

# On Sorrow

*for bass clarinet and piano*

**JONATHAN RUSSELL**

## On Sorrow

On March 31st, 2017, my 37-year-old wife was diagnosed with what turned out to be Stage III Breast Cancer, and our life was turned upside down. We made the decision to leave London, where we had lived for the past four years, and move in with her parents in Weymouth, Massachusetts for the duration of her treatment. All told, it was about a year from initial diagnosis to my wife starting to feel like herself again. For now, she is considered “cancer-free”, but the very real possibility of a more serious recurrence will always haunt us.

Fear, worry, anxiety and exhaustion – not “sorrow” – were the sensations that dominated the year. But as I contemplated the very real possibility of losing my life partner much sooner than anticipated, I became far more conscious of sorrow’s inevitability in all of our lives, of the weight of loss that everyone ultimately carries. For no matter how lucky a life we live, the simple fact remains that the longer we are here the more loss we will experience.

The piece is in five continuous movements that flow together without pause:

- I. Prelude – Loss
- II. Withdrawal
- III. Rage
- IV. Consolation (O Vos Omnes)
- V. Renewal – Postlude

The piece opens with wispy piano chords in a stuttering rhythm, with the bass clarinet floating above, evoking the eternal, endless river of time, the neutral backdrop to the cares and concerns of living. This figure also takes on a quality of “fate,” appearing again, suddenly loud and forceful, at the climaxes of the first, third, and fifth movements. After a few minutes of this material, the main “sorrow” theme of the piece enters: a circular, chromatic figure in five. This material begins slowly and lugubriously, but gradually starts to become more flowing and buoyant. Before it can go too far in this direction, however, it is interrupted by a hammering version of the “fate” motive. This is followed by two intense statements of the “sorrow” theme, and then a high, wispy version that melts into the second movement.

Movement 2 (“Withdrawal”) evokes the sense of turning inward and separating from the world that is often our initial way of coping with the shock of a calamitous event. The bass clarinet plays fragmentary melodies over quiet, repeating chords in the piano that begin high and ethereal, and gradually drift down and down and down. At the end, there is a low, subdued statement of the “sorrow” theme – which then triggers the third movement’s sudden outburst.

Movement 3 (“Rage”) is aggressive, dissonant, and driving. There are several new themes, and the “sorrow” theme is also sucked into the vortex. Its narrow chromatic pitches are played in close canon to create buzzing, insect-like swirls of dissonance. The music churns to a climax, and the bass clarinet is left alone on one of its lowest pitches. The piano hammers out the “fate” motive repeatedly as the bass clarinet ascends four octaves, almost its entire range, and is left hanging alone on a searing high note.

When the bass clarinet stops, a sustained piano note emerges, leading into the fourth movement, "Consolation (O Vos Omnes)." This movement consists entirely of fragments from Tomás Luis de Victoria's choral work "O Vos Omnes," composed in the vicinity of 1572. It is a beautiful, contemplative work, setting a text from Lamentations 1:12, which translates as: "O you that pass by, behold, and see: if there be any sorrow like my sorrow. Pay attention, all people, and see my sorrow: if there be any sorrow like my sorrow." I knew early on that Victoria's composition would inform my own, both because it is such a potent musical evocation of sorrow, and, more personally, because it has itself been a source of consolation for me in difficult times. As my piece developed, it became clear to me that directly quoting Victoria's work would be the most compelling way to provide the "consolation" music I was seeking. It is deeply inspiring and humbling to me that a piece of music composed 450 years ago can still speak to us so directly and immediately today. It is a testament to the power of music itself to console, as well as to the power of spirituality and our common humanity, even across many generations and centuries.

As the fourth movement ends, Victoria's final cadence morphs into a statement of the "sorrow" theme. The bass clarinet begins movement 5 ("Renewal") with tentative fragments of this theme, which are then picked up by the piano. The theme gradually gathers in strength and confidence, finally culminating in a vigorous tango, a swirling, churning dance of life. Sorrow is not denied or defeated, but instead becomes the very basis for renewal and hope. As in the first movement, the dance is cut short by a hammering return of the "fate" motive. This time, however, the harmonies build and finally resolve to a triumphant D major chord. The chord melts away and we are left once again with three iterations of the slow, contemplative version of the "sorrow" theme, rising higher each time, finally leaving the bass clarinet suspended gently in the air. The quiet, wispy version of the opening "fate" motive enters in the piano, and the piece ends as it began, with the bass clarinet suspended over a gently pulsating ocean of time.

