

Jacquelyn Carter (formerly Vaught)
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Dr. David Bard-Schwarz
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Analysis of Ngwenyama's *Sonoran Storm*

Sonoran Storm is both the name of Nokuthula Ngwenyama's (born 1976) viola album and a piece she wrote for solo viola in 2016. Ngwenyama is an American solo violist and composer. The album, released October 12, 2018, features music composed by Rebecca Clarke, Byron Adams, Franz Liszt, and Ngwenyama herself. In the digital booklet that accompanies her album, Ngwenyama writes, "Music is filled with depictions of external and internal tempest.... [Sonoran Storm] unites the descriptive and symbolic." The pieces on the album take the listener through a variety of storms that are depicted through the music, but none are so stormy as the title piece for the album.

"Sonoran Storm" refers to a desert in the southwestern US and central Mexico named the Sonoran Desert. This viola solo is unique in that it can be performed as an unaccompanied solo or accompanied by string orchestra, harp, and percussion. In both recordings of the piece, I can hear melodies that remind me of the old-western cowboys or of American folk songs. These simple melodies also remind me of listening to works of Aaron Copland that depict the American landscape. *Sonoran Storm* depicts the desert landscape of America and also the journey of a fantastic yet dark storm. To me, the storm in this work is not a storm that would make someone fear for their life, but rather a storm that would make someone want to sit back and revel in mother nature's beauty while recognizing the darkness found in the sublime storm. The piece takes the listener on a wonderful journey through the up-and-down roller coaster of

A	B	A'	C	A	B'	A''
:10 Introduction	2:25 B	3:22 alteration of melody from A, includes more momentary outbursts	4:15 C Middle ages drone like	7:25 A returns 7:41 main melody enters	Development like, tour of materials from the piece	9:23 A finally returns
:15 A, motoric ostinato :35 main melody enters	2:35 contrasting motoric melody	4:01 ending material to transition	5:00 Technical arpeggios	Return of A is incomplete and is an abandoned refrain	7:56 contrasting material	9:35 main melody up an octave
1:15 contrasting material	3:00 Flowing arpeggios, Baroque Bach (like cello suites)		5:20 interjection of overtones leading into arpeggios again		8:23 Flowing arpeggios	10:00 drawn out cadential passage
1:35 recap of main melody (slightly more complicated and up an octave)			5:45 bridge		8:40 trill transition	10:30 ending
1:57 main melody (straightforward)			5:57 C middle age drone like recap		8:48 False start of A melody, multiple keys	
2:15 contrasting material transitions to B			6:45 Bach Cello like arpeggios, sequencing		9:10 quick transition	
			7:10 Retransition			



Though the sixteenth-notes are constant in the main theme, various articulations, accents, and bowings emphasize an asymmetrical meter (3+3+2) and multiple voices that are present in different registers of the instrument. The parts that I have highlighted in red are similar to those highlighted in pink.² The pink melody (an altered version of the main theme) sounds mostly like the main theme up an octave, but there is a sense of heightened excitement due to the melodic variation so I marked them as different parts. Because they utilize the same rhythmic technique, they initially sound the same. However, the more times I listened to this piece, the more unique they became.

The B section provides a yearning and mildly anxious sound that still, somehow, sounds hopeful. This section is the first sign of a storm brewing. There are two distinct parts in the B section that I have highlighted. Melodies highlighted in yellow are similar to those highlighted in grey. They are rhythmically similar, due to the notes that are emphasized by the accented bowings simulating two sets of rhythms on top of one another, which is reminiscent of the same technique found in the main theme (highlighted in red) from the A section. The next section, which I have labeled A', serves as a short reminder of the beauty and life from the A section before heading into the melancholy C section that follows.

The C section begins with a listlessness that lacks energy. It also surveys two violinistic styles, one from the middle ages that has a chant/drone-like sound and then moves into running arpeggios of a Baroque style. These arpeggios are reminiscent of the flowing arpeggios from the B section. This C section serves to emotionally distance the piece from the once lively start of the piece, and has now brought the piece to a feeling of inner restlessness and

² Throughout the paper, when referring to highlights I am referencing the chart colors display on page 3.

searching. The A section after C is abridged and serves to “fake-out” the listener into believing that the ending of the piece could be near, but instead suddenly slips into material from the B section. Because the return of the A section is quickly cut short it colors the interpretation of the following B’ section into feeling like a “spinning-out” of ideas from earlier on in the piece, leaving the listener in a limbo of not knowing where the music will go next. Because of the material coming from the B section, and because the material is being altered utilizing sequencing and multiple key areas, this section feels “loosened” as if it were a development of a sonata. This section comes as a surprise to the listener after hearing the return of the A material at 7:25. The B’ section is surprising and unpredictable, and it almost upsets the otherwise predictable structure of the piece. However, after a cadenza-like false start of the melody from the A section at 8:48, which goes through multiple keys, there is finally a transition to the true return of A.

