THE HIGHWAYMAN

COMPOSITION AND ANALYSIS OF A SYMPHONIC POEM

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PREFACE

This Master's thesis consists of an original work for symphony orchestra and an accompanying paper that discusses various techniques and programmatic methods used in composing the piece. I decided to write for symphony orchestra because, having never played in an orchestra, I would be writing for a less familiar medium, thus creating a new educational experience for myself. In addition, orchestra made available to me a wide range of timbres with which to work, especially with string instruments which can be so melodious.

The second major decision was what to write about. I finally came while visiting my parents in San Diego in February of 2007. My mother was showing me many of the old books she had kept throughout the years, including some of my old children's books, and some of her much older children's books, many of which had been published in the late 1800s. One such book, a large volume of poetry, included her favorite childhood poem, "The Highwayman." My mother told me that as a child she continually asked her mother to read it to her at bedtime. I read "The Highwayman" that day and immediately realized two things: I understood my mother's attraction to the poem because of the romantic theme, and I finally knew what to compose for my thesis piece. This symphonic poem is therefore dedicated to her.

While composing my piece, I realized how valuable my music composition education at the University of Hawaii was and how much I had learned in my few short years at the University. I would like to acknowledge my superb music composition professors, Dr. Takeo Kudo and Dr. Byron Yasui, from whom I have learned so much in this wonderful field. I am also especially grateful to Dr. Donald Womack for not only his expert teachings in orchestration and composition but also for his stellar guidance, patience, and sense of humor in helping me with my Thesis. I still find it remarkable that after every composition class with these three professors, I left the classroom smarter and more motivated than when I entered.
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CHAPTER 1: COMPOSING A SYMPHONIC POEM

Introduction

For centuries now, music composers have found literary works to be great inspiration for compositions as small as piano solos or as large as symphonies. Such renowned composers as Beethoven, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Schoenberg, and Wagner used literary works from authors such as Byron, Dante, Goethe, Hugo, Poe, Schiller, and of course Shakespeare, to derive inspiration for their music. For example, Liszt’s Hamlet, Tchaikovsky’s Romeo and Juliet, Dvorak’s Othello, and R. Strauss’ MacBeth are just a few symphonic pieces based on works by Shakespeare alone. However, after the first few decades of the 20th century, especially during the advent of serialism, indeterminancy, and minimalism, program music fell out of favor as a compositional genre. So it was with some trepidation that I elected to write my thesis using a seemingly outdated technique.

That being said, there is the constantly recurring dilemma of composing new music without using old techniques such as functional tonal harmony or 12-tone rows, or without using such forms as sonata or rondo. The orchestral work submitted in this thesis is through-composed and reflects the chronology of events in an epic poem. While it is not an original form, it is certainly one that not only allows the composer a great deal of freedom, but is also relevant to any portrayal of events. One would not want to first tell the end of a story and work randomly backwards, correct? Thus the form used in my work would have to be deemed relevant. The harmonic or rhythmic structure, however, must be an attempt to be new and unique. This attempt has to be tempered with hope that the listener will enjoy or at least appreciate the work. There lies the quandary—to compose music in an advanced style while still remaining accessible to the listener. Hopefully my work will meet these expectations.

In preparation for my composition of program music, I read an extremely helpful work (in two volumes) by Dr. Lawrence Casler—Symphonic Program Music
and its Literary Sources. Casler's work identifies and discusses program music based on literary works, including hundreds of examples of compositional techniques used by composers ranging from Beethoven to Stravinsky. While reading through the many chapters, I took copious notes on techniques I would use for my composition. I attempted to pay more attention to techniques of more recent composers, but I found that certain techniques by the early Romantics seem timeless and are difficult to ignore. For example, Franz Lizst originally composed his *Dante Symphony* in three movements to reflect the three parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This intrigued me and led me to compose my work based only on the second part of *The Highwayman*. I had initially intended on writing for the entire poem, and have in fact completed the first draft of Part I. However, composing for both movements would have resulted in a large symphony that went beyond the scope of this thesis. I saw that Part II lent itself to more diverse themes, more contrasting material, and more of an exciting program to set music to. Therefore, Part II was selected for the thesis composition. It should be noted, however, that elements of the first movement representing Part I, namely the themes for the two main characters, were brought forward and continued in the second movement (Part II). The duration of the second movement is approximately 11 minutes.

In the chapters below, I will share a brief history of program music and present various methods composers have used to shape their music to reflect the literary sources that inspired their compositions. Additionally, I will introduce the various themes I used to represent the key players of "The Highwayman," and will discuss how I manipulated and transformed those themes throughout my composition. I will also discuss the harmonic and extensive rhythmic language used in the piece to make a century-old poem relevant to a 21st-century music composition.

**Instrumentation**

As mentioned previously, I chose to write for a standard symphony orchestra in part because I had already written a large piece for concert band.
Additionally, I wanted to write for strings, with which I have limited experience. I saw this as another educational opportunity.