The piece, like sorrow itself, has fractal and cyclical qualities. The process it evokes can happen on many time scales, successively or simultaneously. The sequence of emotions could be happening in real time over the course of the 30-minute work; or it could happen over the course of an instant, a year, a lifetime. The ending of the piece could lead directly back to the beginning: even as we overcome one sorrow, the next one may be just on the horizon, or already underway. And even the sorrows we think we have overcome will continue to be with us, carrying us again through their gauntlet of emotions when we least expect it.

As long as humans are mortal, sorrow will be a central part of existence. And as long as humans are human, we will seek out ways to process, console, heal, and renew. My hope is that this composition can be one small contribution to that endless and eternal human project.

# On Sorrow

Commissioned by Bruce Belton.

Jonathan Russell

Originally composed for bass clarinet and string quartet. Piano arrangement by the composer.

## I. Prelude — Loss

♩ = 54

**Bass Clarinet**

*p* freely floating (rhythm need not align precisely with piano)

*p* wispy and ethereal, but with a solid core to the sound

*a bit weightier (rhythmically aligned piano)*

*floating again*

*weightier again*

*floating again*

*Ped. each bar*

*articulation simile*

*Ped.*



*rit.* *a tempo*

B. Cl. *mp*

Pno. *mp*

B. Cl.

Pno.

*rit.* **B** Sorrowful ♩ = 63

B. Cl.

Pno. *p*

B. Cl. *p*

Pno.

Like the beginning ♩ = 54

*rit.*

B. Cl. *pp*

Pno. *pp hushed*

**C** More impassioned ♩ = 63

B. Cl.

Pno. *mf*

*Leg. \**

B. Cl. *poco accel.* *espress.* *mf*

Pno.

More flowing ♩ = 72

*poco a poco accel.*  
*(almost imperceptibly)*

B. Cl. *cresc.*

Pno. *mp* *cresc.*





Tempo I ♩ = 54

74 *rit.* **E** **ff**

78

81 *rit.* **ff** *a tempo*

85 *attaca mvt. 2* **pp**

## II. Withdrawal

Even and restrained, but with a hint of expressivity ♩ = 44

90

B. Cl.

*p*

Pno.

*p*

97

B. Cl.

Pno.

105

B. Cl.

Pno.

F

112

B. Cl.

Pno.

B. Cl. <sup>118</sup>

Pno.

B. Cl. <sup>123</sup> G

Pno.

B. Cl. <sup>130</sup>

Pno.

B. Cl. <sup>138</sup>

Pno.

*attaca mv. 3*

**H**

144

B. Cl.

Pno.

### III. Rage

Driving and relentless  $\text{♩} = 110$

151

B. Cl.

Pno.

158

B. Cl.

Pno.

*f*

**I**

163

B. Cl.

Pno.

*f*

B. Cl. <sup>167</sup>

Pno.

This system covers measures 167 to 171. The B. Cl. part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The Pno. accompaniment consists of block chords in the right hand and a rhythmic bass line in the left hand. Dynamic markings include accents and hairpins.

B. Cl. <sup>172</sup>

Pno.

This system covers measures 172 to 176. The B. Cl. part continues with a similar melodic pattern. The Pno. accompaniment maintains its block chord texture with some chromatic movement in the bass line.

B. Cl. <sup>177</sup>

Pno.

This system covers measures 177 to 181. The B. Cl. part shows some melodic variation. The Pno. accompaniment features more complex chordal textures and rhythmic patterns.

B. Cl. <sup>182</sup>

Pno.

This system covers measures 182 to 186. The B. Cl. part concludes with a melodic phrase. The Pno. accompaniment provides a rich harmonic support with various chord voicings.

14 J

B. Cl. *ff*

Pno. *ff*

B. Cl.

Pno.

B. Cl.

Pno.

B. Cl.

Pno.

K

Pno. *f*

Same tempo ( $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 110$ )

Pno. *sub p* *cresc.*

Pno. *f*

Pno.

L

Same tempo ( $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 110$ )

B. Cl. *f*


Pno. *f*


B. Cl. 


Pno. 


B. Cl. 

Pno. 

B. Cl. 

Pno. 

B. Cl. 

Pno. 



