Symphony No. 1 - An Exposition and Reflection

I've always been obsessed with undertaking large projects. My first large undertaking was a fully functioning 'platforming' video game in high school. My second was my (still unfinished) novel, a children’s book about time travel. Symphony No. 1 was my third project. A composer’s first symphony, defined as a ‘major work’ for full orchestra made up of one or more musical ‘sections’, is seen as a major milestone. In this paper, I will explain what inspired me to write this work in the first place, expound upon the different motifs throughout the work and their meaning, explain the details of the piece’s rehearsal and premiere, and finally reflect on what this all means to me.

My inspiration for Symphony No. 1 began in 2011 on a whiny old computer in a neglected Butte High practice room. I don’t remember why I entered that practice room and turned on that computer, but I do remember discovering it ran Sibelius 5 composition software. I had never encountered software like this before, and I was intrigued. The program offered a series of templates, one of which was ‘Orchestral Symphony’. I clicked on this and began writing. Unsurprisingly, the my first run at writing a ‘symphonic work’ was incredibly bad. However, the experience was fascinating enough that after some months of tinkering with the piece I chose to pursue my Bachelor of Music in Composition at the University of Montana.

My unsophisticated symphonic piece I wrote at Butte High, while unsuitable for any concert hall, played a large role in eventually ‘inspiring’ the underlying structure of Symphony
No. 1. The most obvious parallel between the two pieces is in unusual importance of the piano in the orchestration. While many famous composers use piano in their symphonic works (Shostakovich’s 5th is a premiere example,) pianos generally play a conservative, supportive role in the symphony’s overall presentation. In contrast, my total inexperience in complex symphonic writing prompted me to give my piano a major role in my Butte High piece. This idea, though unorthodox, was interesting enough that I gave my later work Symphony No. 1 an incredibly prominent piano role as well, with the pianist even becoming a sparsely accompanied soloist in movements II, IV, and VI.

Another major segment of inspiration resulted in the piece’s main motif, a term for the central musical phrase that is repeated through all sections of a symphony. My motif is quite simple and is most clearly observed in the 2nd movement’s exposition where the motive is continuously repeated and presented in an unorthodox, almost ragtime infused piano solo. This solo is intentionally similar to the original tune that inspired this motive in the first place. An old friend of mine wrote a small piece that included a catchy motive. She and I fell out with at the end of high school, and I was sorely missing that old friendship at the time I wrote this piece. Using a similar (though modified to avoid plagiarism) motive in my own piece was incredibly meaningful to me, and is the primary signpost towards this work’s deeper meaning.

Since the inspiration for Symphony No. 1 predates the work’s premiere by half a decade, it is hard to pin down when I truly ‘began’ the work. I wrote that it began in Fall 2014 in the premiere’s program notes, as that semester was the first time I presented the idea to my composition professor, Prof. Patrick Williams. Williams was initially turned off by my the symphony’s jagged compositional style - parts of Symphony No. 1 will stop incredibly abruptly and begin again with completely new ideas. His suggestions helped me grow as a composer. Notably, it forced me to compromise - while abrupt stops are still a major component of Symphony No. 1, most of the stops became more traditional cadences. This helped improve the
flow of ideas, leaving my abrupt stops only in areas in which their originality was especially additive.

My work on *Symphony No. 1* eventually ended in Spring 2016, giving it a year-and-a-half development span. Unsurprisingly, much of this time was spent ‘fixing’ earlier sections of the symphony I had built when I had less experience and replacing the harmonies with more robust orchestrations. This continuous ‘remastering’ of the work divided the symphony’s idea even more, a feature I eventually began to embrace. When Dr. Lebel replaced Prof. Williams in 2016, she also embraced this jaggedness, which took the symphony in yet another direction in which ideas would be intentionally concluded abruptly. The idea was successful and, along with the motif, helped ‘connect’ *Symphony No. 1*’s movements into one.

Throughout this symphony’s construction I had been getting very little sleep, a reality I was accustomed to. However, as my attempts to balance my violin repertoire and my computer science coursework with this gargantuan project became increasingly difficult I began to mentally equate the symphony’s success to my worth as a composer. At 2 AM on most weekdays, when I sat deep in thought with my composition in the empty recital hall, I would highly anticipate the work’s premiere - almost to an absurd level. This obsession came, in part, from my desire to obtain a reward given to the ‘best composer’ at the end of every Spring Semester. I had never earned this reward before, but I was under the impression that if I wrote a full symphony, something my cohort had never attempted, my chances for getting that reward would skyrocket.

Most composers are given the opportunity to have their symphonic works read by the University Orchestra every April. However, the Composition department was in a time of transition in Spring 2016. Dr. Lebel, in addition to replacing Prof. Williams, had also replaced a second composition professor, Prof. Hutchinson, and was consequently attempting to consolidate two jobs into one. One result of this was that many compositional components,
including the April orchestral readings, were not available throughout 2016. Undeterred, I decided to build my own volunteer orchestra which I would personally conduct.

With the exception of my ‘instrumental conducting’ class, my conducting skills were essentially non-existent. This let me to study conducting techniques - chiefly through pretend-conducted a midi recording of *Symphony No.1*. Although these sessions gave me proficiency over the correct hand motions and time signatures, along with a concept of the most likely difficult rehearsal sections in the work, it in no way prepared me for my biggest challenge of all: rehearsals.

My volunteer symphony was comprised of a little over 20 musicians. As is to be expected in a volunteer ensemble of talented students, anywhere from 4-15 of my players would be missing any given rehearsal because of performances, classes, or other rehearsals. Moving rehearsals to 8:00 at night did little to solve these problems. I quickly observed that directing a large ensemble was not nearly as easy as it looks. Thankfully, over the two months we worked on this piece I developed some charisma, learned how to clearly and concisely explain problems in the ensemble, and put the ‘greater good’ of the ensemble over the good of any one individual.