Instrumentation is that of a typical late 19th century orchestra:

1 Piccolo
2 Flutes
2 Oboes
1 English Horn
2 Clarinets in Bb
1 Bass Clarinet in Bb
2 Bassoons
1 Contrabassoon
4 Horns in F
3 Trumpets in Bb
2 Tenor trombones
1 Bass trombone
1 Tuba
Timpani (5)
Percussion 1: Bass drum, field drum, glockenspiel
Percussion 2: Chimes, snare drum, triangle, marimba, suspended cymbal
Percussion 3: Xylophone, crash cymbals, tam-tam, tambourine, bells
Strings
CHAPTER 2    INFLUENCES OF PROGRAM MUSIC

Background

Although a recognized technique in the early 18th century, program music is most associated with the music of the 19th century, by such composers as Mendelssohn, Schumann, Berlioz, and Liszt, and later Debussy and Richard Strauss. During the early 20th century, program music took a back seat to serialism as composers strived for newer compositional methods. Later in the century, indeterminancy and minimalism further overshadowed the relevance of program music. Yet, one of my music composition professors a decade ago stated that compositions need a program to act as either motivation for ideas, as a central unifying theme, or as a structure for the form of the piece. There are certainly a great many composers who get their inspiration to write music from literary works such as poems, stories, or fables; inspiration can even come from a dream during the night (e.g., John Adams' Harmonielehre). In modern society, news stories, wartime exploits, or even achievements in sports might inspire a composer to act. The motion picture industry today thrives on literary influences in developing screenplays; in turn, music does too.

During my research into program music, the name of Franz Liszt, more than anyone else, seemed to appear at every turn of the page. It seems generally accepted that Liszt developed the symphonic poem genre--one-movement symphonic works by composers using outside influences such as literary works to inspire the music.

There are three recognized techniques to composing program music: depictive, expressive, and narrative. The depictive technique acts to imitate a program using somewhat blatant sounds in the music. For example, to describe birds, a flute might play a flourish much like a bird-call. Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique (1830) is a popular example of depictive program music, with the
many moods and actions in the program clearly illustrated by the music. The depictive approach may not be as practiced or accepted as the expressive method, yet it is still used in modern compositions. Elliot Carter’s *A Mirror on which to Dwell* (1975), based on 6 poems by Elizabeth Bishop, makes extensive use of the depictive approach. One example is his use of staccato notes by the oboe to imitate a bird pecking at the sand for food, as described in Bishop’s poem “The Sandpiper.”

The expressive technique of program music is characterized by music setting a mood that generally reflects a particular program. For instance, if a literary work is generally a happy tale, the music would also be happy and uplifting. On the other hand, if a story had a tragic ending, the music would sound dark and somber. This is the method most preferred by Liszt and Berlioz in the mid-19th century. Liszt, via his symphonic poems, wanted listeners to be able to identify with a certain mood, feeling, or emotion of a poem through the music.

The most controversial method, yet in a way more innovative, is the narrative technique, which ties the music to the chronological events in a literary work. These works are through-composed and therefore do not usually fit into the traditionally accepted norms of sonata, rondo, or variation forms. Depending on the events in the literary work, there is a danger that the music may be a bit choppy and asymmetrical and thus inferior. This may explain why composers seemed to shy away from this format, although this is the method that I chose to use in my thesis composition.

Reading through the two volumes of Casler’s work, I began to see trends in the methods and approaches of the many composers of program music, and I developed a sort of mental checklist of methods that I liked and disliked. Knowing the poem and its sequence of events, I decided to use the narrative technique for my program music. The fact that that technique was not the preferred method by many composers in the past intrigued me and seemed a great opportunity and challenge to make it work. Many other decisions such as the use of themes, rhythm, and orchestration are discussed below.
Themes

My decision to assign themes to the characters in "The Highwayman" was an easy one, as nearly all the program music that I researched featured themes assigned to the central characters. This idea of a theme representing a character is certainly not new. Beethoven used this in his Coriolan Overture, Wagner used leimotifs throughout his Ring Cycle operas, and more recently, Samuel Barber used different themes and rhythms for each of the characters and their moods in his Overture to "The School for Scandal" (1931). Casler writes that in programs involving men and women the masculine theme is generally more assertive and impetuous while the woman’s theme is lyrical and gentle. In researching this, and while reading about Mussorgsky’s methods, I decided to go one step further and create different harmonic structures and different timbres for the two characters. This resulted in the highwayman’s theme being dynamic and atonal, whereas Bess’ theme is very lyrical and diatonic.

Casler also writes that during battle scenes in program music, most composers intermix the themes of the opposing forces, although one central theme can be used instead. I decided on the former, to use both the troops theme and the highwayman’s theme during the battle. I thought it might be fun and a challenge to try to mix the themes against each other, either with call and response or in counterpoint.

Casler also notes that amidst battle scenes in program music, the winner’s theme rises above the action. This idea I did incorporate—in some sections of the music more obviously than others. This will be shown in Chapter 4.

Form

There is a great deal of information on the use of form in program music. Established forms such as sonata and rondo were used extensively, very much in the spirit and structure of a symphony’s first movement. Liszt is said to have insisted that the form of program music mirror that of the poem or literary source;
however, I did find instances of his use of sonata allegro form in at least one of his symphonic poems. Yet, modern composers seem to have followed Liszt’s theory. For example, Leonard Bernstein based his 2nd Symphony (1949) on the form of its source, the poem “The Age of Anxiety.”