250 M Same tempo ( $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 110$ )

B. Cl.

Pno.

*sub p* *cresc.*

255

B. Cl.

Pno.

*mp*

260

B. Cl.

Pno.

*f* *f*

264

B. Cl.

Pno.

*f*

*accel.* A Tempo ( $\text{♩} = 110$ )

B. Cl. 268

Pno. 268

*p*

Pno. 275

**N** *8<sup>va</sup>*

Pno. 286

*(8<sup>va</sup>)* *8<sup>va</sup>*

Pno. 295

*(8<sup>va</sup>)*

Pno. 301

*(8<sup>va</sup>)*

O

B. Cl. *f*

Pno. *sub f*

B. Cl.

Pno.

B. Cl.

Pno.

B. Cl.

Pno.

B. Cl.

Pno.

326

B. Cl.

Pno.

331

P

sub *f*

Pno.

336

sim.

Pno.

341

Pno.

345

cresc.

Same tempo ( $\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 110$ )

Pno.

349

*sub p* *cresc.*

Detailed description: This system shows measures 349-352. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and ties, while the left hand provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines. Dynamics include *sub p* and *cresc.*

Pno.

353

Detailed description: This system shows measures 353-357. The right hand continues the melodic line, and the left hand features a steady accompaniment of chords. The texture is dense and rhythmic.

B. Cl.

*mp cresc.*

Pno.

358

358

Detailed description: This system shows measures 358-362. The B. Cl. part begins with a melodic line marked *mp cresc.*. The piano accompaniment continues with complex textures in both hands, including slurs and ties.

**Q**

B. Cl.

*f*

Pno.

363

*f*

Detailed description: This system shows measures 363-365. A section marker **Q** is present. The B. Cl. part has a rest followed by a melodic line starting at measure 363, marked *f*. The piano accompaniment is also marked *f* and features a strong, rhythmic accompaniment with slurs and ties.

Pno.

*heavy and aggressive*

366

Detailed description: This system shows measures 366-369. The piano accompaniment is marked *heavy and aggressive*. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs, and the left hand has a strong, rhythmic accompaniment with slurs and ties.

*heavy and aggressive*

B. Cl. *ff*

Pno.

369

B. Cl.

Pno.

372

B. Cl.

Pno.

375

B. Cl.

Pno.

378

B. Cl. *381*

Pno. *381* *cresc.*

B. Cl. *384*

Pno. *384*

B. Cl. *387*

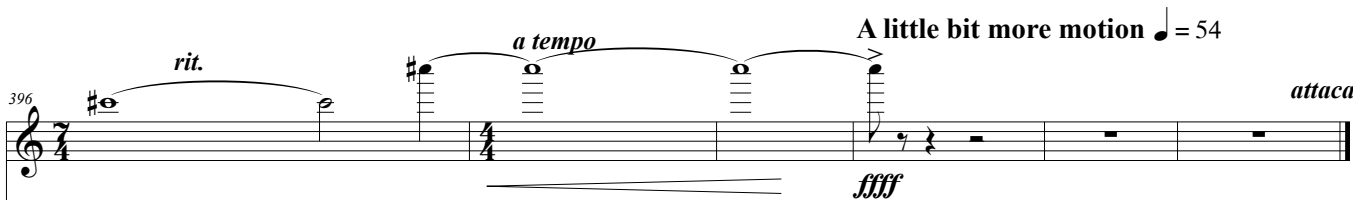
Pno. *387*

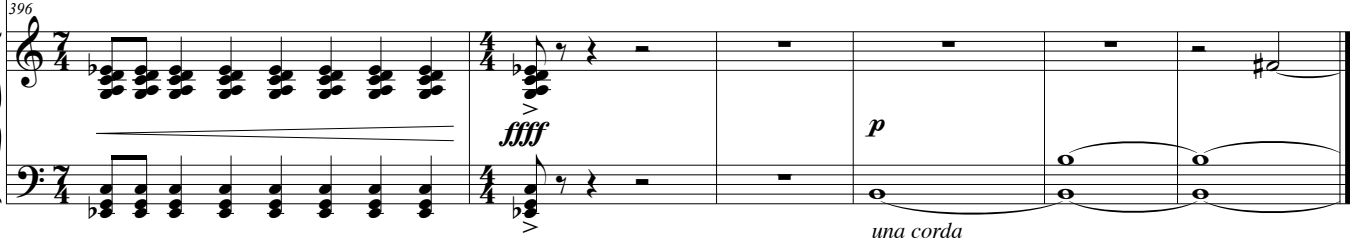
B. Cl. *390* **R** *Very broadly* ♩ = 44

Pno. *390* *ff*

B. Cl. 

Pno. 

