

On Pastel Skies – Review

by M.K. Piano

Hello Fruit Hunter! It's been a long time since we last interacted and I fancy the opportunity to do so over music. I am a man who usually prefaces things, and this is no exception. I will not be doing an annotated review and will focus my comments onto the following document. To add, I will be critical in the following review and in the efforts of justification, I must clarify two points:

1. The bulk of the review will apply within the context of YCF and the purposes of this competition. As the one who created the theme, there is an inherent bias to what the theme means to me and what I may look to see in other works. However, I will do my best to put those opinions aside and focus on this piece individually.
2. I think outside of YCF, this piece can work in other places. As mentioned briefly in your post description, this work does not feel limited to one theme, instead, capturing an array of ideas, emotions and more. Good work on this piece of music and let us begin the review!

ENGRAVING

I wish to start with this point as it is the thing I talk about most and the longest point of my review. Engraving holds a high value in a composer's process and when looking at the engraving of your piece, the score is inconsistent. Every page seems to dance between one or two systems; instrument changes sometimes go to the edge of the page or get cutoff by said edge of the page; the names for the percussion parts are marked incorrectly, and your staff changes between pitched and non-pitched percussion parts are incorrect.

When it comes to notating percussion parts, it can be confusing to keep track of the number of changes simply by the instrument name. Especially when you have more than one system per page. Unfortunately, there are a number of ways to notate it depending on the organization or purpose of the piece. In DCI or marching, they will list one stave per instrument and keep the part name explicit for the instrument. The common way to notate percussion parts in concert band or orchestral music is by using the terms "Percussion 1, Percussion 2, Percussion 3, etc." In concert band, you can notate pitched and unpitched instruments with the following: "Percussion 1, Mallet Percussion 1." Under each individual title, you list the percussion instrument of choice. Here are several links to published scores on J.W. Pepper to showcase this point:

[Swarm – by Brian Beck](#)

[Shine on Me – by Erin Keeton-Howard](#)

[Hangul – by Soon Hee Newbold](#)

ENGRAVING CONT.

To continue, when you change to a new percussion instrument in the middle of the piece, you keep the title the same: "Percussion 1 (Sus. Cym.)" → "Percussion 1 (Glock.)." All of this help any conductor and scholar be able to keep it simple and track which person/ part is doing what. Scores in publication will often do this and it has become expected to see.

Moving on, and sticking with switching instruments, there is confusion about how you notate instrument changes. I will explore this later; however, it is clear to me that this score is heavily inspired by DCI and Marching band. The expectation for switching instruments is quite different than the concert setting, however, something universal stays the same: **Allow time for the player to switch.** Even if they are switching mallets or switching instruments, YOU MUST ALLOW TIME TO DO SO! After my initial listen, I read the existing comments and saw that you are a percussionist and are doing marching band. Fun fact, I too am from Florida, and did marching band, however, not in front-ensemble (I did Bari-sax). Even in marching, a stick change can happen quickly, but not instantly. You must allow time in the music to allow instrument or mallet changes.

The first example of this comes on page 4, where Xylophone goes to Crotales. Same for page 5, and page 8. If they have crotales mounted on the xylophone, great! That helps a lot to this point. However, not when it comes to changes to glockenspiel, Bells or Zil bell. Those instruments would more than likely be adjacent or not attached to the xylophone or vibraphones. You would then need to ensure time in the score for a player to move.

Lastly, when you switch between pitched and unpitched percussion instruments, the staff also needs to change. A snare drum or cymbal part does not read a 5-line staff. They read a 1-line staff and should be shown unless you are in concert band repertoire. Yet, that is not the case here as it is a dedicated percussion ensemble. Other final engraving things are scattered across the score. You have text information in the vibraphones when no one is playing (page 32 & 35), and in my opinion, you do not need a grand staff for the marimbas. Sure, they go low enough in the piece, however, you always kept the music to one marimba staff versus using both. Why not save space and use one staff for the marimba and just use clef changes when the registers change?

MUSIC AND STYLE

As mentioned previously, this work feels heavily inspired by marching band or DCI writing. That is not a bad thing, instead simply an observation in this review. However, when it comes to the literal music, you have good ensemble textures, but the sense of melodic and structural clarity was lost to me completely. Like one might experience in DCI, the percussion can have these beautiful and extensive passages; sometimes as a feature, or to embellish the effects felt by the brass behind them. In this piece, the melody seems to be a chord progression or ensemble texture versus a clear and distinct motif that unifies the piece together. This progression is then embellished constantly by marimba filler or runs from the mallets. The resulting effect is not one where we are taken on a journey by a unifying motif, and one that we as an audience member can latch

MUSIC AND STYLE CONT.

on to and follow along. Instead, we listen to seven minutes of varying ideas, that work together on their own but are less convincing as a singular piece.

This said, with the criticisms stated, you do excel in the emotional landscape. The harmonic language in this work is very satisfying and as I have been writing, I have played the work several times in the background. Each time, hearing the blocked chords in the vibraphone and glockenspiel, it feels enchanting. The sense of mysticism, innocence, or imagination is easily felt from the very beginning. Then the first allegro section comes and now the sense of wind or something fleeting overcomes the listener. As if our character is a little girl running out in a field of grass in the cool evening of summer. However, she is stopped by bell tolls and reminds herself that she must go back eventually, but the adventure is not yet over. Truly, this work is very evocative and the ideas I imagine in my head are vast. There is a sense of innocence in the purest way and one that, when earnest, will bring a tear to my eye as I recall my youth and what felt like simpler times. Really great job in this regard as it was very enjoyable.

CONTEXT OF YCF CONTEST

As we prepare to close, the last thing to address is how this work stands in the competition on YCF. Pual Verlaine is someone I have followed and read for years now. The poem I linked for this competition is a famous one from Verlaine's set "La Bonne Chanson" (The Good Song). Most famously, this collection was set to music by Gabriel Fauré in his Op.61.

Donc, ce sera par un clair jour d'été is the nineteenth poem from this collection and is a poem about love. Love heightened and influenced by Summer. Verlaine wrote this work in anticipation for his wedding day with his fiancée Mathilde Mauté. Actually, in literature, and based off Northrup Frye's research, Summer is the archetype for Romance, and when studying literature, film or music, the summer months have been used heavily to dictate romance or the passion within love. ("The Notebook" would be a popular example)

However, with the context provided about why Verlaine wrote it, this competition was a chance to see how you felt when reading those words and what causes you to feel love. Then to take that feeling and put it into sound, something personal to you and I. Thus, it is rather subjective whether this fits the theme or not; however here is how I would view its standing:

On Pastel Skies does capture a feeling of outdoors, and in some sense, the idea of wind or someone fleeting. With the music, it feels cast in the evening and is as vivid as it is innocent. Hence it stands to reason that this work matches the text given for this challenge. In execution, the melodic content, structure and overall engraving to the score bring its effect down. While it sounds good, the execution of this work will be diminished if or when it is played live. Thanks for sharing this work and keep it up!