Rhythmic language

Casler points out that in several compositions through the years, a galloping horse is represented by triplets or one 8th/two 16th notes rhythm. Cesar Franck used that technique in Le Chausser Maudit and Smetana in Haken Jarl, and we all know Rossini used it in the overture to William Tell. Although the highwayman is always portrayed on horseback in the poem, I decided not to incorporate those rhythms, as that technique seems to have been overdone. I did, however, decide to incorporate the spirit of that technique in that I composed the highwayman’s theme in compound meter.

I also learned that composers have used irregular shifting of meter or rhythm to portray a degree of wildness or uncertainty in their program. I took this to heart in my composition—not to use other techniques per se, but to compose along the spirit of that observation. I like the techniques and rhythmic language that were used by Messiaen. He distributed note values in irregular numerical patterns, avoiding equal time durations. He also favored what he called non-retrogradable rhythms, which are the same pattern when played in retrograde. Intrigued by that concept, I used it in various but limited sections of my composition, as will be shown in Chapter 6. Overall, I favored more random rhythms that cannot be identified as a particular technique, and irregular rhythms play a prominent role in my composition.

Orchestration

As far as representing characters musically, composers such as Dvorak, Prokofiev, and R. Strauss used individual instruments. I thought about representing the highwayman as a solo trumpet, and using flute to represent Bess, but as my composition matured I decided against it—I felt it a little restrictive,
especially as a lot of my scenes required the power of a full orchestra which would likely drown out any soloists.

In *Der Nachtliche Zug* (1861), based on the poet Nikolaus Lenau's poem "Faust," Liszt uses a technique of fading music in and out to reflect approaching/departing action.\(^{12}\) I liked this technique and used it for my piece since much of the poem depicts approaching and departing characters.

In his symphonic poem *Don Quixote*, composer Richard Strauss portrayed the lead character as a solo cello (and Sancho Panza as a solo viola). In one episode Don Quixote does battle against an "army" (of sheep). Strauss scores solo cello against the entire orchestra (which represents the "army").\(^{13}\) This plot is similar to the final sections of "The Highwayman." I could have borrowed the idea, but I decided against it from the outset because I wanted more of a large continuous sound for the battle scene. In other words, I did not want to reduce the volume of the battle scene in order to hear a selected soloist.

I should also mention that I tend to be very democratic when orchestrating my ideas. I don’t necessarily like a symphonic piece to be monopolized by the strings section. Having sat through a symphonic piece both as a percussionist and as a trumpet player and having to count endless measures before I got a chance to play, I empathize with musicians in those predicaments and tend to keep all of the instruments equally involved in my compositions. A perfect example of this is the bass clarinet passages at measures 164-177. I liked the 5/8 rhythmic pitch pattern that I came up with, and especially liked how it sounded on clarinet. I eventually settled on assigning that passage to the bass clarinet not only for its timbre but also to compensate for the instrument not having done much as a soloist in the composition thus far.

**Program notes**

Franz Liszt became aware that an audience could better appreciate the music when the program was explained—he provided prefaces for nine of his symphonic poems.\(^{14}\) During my research I continually found examples of composers including a poem’s text in their scores—Liszt provided that in his last
symphonic poem, *Die Ideale*, for example. More recently, University of Hawaii graduate student Doug McCullough noted in his own thesis that the performing musicians also saw benefit in knowing the narrative—it acted to dictate the expression in their playing. I played around with that idea, and would have done so if my score was hand-written, but I believe it would be a little tricky with the advent of computer scoring software. If I knew of a way to do it, I would. However, the most important issue is whether a piece of music can be appreciated by the listener without knowledge of the poem/program. That was certainly the goal of my thesis composition.
CHAPTER 3  FORM AND CONTEXT OF THE HIGHWAYMAN

My thesis The Highwayman (Second Movement) is through-composed program music. As seen in the Appendix, the poem is in two parts. This thesis composition is devoted to Part II and might be initially determined to be in AB form, with the A section being music describing the events leading up to the death of Bess, the landlord's daughter and the highwayman's love interest. The B section represents the highwayman's vengeful pursuits, which eventually lead to his death. At the point in the music where the highwayman dies, a slow section that signifies the last two italicized paragraphs of the poem is heard, so one might characterize the form as actually AB with a coda (refer to Figure 1 below). I decided to structure my piece in accordance with Liszt's insistence that symphonic poems base their structure on their literary sources, not on standard musical forms.17

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<td>1-17</td>
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<td>48-71</td>
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<td>Climax</td>
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Figure 1. Form of The Highwayman (second movement)

The A section

The A section can be subdivided into three parts:

1) The introduction, with new theme (meas. 1-47)
2) A development and accelerando section (meas. 48-71)
3) The climax section leading to Bess' death (meas. 72-89).
The first measures of the piece represent the quiet beginning of sunrise upon a day in which British troops will make their way to the inn and set their trap. After that, the A section features three basic ideas happening simultaneously. First, I had imagined a slow but rhythmic undertone that would gradually build to the climax where Bess shoots herself. I felt it would have been too literal to use drums to represent marching troops—that idea is centuries old—so I used low strings at the outset. The cellos play 16th-note passages that represents the drumming and marching of the troops, as seen below in example 1.

