

On Sorrow

for bass clarinet and string quartet

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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 string 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 strings 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 strings hammer 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 lone, gentle sustained cello 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 first violin. The other instruments gradually join in, with the theme gathering 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 strings, 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

I. Prelude — Loss

$\text{♩} = 54$

Bass Clarinet

p freely floating (rhythm need not align precisely with strings)

Violin I

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

Violin II

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

Viola

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

Cello

p

4

B. Cl.

a bit weightier (rhythmically aligned with strings)

floating again

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

7 *weightier again* *floating again*

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

10 *cresc.* *sub pp*

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

rit.

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

A *a tempo*

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

brighter and more expressive

mf

25 *a tempo*

B. Cl. *mp*

Vln. I *mp* 3 3 3

Vln. II *mp* 3 3 3

Vla. *mp* 3 3 3

Vc. *mp* 3 3 3

29 *rit.*

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

B Sorrowful ♩ = 63

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

33 *p*

10

C More impassioned ♩ = 63

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mf

mf

mf

mf

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

poco accel.

espress.

mf

mp

espress.

mp

More flowing ♩ = 72

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

poco a poco accel. (almost imperceptibly)

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

D

59

B. Cl.

f

espress.

Vln. I

f

espress.

Vln. II

f

Vla.

f

Vc.

f

63

B. Cl.

cresc.

Vln. I

cresc.

Vln. II

cresc.

Vla.

cresc.

Vc.

cresc.

67

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

The musical score is arranged in five staves. The first system (measures 59-62) features a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The B. Cl. staff has a key signature change to two flats (Bb, Eb) at measure 60. The Vln. I and Vln. II staves have a key signature change to two flats at measure 60. The Vla. and Vc. staves have a key signature change to two flats at measure 60. The second system (measures 63-66) features a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb) and a 4/4 time signature. The third system (measures 67-70) features a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb) and a 4/4 time signature. The score includes dynamic markings of *f* and *cresc.*, and articulation markings of *espress.* and *acc.*.

12

$\text{♩} = 84$

rit.

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Tempo I $\text{♩} = 54$

E

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

ff

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

81 *rit.* *a tempo*

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

fff

let ring

let ring

let ring

let ring

85 *attaca mvt. 2*

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Sul G

let ring

pp

let ring

pp

let ring

pp

pp

II. Withdrawal

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

90

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

p

p

p

p

97

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

105 F

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

112

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

118

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

123

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

130

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

138

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

144 H *attaca mvt. 3*

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

The musical score consists of five staves. The B. Cl. staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, followed by a rest and then a descending line. The Vln. I and Vln. II staves also begin with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. They play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, followed by a rest and then a descending line. The Vla. staff begins with a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp. It plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, followed by a rest and then a descending line. The Vc. staff begins with a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp. It plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, followed by a rest and then a descending line. The score includes a rehearsal mark 'H' at measure 144 and a tempo change to 'attaca mvt. 3' at measure 146. The time signature changes from 4/4 to 6/4 and back to 4/4.

III. Rage

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

151

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

156

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

I

160

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

165

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

170

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

175

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

180

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

[illegible]

This image shows a page of a musical score for measures 190 through 194. The instruments are B. Cl. (Bass Clarinet), Vln. I (Violin I), Vln. II (Violin II), Vla. (Viola), and Vc. (Violoncello). The score is written in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like accents (>) and breath marks (>). The measures are numbered 190, 191, 192, 193, and 194 at the top of each staff.

195

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

200

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

K

205

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

f

f

f

pizz.

f

210

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

[illegible]

223

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

L

Same tempo (♩ = ♩ = 110)

223

224

225

226

227

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

f

f

f

232

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

237

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

242

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

247

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

252

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

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

sub p

cresc.

sub p

cresc.

sub p

cresc.

p cresc.

257

B. Cl.

mp

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

262

B. Cl.

f

Vln. I

f

Vln. II

f

Vla.

f

Vc.

f

265

B. Cl.

f

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

accel.

268

B. Cl.

A Tempo ($\text{♩} = 110$)

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

pizz.

p

N

274

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

quasi sul ponticello

p

quasi sul ponticello

p

quasi sul ponticello

p

285

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

294

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

O

301

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

f

Ord.

sub f

Ord.

sub f

Ord.

sub f

arco

sub f

307

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

312

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

pizz.

Measures 312-316. The B. Cl. part features a melodic line with many sharps and naturals. The strings (Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Vc.) play a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The Vc. part includes a 'pizz.' (pizzicato) marking.

317

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Measures 317-321. The B. Cl. part continues the melodic line. The strings (Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Vc.) continue the rhythmic accompaniment. The Vc. part includes a 'pizz.' (pizzicato) marking.

322

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc. arco

323

324

325

326

327

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

328

329

330

331

P

332

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

sub f

noisy pizz. (quasi. snap)

sub f

noisy pizz. (quasi. snap)

sub f

sim.

sim.

337

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

342

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

arco

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

346

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

350

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

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

sub p

cresc.

sub p

cresc.

sub p

cresc.

arco

p cresc.

355

B. Cl.

mp cresc.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

360

B. Cl.

Q

f

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

f

364

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Measures 364-366. The B. Cl. part has whole rests. The Vln. I, Vln. II, and Vla. parts play a continuous eighth-note pattern with various accidentals. The Vc. part has whole rests.