B. Cl. 

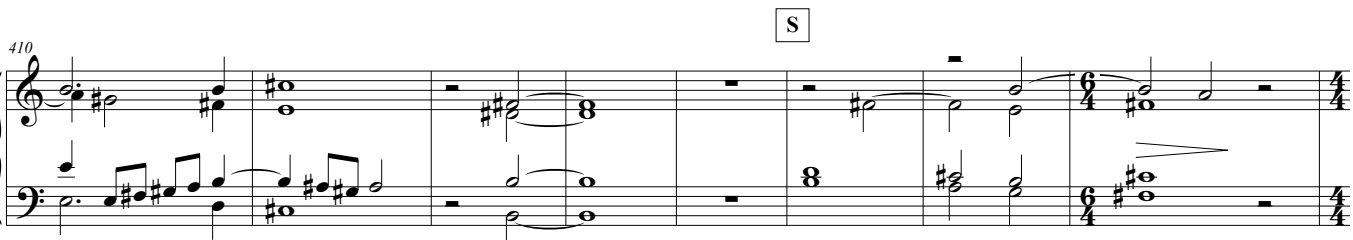
Pno. 

*rit.* *a tempo* A little bit more motion ♩ = 54 *fff* *p* *una corda* *attaca mvt. 4*

### IV. Consolation (O Vos Omnes)

*almost monotone, but with hints of expressiveness*

Pno. 

Pno. 

S

Pno. 



424

Pno.

430

Pno.

T

*pp*

8

*tre corde*

437

Pno.

*mf*

444

Pno.

*rit.*

*attaca mvt. 5*

*p*

*fff*

### V. Renewal — Postlude

A Tempo ♩ = 54

452

B. Cl.

*tentative and distant*

*pp*

*restrained, yet expressive*

*p*

452

Pno.

*restrained, yet expressive*

*p*

U

B. Cl.

Pno.

*accel. poco a poco*

B. Cl.

*cresc.*

Pno.

*cresc.*

B. Cl.

*espress.* **A bit more motion** ♩ = 84

*mf*

Pno.

*cresc.* *mf*

B. Cl.

*accel.*

*cresc.*

Pno.

*cresc.*

474 **v** **More motion** ♩ = 96 *accel. poco a poco*

B. Cl.

Pno.

478

B. Cl.

Pno.

**Flowing** ♩ = 126

482

B. Cl.

Pno.

486

B. Cl.

Pno.

*accel.*

B. Cl. *cresc.*

Pno. *cresc.*

B. Cl. *ff*

Pno. *ff*

**w Dancing** ♩ = 138

*accel. poco a poco a poco*

B. Cl.

Pno.

B. Cl.

Pno.

B. Cl.   
Pno. 

B. Cl.   
Pno. 

B. Cl.   
Pno. 

B. Cl.   
Pno. 

B. Cl. <sup>523</sup>

Pno. <sup>523</sup>

*ff* *mf*

X ♩ = 152

B. Cl. <sup>527</sup>

Pno. <sup>527</sup>

*mf* *cresc. poco a poco*

B. Cl. <sup>531</sup>

Pno. <sup>531</sup>

*rit.*

Y ♩ = 54

B. Cl. <sup>535</sup>

Pno. <sup>535</sup>

*molto rit.* *ff*

B. Cl. 538

Pno. 538

B. Cl. 541

Pno. 541

B. Cl. 544

Pno. 544

*mf*

*cresc.*

B. Cl. 547

Pno. 547

B. Cl. 550

Pno. 550

B. Cl. 553

Pno. 553

*dim.*

B. Cl. 557

Pno. 557

*rit.* **Z** *a tempo*

*pp* *mp* *p*

B. Cl. 562

Pno. 562

*pp* *pp* *pp*

*rit.* **AA** *a tempo*



566

B. Cl.

*pp*

Pno.

569

B. Cl.

Pno.

572

B. Cl.

*dim.*

Pno.

*dim.*

575

B. Cl.

*ppp*

*rit.*

*ppp*

Pno.