was given in 2009 by the University of North Texas Symphonic Band, Denis Fisher, conductor.

This is a unique, deeply felt and moving work based on the composer's emotional response to the death of her father in 1997.

Instrumentation

Picc, Flutes 1, 2

Ob.1,2

Bsn 1, 2, contra

Eb Cl, Bb Cl 1-6, BCl, Bb ContraBCl

AATB Saxes

Cornets 1, 2

Trumpets 1, 2, 3

Horns 1-4

Trombones 1-3, Bass

Euphonium

Tuba 1,2

String Bass

Percussion - 6 players:

Timpani

Glockenspiel, Tubular Bells, Ride Cym, Large Tam Tam, Triangle Vibraphone, Xylophone, Sus Cym

Bass Drum, Siren with crank

23" timpani, Sus Cym, 3 toms, Crash Cyms, Large Tam Tam

25 or 26" timpani, Large Chinese Cymbal

Unconventional Instruments

Nailenspiels: One feature particular to all Jodie's works is the use of unconventional and/or completely new instruments. *Soulström* is no exception, in this case calling for the ensemble members to play 'Nailenspiels', consisting of striking one suspended non-galvanised 1/4" nail with another, creating a haunting, tinkling sound when played tutti.

Hand Crank Siren - industrial siren required for use by percussionists.

Work Background/Synopsis

The composition of *Soulström* was a reaction to the trauma following the death of Jodie's father, Christopher John Blackshaw, in 1997. Ten years in the making, the work follows the drawn-out emotional turmoil of the grieving process before finally ending in a triumphant release.

Originally the work was to follow a clearly articulated plot surrounding two lovers and their separation, complete with narrator. Whilst the narrative was eventually shelved, the theme of one of these original protagonists 'Amali' appears in the final version.

The work is a personal journey through the landscape of depression, pain and despair. It is about the journey of living in and with grief, and the struggles on the path towards acceptance.

A great sense of loneliness pervades the opening of the work, created by mournful individual melodies that briefly unite but then disengage. This also conjures a sense of impermanence, loss and of being lost. This desolate landscape gives way to a storm, heard in the first soundscape and a great thickening of texture, from which another lone melody emerges. This melody is gradually developed into a tutti chorale, which culminates in a moment of hope, only to be snuffed out. Exponentially the sound then grows as sadness turns into an ugly, angry outburst. Suddenly desolation returns as the eye of the emotional storm is reached. Anguish more deeply felt than before is expressed through crying, moaning desperation before twisting and turning and transforming into anger again. In a final, stormy, urgent struggle, full of rage the music finally light breaks free of darkness and a final, blazing fanfare announces the future.

Harmony

Almost the entire work is centred around G minor, tension and release is created through the repeated exploration of the resolutions of C to D and Ab to G. Minor 6ths and tritones abound and contribute to the work's constant uneasiness. This permanent tonal centre yet

constant unease makes the first major chord (10 minutes in) stand out like a beacon, but its hope is fleeting. Further pain, anger and outbursts ensue before the final escape from depression and the entrance into a world of blazing light (D major).

Technical Challenges

Solos: The nature of the writing requires assured individual playing is required by all performers in every section due to sparse scoring. There are also notable extended

passages for soloists: Bass Clarinet, Flute, Horn, Piccolo, Trumpet (including offstage trumpet), Euphonium, Bassoon, Oboe.

Soundscapes: The ensemble and conductor create two soundscapes during the work. In the first section players have small melodic cells notated on their part that they are to play repeated with ad. lib. tempo and dynamics when directed by the conductor to begin. The result is a gradually building texture representing an emotional 'storm'.

The second soundscape uses extended techniques to create an initially groaning sound that is gradually consumed by wailing sounds.

Extended techniques: Many extended techniques are employed as below.

- Flutes - roll headjoint to alter pitch on held tone
- Clarinet - Cross left ankle over right knee, gently push bell of clarinet into left calf muscle to gradually alter pitch
- Saxophone - jaw/lip bends
- Brass - Mouthpiece buzzing
- String Bass - 'Seagull' effect (from Peter Sculthorpe)
- Timpani - directed and ad-lib glissandi with pedal
- Woodwinds - foot stamping whilst playing

Technique: Overall the work would probably be graded as a 5.5 or 6 mainly due to the soloistic passages mentioned as well as the technical demands of the final section. It includes fast scalar passages for woodwinds with occasional quintuplet, sextuplet and septuplet semiquaver subdivisions.

Brass must double tongue, have excellent dynamic control for repeated sfzp and prolonged fff and ffff. Stamina is important to sustain the power of the final fanfare section, as is good flexibility in trumpets who have a prolonged stretch of arpeggiated triplets at crotchet = 96 in the mid-upper register.

Musical challenges

The emotional content of this work requires great maturity from both players and conductor. Getting to the heart of this work requires deep personal insight, reflection and soul-searching by all musicians involved. Rehearsing and performing the work is very emotionally taxing. (I rehearsed it alongside *Godzilla Eats Las Vegas* to balance this!).

Great care and tact is necessary in approaching the content with players of any age. Loss is universal, and in the real world a constant occurrence. Being mindful of players own current emotional landscapes is important.

However, the experience of performing this work is transformative, cathartic and incredibly rewarding. The journey for conductor, players and audience is well worth the heartache.