

Symphony for Horn and Orchestra, *The Fire and the Rose* (2008)

Programme Note

The Symphony for Horn and Orchestra, *The Fire and the Rose* (2008) developed from a vocal setting I wrote years ago of the last stanza of T.S. Eliot's great poem, *Four Quartets* (which was his response to the late quartets of Beethoven). The melody in the last movement (the denouement of the entire work) is almost identical to the original song; the vocal line thus played by the horn. The horn part has been written specifically for the Croatian virtuoso Radovan Vlatković.

It is the largest scale work I have written to date, both in instrumentation and in length. But it is also the most economical and exactly structured by far. All the musical material in all five interconnected movements is closely related. The handful of motifs and melodies with which this work is built are not, for the most part, developed as in traditional classical symphonies; rather they are repeated in ever varied ways and contexts throughout the work, similar to Wagner's usage of leitmotifs in his late operas. Nearly all of these motifs can be heard in succession and simultaneously in the absurdly chaotic 'canon in nine parts' halfway through the second movement.

My work attempts to expand upon the two most important themes in Eliot's poem: 'time' and 'remembering.' Music is, of course, played and heard in 'real time', which gives the composer considerable advantages over the poet in a work concerning the passage of time. Because the Symphony was written in reverse order (the last movement being written first, and so on) I often felt as if I were trying to remember a dream, from the relative clarity of the ending, backwards toward the nearly forgotten events of the beginning. As a completed work, heard from the beginning, in real time, the 'dream' can be 'dreamed' once again, simultaneously, by all listeners present. My personal fascination with the mystery of 'remembering', and the magic of the 'déjà vu' experience (which Eliot alludes to time and again) has resulted not only in the unusual structure of *The Fire and the Rose*, but also in all those far away, long ago 'echoes of echoes,' which reverberate throughout the piece. Nevertheless, it seemed to me at one point during the composition of *The Fire and the Rose* that it was also, unintentionally, becoming a commentary on Eliot's poem. The most obvious example of this occurs when we reach the moment of final blissful union at the end of both the Symphony and Eliot's poem (the long awaited C major tonality).

At this point Eliot's idealized and certain finality is disturbed by a quiet yet clear voiced interruption: one lonely, dissonant final note - a D flat in the glockenspiel - the inevitable last note of the oft-heard 'church bell' motif, played (this one final time) in the key of C. I know now that this final D flat is an expression of my own personal, stubbornly heretical argument with Mr. Eliot.

For me, time is eternity itself, and its end is therefore unimaginable.

Joseph Swensen, September 2008