Example 1: cello "drumming" at measures 10–21

This fades in and out until it gradually and steadily becomes more continuous and noticeable (at measure 21), signifying the troops marching closer and closer to the inn. It becomes a constant yet irregular rhythm that eventually builds by adding more instruments, signifying not only the troops marching closer and closer to the inn but also the heightening tension. This is a technique used by Liszt, for example, in his *The Procession by Night* where his music gets louder as the "procession" gets closer. At measure 30 the double basses join in playing the rhythm, and at measure 24 the bass clarinet is added. As mentioned above, more and more instruments fall in with that rhythmic "drumming" to act as an orchestral crescendo. Examples 2 and 3 below demonstrate the technique.
Example 2: Orchestral crescendo of "drumming" rhythm by adding bass clarinet—meas. 35-39 (double basses entered at meas. 30).
Example 3: Orchestral crescendo of “drumming” rhythm at meas. 59 - 61. Timpani has entered (bassoons entered at meas. 52).
Above the rhythmic low strings pattern is a set of slowly developing atonal trichords played by the violins and violas. These are played softly in the background starting at measure 15. The chord changes are slow at first, changing more quickly as the tension increases prior to the musket shot. The result is an atonal and unpredictable (in pace) series of chords. There is a reason for this decision, and that is to create an atmosphere of anxiety and tension. The chords reflect the sense of mystery and confusion evoked by the poem's text in which the whereabouts of the highwayman are in question and the actions of the British troops become more and more antagonistic.

Between the low "drumming" and the high chords, various themes are introduced and developed. At measures 11 and 16, incidental themes are brought in from the first movement. It is not until measure 18 that a fragment of a new theme is introduced, that of the British troops. The original version is evocative of a British folk song, as seen in the example 4 below (in my draft C score), which takes on a more contemporary variation in *The Highwayman* (Second Movement), as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Example 4: Theme of the British troops (melody in the oboe line)
The first part starts slowly with just high strings, and as delineated above, the low "drumming" by the cello section begins to fade in and out. Then at measure 18 the piccolo introduces the theme representing the British troops. The theme is completed in its final form at measure 47 where a development section begins. This signifies the beginning of the second part of the A section. Bess' theme is soon introduced (to reflect the text where the troops bind and gag her). The third part of the A section is characterized by the now loud "drumming" being stabilized on F pitches (meas. 72) and the orchestra loudly announcing the highwayman's theme as he approaches the inn. The orchestral crescendo to the musket shot is the climactic end of the A section.

The B Section

The B section can be broken up into four distinct parts:

1) A short "fleeing" scene (meas. 90–117)
2) The "confusion" scene which is marked by polyrhythmic passages (meas. 118–161)
3) The village scene which signifies the hustle and bustle of the market place (meas. 162–178)
4) The battle scene that occurs when the highwayman seeks revenge (meas. 179–258).

The second and third parts represent a re-imagining of what would happen in real time. The poem spends a great deal of time—seven paragraphs—describing the actions of the approximate 15 hours leading up to the death of Bess, yet only two paragraphs describing the events of the next 14 hours. There were some compositional techniques and ideas that I wanted to explore during this B section, so I imagined what the highwayman would be doing between his fleeing the inn and his subsequent return. The short fleeing scene ends at the point where the music fades (measure 117), representing his riding off into the horizon away from the inn.
The confusion scene features polyrhythmic passages, pairing different time signatures with each other to represent the conflict the highwayman must have felt in not knowing what has occurred at the inn (not mentioned in the poem). The end of this second section slows into a poignant English horn solo playing a few notes of the highwayman's theme, representing our shaken hero falling asleep. The third (village) scene is meant to represent the time between waking until the time the highwayman hears about the tragedy. The music is meant to evoke images not in the poem of a village marketplace where townspeople are greeting each other, bartering for goods, and gossiping. I imagine the highwayman walking through the market until he hears of Bess' fate (at measure 178).

The remaining part of the B section (measures 179-258) represents the "battle" scene, which I must admit was my main motivation for devoting my thesis to the second half of the poem. During this section there is a great deal of scoring, time signature changes, thematic changes, and various ways of using percussion, especially the chimes—an idea I had at the outset of the compositional process. The B section ends with the death of the highwayman.

Coda

The last two stanzas of "The Highwayman" poem might be arguably the most popular among readers. The stanzas are a romantic depiction of the spirits of the two lovers meeting again. I tried to capture this mood and atmosphere during the short (thirty-one measures) coda. The attempt in this section is to portray an ethereal atmosphere with the two themes interplaying with each other. Bess' theme is more prominent, as in effect it is the composition's love theme. I attempted to create the ethereal feeling with high strings, triangle, bells, and celesta, as seen below in example 5. The final melody line, meas. 282–288, features solo viola and piccolo. The piece comes to a conclusion with an unresolved chord signifying the spirits' undying love for each other.
Example 5: Ethereal atmosphere created by soft high strings and irregular rhythms played softly by triangle and high orchestral bells (meas. 272 – 279).
CHAPTER 4 THEMATIC TRANSFORMATION

During the past three centuries composers have discovered countless ways in which to develop thematic material. Often themes are turned into fugues or other contrapuntal statements. During the symphonic era of the 18th century, themes were transformed, expanded, and/or elaborated upon during the development sections of movements using sonata allegro form. Although certain specific techniques such as transposition, augmentation, diminution, inversion, fragmentation, retrograde, or transformation can be traced back to Bach’s work, several sources credit Beethoven, Liszt, and Berlioz—all practitioners of program music—as the true champions of thematic transformation. All of these seven techniques are used in my composition; examples will be provided below.

