

Overcoming

Rhapsody on *We Shall Overcome* for Piano Quintet (2009)

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Normally indifferent to pomp and ceremony, on January 20, 2009, I found myself, as I watched the inauguration of the first person of color as President of the United States, with a lump in my throat. Millions watched on television. Thousands made the journey and braved the cold to attend. People, some old enough to have been denied the right to vote, wept. We have indeed come a long way. And, having lived through the 60's, I remember that it has not been easy. I could not help but feel a deep sense of gratification that—in this regard at least—we have matured as a people.

From jazz critic James Maher: “Song is the wind chime of memory.” *Overcoming* is built around that essential anthem of the civil rights movement, *We Shall Overcome*. Virtually all melodic material in the piece is derived or taken directly from it. Though the tune is always present in one form or another, it is never presented in its entirety. It appears in a variety of keys, often changing keys as it goes or sounding in two keys at once—just as the people singing it responded in a variety of ways, not always in sync during a tumultuous time. There is some emphasis on the portion of the phrase set to the word “someday.”

The form of the piece follows a very rough abstraction of the history of the civil rights movement. A seemingly innocent, self-evident concept—of justice for all Americans—is born. It struggles against deeply ingrained resistance, some of it violent. Ultimately the idea prevails owing to its ethical power and the thousands who worked and sacrificed to make it happen, some giving their lives.

The piece begins with a quiet evocation of a beautiful idea—that inequality will be overcome. A relatively brief period of optimism gives way to the struggle. Roughly halfway through this, another tune important to the movement, *Keep Your Eyes on the Prize*, appears. This section is eventually succeeded by another that celebrates the ascendancy of justice in a vague, nostalgic wash of songs that attended those years: Bob Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* and *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, John Lennon's *Imagine*, the Beatles' *Revolution*, Pete Seeger's *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, Paul McCartney's *Blackbird*, and *The Star-Spangled Banner*. All of this is followed by a final rumination on the “someday” phrase. The coda begins with a *pizzicato* section in which the 'cello, while the upper strings play one more variation of *We Shall Overcome*, quietly celebrates with a playful version of *Hail to the Chief*. It shifts briefly to a sentimental tone; then, a

bell-like chord in the piano, heard at several points earlier, suggests the urgent need to remember the lessons of the past. There is yet work to be done.

From Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Justice denied anywhere diminishes justice everywhere.” And Eleanor Roosevelt: “Justice cannot be for one side alone, but must be for both.” America’s story, in part, is one of striving to manifest its own ideals. *Overcoming* is my heartfelt paean to the progress we have made and a gesture of hope that we will continue—in our government, laws, and our personal lives—to work toward America’s promise of justice for *all* Americans regardless of who or what they are.

Performance & Interpretive Suggestions

The one-minute recording of *We Shall Overcome*, made during the march on Selma in 1965, should be played as an introduction. As the 2nd verse begins (“We shall live in peace...”), the 1st violin begins the piece by playing in unison with the singers on the recording. The recording will quickly fade out, leaving the violins & viola.

The introductory section, to bar 23, should be essentially tranquil, but with quietly ominous undertones. Section B. marks the transition from optimism to the grim realities of the struggle. In sections C. and D., take care not to let the tune (violin I & ‘cello) obscure the accompaniment, especially the *pizz.* Chords. Sections E. through H. should manifest very overt turbulence. Sections I. Through K., with the emphasis put on the song *Keep Your Eyes on the Prize (Hold On)*, would seem to signal a release of tensions, but the piano chords at bar 133 and the *sul ponticelli* at bar 138 (play these with a *very* thin and brittle tone) bring about the sheer violence of section L. The piano tone clusters should mimic gunshots. Section M. gradually fades down into the dream state of section N. In this section, work to balance the various quotations as equally as possible; the ‘cello and piano RH are the timekeepers. Section O. is the dissolving of the dream into the subdued celebration of the present in section P. The coda, section Q., is simple, direct and heartfelt reflection on the rest, ending on a note of caution. Do not hurry any part of this. It is suggested that a fairly long silence, in playing posture, be held by the performers after the last chord has died away.