CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

RUN DOWN GLASS

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Music
in Composition

By

Eric Coffey
December 2012

The Thesis of Eric Coffey is approved:

_____________________________  ________
Dr. Milen Kirov    Date

_____________________________  ________
Dr. Steven Thachuk    Date

_____________________________  ________
Dr. Liviu Marinescu, Chair    Date
PREFACE

Music begins with fascination. Capturing the fascination and bringing it to the listener through which they might find themselves in a different place is the aim of this composer. Within the fascination, the balance between logic and emotion provide a backbone that makes music real.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Maestro, Dr. Liviu Marinescu, you have always supported my ideas in music and I am obliged to have studied with a musician of such an elite caliber; what I admire most about you is your willingness to share your opinion under any circumstance. I am deeply grateful and enjoy your guidance as I continue upon my musical endeavors.

Dr. Milen Kirov your musical talent inspires all who hear you play. Whether you’re composing or playing, your quiet confidence ensures the listener of the mastery in your skills.

Dr. Steven Thachuk your insight in aiding me to relax and just play has been paramount. It’s so easy to get lost in technique, but you helped me breathe, open up and express myself like no other guitarist could.

You are all my teachers, you are all my friends.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature page ii
Preface iii
Acknowledgements iv
Abstract vi
Instrumentation and Performance Notes xi
Run Down Glass: Score 1
Music can entertain, inspire, fascinate and captivate the listener. It can bring people to tears of deep joy or sorrow. It has moved people to riot. Creating music and presenting it to an audience to communicate such emotions and connotations is one aim of the composer. Music can transcend virtually every human emotion and thought—through which the listener might find themselves in a different place. The possibility to capture a raw music and affect the listener in such ways is what brings me to compose. In this abstract I will explain my chamber symphony, Run Down Glass which begins with dissonances both spread across octaves and clustered in smaller intervals.

At a first glance this chamber symphony may not appear to abide by a traditional form, but it does use elements of form such as a cognitive process which links ideas and motives together. Where it differs from tradition is that it is held together by timbre and color, rather than functional harmony. However in the place of functional harmony there is no void, but rather a different set of rules to achieve the same goals (such as tension and release) that functional harmony allows for. The rhythm begins in a static state with slow moving descents, a stasis dominated by clusters made up of every tone between A and C-sharp. There is no perceptible meter until it gradually becomes three against four—
only to become seemingly static again. This is one way I create tension and release elements in the form which were traditionally created by harmony. Consonances and dissonances are derived from the clusters and do not resolve traditionally. Tension and release aspects traditionally found in music were replaced and achieved using clusters spread over an octave or two that occur naturally in the overtone series (treated as a consonance) set against clashing clusters such as a minor second. I also used timbre to amplify the effects of these ‘consonances’ set against dissonant clusters to achieve contrasting elements within natural progressions of tension and release. Indeed, the modern musician’s ear finds that dissonances that have at least an octave between them are less harsh and more aesthetically pleasing displayed as a minor ninth or major fifteenth instead of a minor second or major seventh. In Run Down Glass I also use voice leading to help to smooth the clashing dissonances that have become more pleasant over time.

Following these rules that I either perceived to be natural or perhaps just suitable for myself, I tried to capture raw music in a single moment of time as a droplet of liquid glass, or perhaps a bubble stuck in a glass window, perpetually running down the glass. In science we learn that glass is neither solid nor liquid. In my mind, I wonder as the decades turn into hundreds of years the components of a glass window slowly adhere to the rules of gravity and make their way down.