Transposition

Transposing a theme into another key works to give the composition not only a sense of unity but also an addition of new color in regards to which instrument or pitches are used. In my composition, there are essentially three themes heard throughout: one each for the highwayman, Bess, and the British troops. Originally introduced in the first movement, the highwayman’s theme is a dynamic 12-tone row that is intended to reflect a masculine and gallant character (shown in example 6 below):

Example 6: The highwayman’s theme

This theme is first introduced at measure 81, indicating that the highwayman is approaching the inn. The highwayman’s theme is sounded by the horns, typically a heroic sound befitting the highwayman’s stature in the poem. At measure 82 the trumpets echo the theme in a different key. The horns then re-
state it, but higher in pitch to represent both the closing distance and the increasing tension (see example 7 below).

82

Example 7: Transposition of the highwayman's theme (meas. 82-84)

Another example of transposition of this theme occurs during the battle scene as the highwayman is charging the British troops "with the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high." The trombones loudly sound the theme, echoed by the trumpets at an octave and minor third above, as follows in example 8:

230

Example 8: Transposition of the highwayman's theme (meas. 230-232)

As seen in the two examples above, transposition of a theme clearly gives a composer valuable options to express an idea in diverse ways. In the two examples, the transposed themes not only add heightened drama to the passages but also create unique harmonies when overlapped with each other.
Augmentation

Augmentation of a theme—expanding the duration of each note value—is utilized to create an underlying theme while the remaining instruments of the orchestra are busy with fast note passages. As an admirer of Bach’s organ music, I am reminded of his technique of augmenting a theme with the low organ pedal voice for dramatic effect. In this composition, I use a similar technique with the theme of the British troops. That theme is intentionally in the style of a fife-and-drum march tune, and is ideal for piccolo or flute. It is first introduced in fragments at measure 18. The entire theme is seen in example 9 below:

Example 9: Theme of the British troops

During the busy battle scene of my piece, there is one section that represents the British troops readying themselves to ambush and kill the highwayman. I augment their theme using low brass underneath the strings’ and woodwind’s 16th and 32nd-note passages. The augmentation is seen below in example 10:

Example 10: Augmentation of the British troops theme (meas. 215-218)

Like its effectiveness in Bach’s organ music, augmentation adds another layer to the texture of the battle scene, a layer that is dark and foreboding while adding a new dimension to the composition.
Diminution

Diminution of a thematic passage—decreasing the note values—is used in my piece to reflect a sense of urgency or activity. The original theme is seen in example 11 below. Note that the original theme lasts for ten beats.

Example 11: Original highwayman theme

The example below demonstrates diminution of the theme to 5 1/2 beats.

Example 12: Diminution (and transposition) of highwayman theme (meas. 82-83)

This diminution is used during the dramatic measures leading up to the point in the score (measure 89) where Bess shoots herself. The highwayman is approaching quickly and Bess is trying to time the shot early enough so that the highwayman is not seen by the British but also late enough so that he is close enough to hear the shot. A great deal of tension is building up in the music, with diminution of the theme featured four times during the crescendo.

Inversion

There are times when inverting a theme will introduce a new melody line that can be used to heighten the melodic interest of a score. Because it is inverted, the new theme may even be used as counterpoint to the original theme. There were several attempts to incorporate inversion of a theme in my composition, but I used it only once, at measures 48-50 with contrabassoon and tuba. The British troops theme had already been presented, so to add some variety to the score I inverted the theme. Both themes are presented below in examples 13 and 14:
Example 13: Fragment of British troops’ theme (meas. 28-29)

Example 14: Inversion (and augmentation/transposition/fragmentation) of the troops’ theme (meas. 48-50).

**Fragmentation**

Fragmentation was used frequently in my composition. Probably the main reason it was used so much was that the themes were long (perhaps too long). It would have been very distracting to use each theme in its entirety each time I wanted to use it. One example of fragmentation is seen in example 13 above. Other examples are many. Additionally, some fragments do not necessarily apply to the beginning notes of a theme. Examples 16 and 17 below are fragments of Bess’ theme (example 15)—both are fragments of the latter measures of the theme.

Example 15: Original love theme representing Bess

Example 16: Fragmentation of Bess’ theme, meas. 283-287.
Example 17: Fragmentation of Bess’ theme, meas. 276-278

Example 18 below is a fragment of the highwayman’s theme using the first notes of the theme at measure 85. This passage is played by the trumpets moments before the point in the score that signifies Bess shooting herself. Note that in the following passage, only the first four notes correspond to the highwayman’s theme.

Example 18: Fragmentation (first four notes) in meas. 85-86

Retrograde

Near the end of my piece I needed a new theme to be sounded during the several accented orchestral chords from measures 238-242. Having not used any retrograde in the composition, I endeavored to create one. There is a section in Bess’ theme that would work in retrograde, but since Bess is not involved in the measures I was concerned with, I chose not to include it. What I needed was a retrograde from the Troop’s theme, since they are the eventual winners of the battle and often in program music the winner’s theme, understandably, is selected to dominate. I finally found the solution in a section that first appears midway through the Troops’ theme. The retrograde of it is shown in example 19 below, in the second staff. I had originally planned to play it twice—at measure 238 and then
at measure 242. In the first occurrence, I decided to modify the retrograde slightly to alter the first two pitches into a tritone, as seen in the first staff of the example. In the context of the piece, the altered theme worked best playing it first (meas. 238-241). The re-statement of the retrograde theme, starting in measure 242, was transformed back to its original pitch intervals; however I elected to score only a fragment of it in order to allow the highwayman's theme to be heard.

