Stella G. Gitelman Willoughby

Program Notes (Extended)

Stories of Sorrow and Strength: A Suite in Two Movements addresses two defining moments in Byzantine history. This composition reflects the emotions and reactions of the Byzantine people. These strong and painful feelings are universal, and my hope is that they will resonate with listeners, today.

I. Elegy for the People of Tomorrow expresses the fear, suffering, and pain of the Byzantine people as their church and city fall to the Western knights on their Fourth Crusade.

The composition begins with tension: Harmonies are sustained beyond their expected point of resolution, creating an extended sonority. This harmonic tension represents the impending conflict between the crusaders and the people of Constantinople, while the bleeding over of sounds is emblematic of the blood that is about to be shed. In the first violins, descending *portamenti* across the interval of a fourth, represent the looming downfall and destruction of Constantinople at the hands of the Fourth Crusaders.

The second section depicts the arrival of the crusaders in Constantinople. Their steady and ominous approach – portrayed through the heavy rhythmic pattern in the lower strings – is coupled by the chaos and shrieks of those whom they attack – represented by the rapid thirty-second note passages and the dissonant intervals in the upper strings.

Throughout the composition is a recurring melody: *Dies Irae*. This Gregorian chant melody, originally composed in the 13th century although likely even earlier, has been used by composers throughout the western tradition to convey feelings of loss, death and eternal hopelessness. After a pause in the music, this melody returns in the third and final section of the composition. This time, it reflects the feelings of future generations and their reminder of the past events. The Byzantines and Eastern Church will never forget the pain and death inflicted upon them by the Western Crusaders.

The themes of pain and suffering and division among people and nations continue to resonate today. Nearly a millennium later, we have yet to resolve the religious intolerance, racism, and

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societal conflicts similar to those that plagued 13th century Europe. If we cannot reconcile with one another in spite of our differences, this too will be our elegy.

Bravery and determination; tension, unease, and desperation; honor and dignity. These convictions and emotions ignite strength within us, drive us forward, and serve as the impetus for ***II. Fight for Our Soul***.

The composition begins in forceful melodic unison while simultaneously, several of the instrumental parts are rhythmically displaced. Bound by a singular melodic pitch, they remain united. This is a call to set aside differences and to stand together in a common sonority.

The rhythmic displacement continues, and the pitches deviate further from the central unison. This creates tension, both harmonically and emotionally. Reuniting at a common downbeat, apprehensions fade away, and are replaced by interacting melodies. These interconnected melodic gestures represent shared, poignant memories of the past, which now serve as inspiration for fortitude.

In a brief moment of silence, reflection and heartbreak set in. What might be lost in the face of adversity? The music reenters, rising in register and dynamic. The path forward will be difficult and painful. There will be losses along the way; success is not guaranteed. Yet, if the cause is worthy, it is worth the fight.

This was the situation and rallying cry of the Byzantines, Genoese, and Venetians who fought to preserve the Byzantine Empire and sustain the city of Constantinople in 1453, as it fell under siege by the Ottoman Turks. ***Fight for Our Soul*** accompanies the last-documented speech of Constantine XI Palaiologos, as he rallied his soldiers and prepared them for what would be their final battle.

Although the Byzantine Empire ultimately fell on May 29, 1453, this speech was deeply uniting and enormously impactful. The soldiers fought valiantly and courageously for their homeland and for their shared cause, demonstrating to the world, and to modern audiences, the importance and power of standing firm and standing together for your principles.

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