I tied this idea to my music. In Western music our evolution has been slowly progressing along the overtone series. First we had the prominent role of perfect intervals in medieval church music: octaves, fifths and fourths. As time progressed and human ears attuned to those sounds, Renaissance composers inched towards adding more emotion:
the major and minor intervals. This brought more connotations and led us through Baroque and Classical eras. Composers expanded the system to include dissonances, the tritone and major seconds or the minor seventh. With each addition, composers had more at their disposal, but more stringent rules accompanied the new ‘dangerous’ intervals. Into the Romantic era composers like Gustav Mahler expanded this system more than it could endure and by the time Schöenberg was writing he perceived that it broke. A century of reactions took place and I believe that now we have finally landed back on the track of where we should be in exploiting the overtone series. In Run Down Glass I am exploiting these partials that cannot be easily played with our current tuning system. To work around this, only instruments that can easily bend their pitches were asked to play microtones, such as woodwinds and strings. Many of these intervals are found intact on a single string in the upper partials. Indeed I try to mimic the natural beauty that one finds when they hear these overtones naturally occurring on a stringed instrument such as a guitar. These intervals such as the minor ninth and major fifteenth are what I perceive as a form of consonance. Dissonances are those same intervals without the octave between—as a minor second or major ninth still clash to my ears. This theme endures throughout the piece.

*Run Down Glass* begins with a hearkening to tradition in opening with a fanfare. The ideas represented in motive and timbre stem from a play on words. An old stain glass window is an inanimate object, but it gains lifelike qualities, character and almost a mind of it’s own through the passage of centuries as it becomes witness to the full spectrum of what humanity has to offer, from the best to the worst. It has character and over the many generations becomes, ‘run down,’ paying credence to glass eluding scientists to this day
by being somewhere between liquid and solid. And second: a drop of water which slowly builds with condensation until it begins a long journey, running down the glass window releasing waves that, in this music, come to be represented in sound. This purely abstract idea is realized through the music as a view in a stasis, a moment of time in which we, the human, view it from a distance in perception and time. Indeed science proves that time is perceived to move slower when viewed from a distance. The stain glass window is still, fleetingly liquid, changing slowly over the eons and it eventually becomes tired and run down. This is represented by the static background in the music, changing slowly throughout the piece and slowly swishing. The drop of water, relative to our perspective on time, is at first small, but accumulates condensation and builds until it finally takes off running down the glass (in measure 29).

Measure 29 also marks the culmination of the static fanfare and more rhythmic transition growing out of the dotted quarter note followed by three eighth notes pattern that will continue to grow and culminate with three against four in overlapping textures. The static background set against a rhythmic three against four in the middle section of the piece serves to represent something we perceive to be unchanging (a piece of glass) and the bustling of humanity that spends centuries beneath that seemingly static background. These two themes continue throughout the piece until the static slowly moving descending lines overwhelm the discant above it.

In this abstract I introduced compositional forces my chamber symphony, Run Down Glass and the devices that I used to create them. The traditional use of form was not abandoned, but altered to accommodate our sense of tension and release with a new consonance that many have begun to perceive as pleasant. Timbre and color helped to
adhere the overall form of the piece by integrating with traditional principles of tension and release. Finally, dissonances that were spread across octaves were treated as consonance and those clustered in smaller intervals were harsher and remained clashing dissonances.
RUN DOWN GLASS

A Chamber Symphony by Eric Coffey: July – November 2007

Instrumentation

1 flute
1 oboe
1 clarinet in B♭
1 bassoon
1 horn in F
1 trumpet in B♭
1 trombone
1 percussion: timpani, castanets, vibraphone, tam-tam
1 percussion: chimes, glockenspiel, xylophone
1 guitar
1 violin
1 viola
1 cello
1 double bass

Performance Notes

Run Down Glass begins with an obscure fanfare to the continual passage of time.

Ambiguous rhythms become a steady three against four before returning to obscurity.

This piece captures my perception of life flying past at an ever increasing rate.

Quiet dynamics throughout the piece reflect instrumentation and use of the orchestral forces.

The quarter tones requested need not be exact—a bend of about a quarter step is sufficient.

Figure I. Suggested layout of performers:

guitar  percussion II  percussion I  horn  trombone  trumpet
flute  oboe  clarinet  bassoon  violin  viola  cello  double bass

Conductor
Run Down Glass

Eric Coffey