Example 19: Two retrogrades of a section of the Troops' theme

Transformation/Permutation

After the presentation of the troops' theme at the first part of my composition, the tension in the music builds to a point where statements of motives and themes are exchanged in shorter passages. The music is establishing a faster simple meter, which tends to negate any further use of the troops' compound meter theme. Hence the theme is transformed (and fragmented) and used in several occasions leading up to the first climax. Example 20 below shows the "before and after" transformations:

Example 20: original theme (meas. 28)...... and permutation (meas. 51)
CHAPTER 5 HARMONIC LANGUAGE

There is no attempt at any type of tonality in this composition as a whole, so most attempts to define the harmonic language would be futile. That being said, there is evidence of tonality in two of the four themes heard throughout the piece, and some of the transition sections exhibit some degree of tonality.

The pitches of the A section were determined by assigning pitches according to the words “the highwayman.” The letters E and A were of course assigned pitches E and A, but letters such as T and H were assigned pitches according to an ascending pattern derived from the piano keyboard. For example, starting at “a” on the piano, letters a-g are assigned pitches low A-G (all white keys), but then for letter “H,” the new scale starts on G# and remains on the black keys for five notes. Therefore letter H = G#, letter I = A#, J = C#, etc. until L = F#.

Then I returned to the white keys G-F, which are assigned to letters M-S. Then F# becomes T, et cetera. This continues until all letters are assigned pitches. The interesting part of this technique is that identical pitches become assigned to different letters (see below), which allows some flexibility for the composer when it becomes time to assign pitches to the orchestra (in this case, the violins).

```
T    H    E    H    I    G    H    W    A    Y    M    A    N
Pitches: f#  g#  e  g#  a#  g  f  c#  a  e  g  g  a  a  d#  f  b  f  a#  f#
        d  d#
```

Interestingly enough, the pitch “c” was never chosen using this method, and is not played by the high strings until the triads have concluded at measure 55.

When it was time to build chords for the high strings, I used the pitch “formula” as a guideline, not as a strict rule. I started by selecting the pitches sequentially from the start of the process, ensuring only that major or minor chords were not built. For example, at measure 23 the first triad begins as a transformation from the introduction: pitches are F# (in the bass), G# and E – the
C natural is a transition note from the introduction. Two beats later, still in measure 23, the pitches are G, A, and A# (Bb); at measure 26 the pitches are F, C#, and A, etc.

The low "drumming" in the strings formally starts at measure 26. Before that, the rhythmic passages are random, short, and undefined in pitch. From measure 26 to 70, however, the "drumming" slowly moves up from F2 to F3 (using the cello part as reference) chromatically. The decision to use the F pitch at the unison at measure 70 was based on the lowest pitch the double bass player can bow on a non-open string.

There are a few transition sections that exhibit some degree of tonality. Measures 123-131 are a polytonal section in E Phrygian under Bb fifths (coincidentally a Stravinsky-type polychord). This continues a whole step lower from measures 132-135, then stabilizes at B Phrygian until the V section, at measures 141-148. This section builds to the climactic B major chord at measure 149.

Another example of a somewhat tonal passage is at measures 162-173. It starts essentially in D minor 1st inversion with short periods of Eb major with the F pedal. It then transitions to F major via a G half-diminished chord and then slowly to E minor at measure 175. The E minor chord signifies the point where the highwayman is beginning to realize that something is wrong, that Bess may have been killed the previous night.

These transition sections were arrived at intuitively. Throughout the composition process I would occasionally be at the piano or at a keyboard arriving at different themes or ideas or chords, some that I thought might be useful for my thesis piece. Other times I might be commuting to work or doing chores and suddenly come up with a rhythmic idea that might work. I would then write the idea down on the nearest scratch paper and bring it to the computer later on. The transitions through different chords in the two sections mentioned above were simply taking an idea and expanding it via smooth voice leading. I was not attempting to go from one key to another specific key, nor was I even attempting to
stay tonal. The voice leading that I arrived at was just some sort of intuitive agreement with myself that it "sounded good."
CHAPTER 6  RHYTHM

One of my goals thoughout the entire piece was to keep its meter a mystery. There is no consistent time signature for the piece, but even when the time signature remains constant for a few measures, the rhythm stays unpredictable and in many cases is polyrhythmic. Measures 179-185 and 189-197 are examples, where 5/4 phrases are played above 4/4 phrases. In example 21 below, the instruments in the top three staves are playing 5/4 phrases over the 4/4 phrases in the bottom three staves.

Example 21: Metric ambiguity at measures 189-192.