This A’’ section represents the change that A went through throughout the piece. At first A was coherent and cohesive, then B contrasts to send A’ into repeating the pink melody (which is an altered main red theme). A’ is followed by C, which is a long, drawn-out emotional departure that is also a stylistic departure from the “modern” style seen thus far in the piece (heavily emphasized in the A section). Instead, section C incorporates styles that are reminiscent of the renaissance or baroque era. Additionally, in the C section, this act of surveying styles (which relate back to the B section) helps the piece to delve into a “soul-searching” mission. Following the middle C section, the piece returns to an abridged version of the A section that is “cut short.” I believe that the piece tried to begin again just as it had in the beginning but realized that its being was no longer the same as it once was. The A

section had a moment of further reflection and torment to send it into the B' development.

After the development, A'' signals the last section of the piece and presents the revised version of itself after having gone through the inner storm of the piece.

When comparing recordings of the unaccompanied solo version versus the orchestral version, I can hear how the solo takes on a different life in both arrangements. In the unaccompanied version, the solo line is exposed, which allows for the listener to focus on the specific qualities of the viola solo. In this version, the dance-like rhythm of the main theme (highlighted in red) stands out more than it does in the orchestral version. On the other hand, in the orchestral version, the dance like rhythm of the main theme in the viola seems to support the orchestra at times and deemphasizes its importance to the solo. In the solo version, this asymmetrical rhythm has a 3+3+2 feeling which makes the listener want to dance or clap along with; without the busy accompaniment, the main theme feels static and repetitive. Whereas, in the orchestral version the texture feels less rhythmic and feels more focused on adding harmony and additional melody to the unaccompanied solo.

In the orchestral version, there are several important changes for the listener as well as the soloist. The main theme motor rhythm seems to take a backseat to melody and harmony of the orchestra, which are not found in the unaccompanied version. In some cases, the harmonies of the orchestra were not even implied in the unaccompanied version. The presence of the orchestra rebalances the solo and guides the listener at times to focus on the ensemble and less on the soloist.

Changes in timbre play an important role in both versions of this piece. When listening, I am able to focus on the timbre of the viola/string instruments and how they are emphasized in the main theme. In the A section, there is a characteristic “bow scratching” that is brought forward which gives off a percussive effect. The bowing is not a “refined” style of bowing you would use to play a classical piece, but rather it sounds rough around the edges and adds an informal “twang” reminiscent of fiddle playing. This “informal” sound serves to support the American desert/pioneer sound. Additionally, the rhythmic emphasis of certain melodic notes (emphasized with the 3+3+2 rhythm) allows me to envision a guitar strumming that rhythm, perhaps for someone to dance to or play along with. This theme is the backbone for the entire piece and helps give the piece its cohesive nature. The “informal” sound of the A section is later contrasted by the “formal” sounding techniques exhibited in the B and C sections.

In the unaccompanied recording, every part of the solo seems significant. However, in the orchestral version some of these portions of the solo are deemphasized when the orchestra comes forward as a primary voice. The spotlight is handed back and forth between the solo and the orchestra, creating a dialogue between the two parts. Rebalancing the solo part with the orchestra accompaniment creates a new hierarchy between solo and ensemble for the listener, and provides a different aural experience from the unaccompanied version. At points, the orchestra takes over, becomes the main voice, and soars over the solo, especially in the chorale-like passages. The solo part no longer seems like a survey of technical styles and display of facility; the addition of the orchestra allows for a larger dynamic range, which guides the listener towards dramatic builds of emotion and contrasting emotional dissipation. The

accompanied solo cultivates this relationship between the orchestra and the soloist where both parts can hand off intensity or take it over.

The qualities that make this piece a brilliant composition and exciting to listen to are Ngwenyama's use of formal structure to show the inner conflict of the storm; the use of modern informal bowings paired with simple folk-song-like melodies in conflict with the formal arpeggios and informed reference to classical styles; using the evolution of musical styles to fuel the evolutionary journey of the A section; and creating different experiences for the listener by providing unaccompanied and accompanied versions of the piece to beg the question how the solo line can stand out on its own as well as have a dialogue with the accompaniment. To truly appreciate the depth of this work, it is imperative to study and compare the unaccompanied and accompanied versions and relate to the symbolic journey of both.

Works Cited

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