These rehearsals, in fact, taught me the more then all the other components of *Symphony No. 1*’s development. Firstly, I learned that I am not automatically charismatic. While I do have the ability to be organized, concise, and charismatic, I must first ‘prepare’ to exert these skills before presenting in front of a large group of people. Secondly, I learned that working with friends can be disastrous if clear boundaries are not set. My pianist, a incredibly talented friend who won a national award last year, did not practice my music until the week before the concert despite his having it for a few months before the premiere. Although Mike did not plan to mar the orchestra’s premiere, his lack of understanding endangered the entire orchestra’s confidence in the piece, as his tempos could be amorphous and his notes wrong.
Thirdly, I learned that I liked conducting. Although I do not believe I will pursue a ‘professional’ conducting role, I hope to further hone my skills through future projects. The hardest lesson of all, however, was learning how to navigate around unexpected changes.

*Symphony No. 1*’s premiere’s date originally fell 7:30PM on Tuesday, April 12th for the annual Composer’s Showcase. However, the performance was abruptly moved two weeks from the premiere to Monday, April 11th at 2:00PM. This was disastrous, as some of my performers could not make this time. In addition, many of my friends and family members had been planning to view the premiere and could not make the afternoon 2:00 performance. My attempts to reschedule my Symphony back to the 12th eventually ended in failure, with the arrangement of the guest composer’s electrical equipment cited as the reason for the rescheduling. At first, I was incredibly angry about this. I refused to believe that my years of work could be derailed by one stage manager’s logistical oversight. However, I eventually picked myself up, resigned myself to the loss of some brass players, and rescheduled the premiere for the 11th.

April 11th finally arrived. I’ve never been so nervous in my life. Some Freudian slip of the tongue caused me to introduce my volunteer symphony as the ‘Butte Symphony’, the symphony I grew up playing in. I awkwardly corrected myself, thanked everyone for being there, and began to conduct.

The first movement was rocky, but the main ideas shone through. The violins begin with rising and falling minor arpeggios, the up and down motions acting representing a dark, chaotic ocean. The brass comes in a measure later, bearing down on that ocean like a foghorn. The sound builds to a roaring cadence, then suddenly ceases. And then the violins play a stark perfect 5th as the base drum rumbles.

The second movement was the roughest. My pianist was not confident in his music, and his exposition of the ragtime motive was marred by dissonant chords. He played the the counterpoint section in the middle well though. This secondary contrapuntal motif, which
appears again in the 3rd and 5th movements, eventually becomes a main theme of the 6th movement.

The third movement was the best. It began with Saje’s cello solo. He made that solo incredibly beautiful, and the orchestra was the most connected throughout this movement. The high string tremolo and pizzicato coupled with the high woodwind melodies represents the snowfall outside the house I grew up in.

The fourth movement was not what I intended, although this ultimately ended successfully. This movement, a fast movement built to take advantage of Mike’s full potential as a pianist, was plodding and slow in the premiere.

The fifth movement was my teachers’ favorite. Inspired by the works of Shostakovich, this is a movement inspired by Shostakovich’s harmonies, Stravinsky’s use of the timpani, and Korsocov’s use of the waltz. This was the most complicated movement, and my volunteer symphony did it justice.

The sixth movement, unfortunately, fell apart in the exposition. This movement, meant to embody optimism and is inspired by Beethoven’s 4th movement of his 5th symphony, combines the secondary motif introduced in the second movement with the primary motif of the piece. Thankfully, the orchestra managed to scramble back together for a strong ending.

The premiere (now posted on Youtube for your viewing pleasure) was initially very rewarding for me. Although the performance was hardly professional, I felt as if I had accomplished my goal. My teachers and the few friends that had been able to make the earlier premiere time gave me positive feedback. However, I later began to wonder if the entire thing had been worth the time I had put into it. Some of my grades had floundered from A’s to B’s as a result of my zealous devotion to Symphony No. 1’s completion. Although the initial feedback had been positive, people didn’t say much else afterwards, and the messages I had hoped to convey through my work ultimately seemed lost on others. To add to my pain, my composition
did not win ‘Composition of the Year’, with that reward going to an experimental composer who wrote a 4 minute piece for guitar feedback and string quartet.

“So, what was the point of all this?” That question still pops into my head sometimes. Ultimately, through my reflections, I determined that my experience was incredibly important. First and foremost, I proved to myself that I could make a long term plan and stick to it. I proved that I could keep pushing forward through dry times, conflict, or even boredom. Second of all, I learned that my happiness cannot be dependent on the opinions of others. Although it been a theme throughout my life, this project brought my ‘need to be accepted’ to the forefront of my character. In a very real way I ‘went all in’ in my attempt to please my professors and got nothing back. The next semester I went back to school and almost completely abandoned the music program, dropping out of orchestra and choosing instead to temporarily pursue music on my own terms. Although I did ultimately integrate back into the program this semester, the break helped me get a better perspective on my life, better serve the Missoula Symphony as their Assistant Principal, and think about where I want to go next. Thirdly, I learned a lot about symphonic writing in general. Most composers’ first symphonies tend to be somewhat less performed works that served to introduce them to the intricacies of the genre. Someday, I look forward call upon this experience when writing and premiering my Symphony No 2.

_Symphony No. 1_’s story is not a sterile Hollywood-esque script about a rise to success. It’s a story about a composer learning, through trial and error, how to build something that matters to others. I plan on continuing my careers in composition and performance even as I make my transition to the UM’s Computer science grad program, and I also plan to write another symphony… but I’ll probably wait a few more months before I embark on this crazy journey again.