If there is any one thing consistent about this piece, it is that rhythm is the dominant focus of my efforts. The 8th and 16th note passages in the low strings in section A are purposely unpredictable. During much of the A section, I borrowed a technique used in the past by Messiaen of a palindromic rhythm pattern (he called it “non-retroradable”). The particular rhythm, regardless of length, is the same whether it is played forward or backward. Example 22 below illustrates a seven-beat “non-retroradable” rhythm in the top staff. The bottom staff is how it looked in my piece, as I wanted more separation in the playing of the rhythm (much like a snare drum would sound if it played the top staff).
Example 22: Non-retrogradable rhythm passage (meas. 32-33)

In my piece, I used this rhythm frequently, but also interspersed a five-beat rhythm alongside it. The desired effect is a steady drumbeat, yet it uses a pattern that is nearly imperceptible to the listener.

During the composition process, I spent a great deal of time developing and composing different rhythms for each section of my piece. In some sections, the rhythm was composed even before the melodic content. In recent years I have developed a certain fascination with and appreciation of polyrhythm, and there is ample evidence of that throughout my thesis composition. For example, at measure 127 the experiment is in full form. The strings play an alternating 7/8-10/8 pattern but the woodwinds and bass drum play straight 7/8 rhythms. This of course conflicts with the strings by the second measure, an effect that is intentional. A condensed version of this is seen in example 23 below, with the xylophone line playing a strict 7/8 rhythm over the rhythms corresponding to the time signatures.

Example 23: Polyrhythm at measures 131-134

I carry the polyrhythm on to see how it may evolve—which ends with climbing patterns at measure 141. I initially wrote four 11/8 measures, but found
it repetitive and a little elementary. I changed it to essentially 11/8, 12/8, 11/8, 12/8. However, to avoid sounding repetitive, it's actually 6+5/8, 7+5/8, 5+6/8, then 5+7/8 – each pair of time signatures are in opposite subdivisions. These rhythms are scored only for the strings, bass drum, and horns. In continuing with the polyrhythmic idea, there is a constant 7/8 rhythm overlaid by the timpani and woodwinds. A short example is provided below:

Example 24: Polyrhythm at measures 141-146.

Note that at measure 145, both rhythms overlap on the same downbeat. This provides some relief of the rhythmic tension, and it also serves as a practical performance benefit.
CHAPTER 7  CONCLUSION

To satisfy my curiosity about program music in today's art music world, I read through countless liner notes of concert programs in recent years. Much of the contemporary music performed in today's concert halls would be what I might classify as impressionistic; however, a significant amount of music is program music. A list of selected examples are provided below:

1) David Felder's *Another Face* (1983), based on a Japanese story about a mad scientist who transforms his disfigured face into one of beauty.

2) John Drumheller's *The View From Dead Horse Point* (2011) is based on landscapes of the desert southwest.

3) Jeffrey Mumford's *a garden of flourishing paths* (2008) is inspired by the West Garden Court of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

4) The four movements of Judith Shatin's *Tower of the Eight Winds* (2008) are named for particular winds with interesting characteristics.

5) John Adams' *Harmonielehre* (1985) was inspired by a dream he had in which he was driving across a large bridge and witnessed an oil tanker on the water below suddenly turn upright and take off like a rocket.

6) The second movement of John Adams' *My Father Knew Charles Ives* (2003) acts to portray the various activities along a lakefront at night.


8) Andrew Rindfleisch's *Tears* (1994) attempts to portray the various intensities associated with sadness and the act of crying.

Obviously contemporary composers are still writing program music as well as absolute music; therefore, it can be said with confidence that program music, especially the expressive and narrative approaches to program music, is a valuable, legitimate, and still relevant compositional technique.
I personally find having a program is most valuable in either finding a subject to compose about or finding the inspiration to compose, and it can certainly dictate a composition's style or direction. It seems easier to outline a proposed composition if one has a "storyline" to follow. However, certainly one of the great lessons learned in writing my thesis piece is that a composer can fall into a trap of following a program too closely and creating a work that does not stand on its own merit. This was one writer's criticism of Vincent D'Indy's *The Enchanted Forest*.

In other words, it is recommended that a composer step back from his score, make continual re-evaluation of the music, and attempt to compose an interesting and entertaining work of absolute music at the same time.

As I look back at my piece, the music makes perfect sense to me, but only because I know the context in which it was written. I am afraid that without the listener hearing the first movement, he may not fully appreciate the coda section of my piece. It would be interesting to hear the reactions of listeners of this piece, in that I am very interested if the second movement is appreciated on its own merit. Nevertheless, it certainly has motivated to complete the first movement as soon as possible.

The experience of writing this thesis has taught me several very important lessons. Certainly I have gained more appreciation about the art of orchestration, realizing that sometimes less is more. I also found that what I thought were my original ideas have been done in the past by other composers several times over. The goal then became to instead modify or make an innovative variation of those past techniques. Perhaps the greatest reward of writing this thesis came while researching works by other composers. By reading composer's biographies or analyses of their works, I learned new compositional techniques and methods to which I had never been exposed. For my thesis piece, I did not use every tool that I came across, but I did file away those ideas for upcoming compositions, and I certainly gained newfound appreciation for the value of library research.

During an interview, Messiaen stated that he believed music should be interesting, beautiful to hear, and should touch the listener. If this would be a mantra to follow, I hope I have lived up to it with my composition.
ABSTRACT

"Music can reach its true power only when it is guided by poetic meaning--in other words, when music and poetry are united. Then the obscure atmosphere that the music has aroused becomes clear, and the words, even though magnificent in themselves, take on greater meaning. Absolute music cannot by itself satisfy..." – Jean Sibelius.

Although I disagree somewhat with Sibelius’ comment about absolute music, I fully support his sentiments about music and poetry. The story line, the emotion, and the visualization gained from a poem or other literary work can be more than enough inspiration for a composer to set the work to music. The incentive to create a music composition that adequately represents the poem’s text can be powerful and can be a driving force behind the composer’s methodology. Furthermore, the many varied compositional methods and techniques used in program music of the past two centuries are still very relevant to present-day composers. A new composer can draw on the countless techniques of past composers and either accept, disregard, or modify those techniques for his own composition.
APPENDIX: THE POEM

"The Highwayman," by Alfred Noyes (1880-1958) was published in Scotland in 1906. Within a year it was acclaimed throughout Great Britain. It has been studied in literature classes in American high schools for nearly a century. In Hawaii, for example, Kamehameha Schools students are asked to memorize the poem as part of their 7th-grade speech class curriculum.23

In 1995, in a BBC poll conducted throughout the British Isles for "The Nation's Favourite Poem," it was voted fifteenth.24 The poem is presented below in its original format.25 Keep in mind that my composition represents only Part II of the poem.

The Highwayman

PART I
The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—

  Riding—riding—

The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

He'd a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,
A coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of brown doe-skin;
They fitted with never a wrinkle: his boots were up to the thigh!
And he rode with a jeweled twinkle,
His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jeweled sky.

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard,
And he tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and barred;
He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
   Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

And dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked
Where Tim the ostler listened; his face was white and peaked;
His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like moldy hay,
But he loved the landlord's daughter,
   The landlord's red-lipped daughter,
Dumb as a dog he listened, and he heard the robber say—

“One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I'm after a prize to-night,
But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light;
Yet, if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day,
Then look for me by moonlight,
   Watch for me by moonlight,
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way.”

He rose upright in the stirrups; he scarce could reach her hand,
But she loosened her hair i' the casement! His face burnt like a brand
As the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast;
And he kissed its waves in the moonlight,

(Oh, sweet, black waves in the moonlight!)

Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to the West.

PART II
He did not come in the dawning; he did not come at noon;
And out o' the tawny sunset, before the rise o' the moon,
When the road was a gipsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor,
A red-coat troop came marching—

Marching—marching—

King George's men came matching, up to the old inn-door.

They said no word to the landlord, they drank his ale instead,
But they gagged his daughter and bound her to the foot of her narrow bed;
Two of them knelt at her casement, with muskets at their side!
There was death at every window;

And hell at one dark window;

For Bess could see, through her casement, the road that he would ride.

They had tied her up to attention, with many a sniggering jest;
They had bound a musket beside her, with the barrel beneath her breast!
“Now, keep good watch!” and they kissed her. She heard the dead man say—

Look for me by moonlight; 

Watch for me by moonlight;
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way!

She twisted her hands behind her; but all the knots held good!
She writhed her hands till her fingers were wet with sweat or blood!
They stretched and strained in the darkness, and the hours crawled by like years,
Till, now, on the stroke of midnight,
    Cold, on the stroke of midnight,
The tip of one finger touched it! The trigger at least was hers!

The tip of one finger touched it; she strove no more for the rest!
Up, she stood up to attention, with the barrel beneath her breast,
She would not risk their hearing; she would not strive again;
For the road lay bare in the moonlight;
    Blank and bare in the moonlight;
□ And the blood of her veins in the moonlight throbbed to her love's refrain.

Tlat-tlat; tlat-tlat! Had they heard it? The horse-hoofs ringing clear;
Tlat-tlat, tlat-tlat, in the distance? Were they deaf that they did not hear?
Down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill,
The highwayman came riding,
    Riding, riding!
The red-coats looked to their priming! She stood up, straight and still!

Tlat-tlat, in the frosty silence! Tlat-tlat, in the echoing night!
Nearer he came and nearer! Her face was like a light!
Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last deep breath,
Then her finger moved in the moonlight,
   Her musket shattered the moonlight,
Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him—with her death.

He turned; he spurred to the Westward; he did not know who stood
Bowed, with her head o'er the musket, drenched with her own red blood!
Not till the dawn he heard it, his face grew grey to hear
How Bess, the landlord's daughter,
   The landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Had watched for her love in the moonlight, and died in the darkness there.

Back, he spurred like a madman, shrieking a curse to the sky,
With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high!
Blood-red were his spurs in the golden noon; wine-red was his velvet coat,
When they shot him down on the highway,
   Down like a dog on the highway,
And he lay in his blood on the highway, with the bunch of lace at his throat.

And still of a winter's night, they say, when the wind is in the trees,
When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
When the road is a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
A highwayman comes riding—
   Riding—riding—
A highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn-door.
Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark inn-yard;
He taps with his whip on the shutters, but all is locked and barred;
He whistles a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,

Bess, the landlord's daughter,

Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.
NOTES

1. Jeremy Grimshaw, "Elliot Carter—A Mirror on Which to Dwell, for soprano & chamber orchestra" 14 December 2012.
4. Ibid., p. 477.
5. Ibid., p. 29.
6. Ibid., p. 646.
7. Ibid., p. 91.
8. Ibid., p. 238.
9. Ibid., p. 646.
10. Ibid., p. 384.
13. Ibid., p. 679.
18. Ibid., p. 434.
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