367

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

heavy and aggressive

ff

Measures 367-369. The B. Cl. part has whole rests. The Vln. I, Vln. II, and Vla. parts continue the eighth-note pattern. The Vc. part enters with a heavy, aggressive eighth-note pattern marked *ff*.

heavy and aggressive

370

B. Cl.

ff

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

373

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

376

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

This musical score page contains measures 370 through 376. It is for a five-part ensemble: B. Cl. (Bass Clarinet), Vln. I (Violin I), Vln. II (Violin II), Vla. (Viola), and Vc. (Violoncello). The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo/mood is marked 'heavy and aggressive'. The dynamics are marked 'ff' (fortissimo) starting at measure 370. The B. Cl. part begins at measure 370 with a rest, then enters in measure 371 with a series of eighth notes. The Vln. I and Vln. II parts play a continuous eighth-note pattern with slurs. The Vla. and Vc. parts play a similar eighth-note pattern, with the Vc. part having a lower register. The score is divided into three systems, each containing five staves. Measure numbers 370, 373, and 376 are indicated at the start of their respective systems.

379

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

382

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

385

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

388

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

R Very broadly ♩ = 44

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

391

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

394

rit.

Sul G

a tempo A little bit more motion ♩ = 54

attaca mvt. 4

B. Cl. *fff*

Vln. I *Con sord.* *p*

Vln. II *Con sord.*

Vla. *Con sord.* *p* non vib., flautando poco sul ponticello

Vc. *Con sord.* *p* non vib., flautando poco sul ponticello

ppp ▶ *p* almost monotone, but with hints of expressiveness

IV. Consolation (O Vos Omnes)

402

B. Cl.

Vln. I

non vib., flautando poco sul ponticello
almost monotone, but with hints of expressiveness

Vln. II

non vib., flautando poco sul ponticello
almost monotone, but with hints of expressiveness

Vla.

almost monotone, but with hints of expressiveness

Vc.

409

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

S

416

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

424

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

431

T

vib. and tone ord.
with more expression

pp

vib. and tone ord.
with more expression

pp

vib. and tone ord.
with more expression

pp

vib. and tone ord.
with more expression

pp

438

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mf

mf

mf

mf

445 *rit.* *attaca mvt. 5*

Vln. I *p* *fff*

Vln. II *p* *fff*

Vla. *p* *fff*

Vc. *p* *fff*

The musical score consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. Measure 445 begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'rit.' (ritardando). The dynamics are 'p' (piano) for all parts. The time signature changes from 4/4 to 6/4 in measure 446, then to 5/4 in measure 447, and back to 4/4 in measure 448. The dynamics change to 'fff' (fortissimo) in measure 449. The score ends with a double bar line in measure 450, which is marked 'attaca mvt. 5'.

A Tempo ♩ = 54

U

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Senza sord.

p

Senza sord.

p

457

accel. poco a poco

462

B. Cl. *cresc.*

Vln. I *cresc.*

Vln. II *cresc.*

Vla. *cresc.*

Vc. *Senza sord.* *p* *cresc.*

466

B. Cl. *espress.* **A bit more motion** ♩ = 84 *mf*

Vln. I *mp*

Vln. II *mp*

Vla. *espress.* *mf*

Vc. *cresc.* *mf*

470

B. Cl. *cresc.*

Vln. I *cresc.*

Vln. II *cresc.*

Vla. *cresc.*

Vc. *cresc.*

V More motion ♩ = 96

accel. poco a poco

474

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

f

478

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Flowing ♩ = 126

482

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

486

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

accel.

490

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

W Dancing ♩ = 138

494

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

Sul G

Sul G

accel. poco a poco a poco

498

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

503

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

This musical system contains measures 503 through 506. The B. Cl. part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including accents and slurs. The Vln. I part has a similar melodic line with triplets in measures 505 and 506. The Vln. II part provides harmonic support with sustained chords. The Vla. part plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The Vc. part plays a similar eighth-note accompaniment in the bass register.

507

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

This musical system contains measures 507 through 510. The B. Cl. part continues its melodic line, featuring a long slur across measures 508 and 509. The Vln. I part has a more active line with slurs and ties. The Vln. II part continues with sustained chords. The Vla. part maintains its eighth-note accompaniment. The Vc. part continues its eighth-note accompaniment in the bass register.

512

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

513

514

515

516

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

517

518

519

520

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

524

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

$\text{X} \text{ } \text{♩} = 152$

mf

mf

mf

ff

B. Cl. *mf* *cresc. poco a poco*

Vln. I *cresc. poco a poco*

Vln. II *cresc. poco a poco*

Vla. *cresc. poco a poco*

Vc. *cresc. poco a poco*

B. Cl. *rit.*

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

536 *molto rit.* **ff**

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

55

539

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

542

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mf

mf

mf

mf

546

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

550

B. Cl.

550

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

rit.

fff

dim.

57

[illegible]

rit. AA *a tempo*

B. Cl. *p* *pp*

Vln. I *pp* *pp* ³

Vln. II *p* *pp* ³

Vla. *mp* *pp* ³

Vc. *pp* ³

B. Cl. *pp*

Vln. I ³

Vln. II ³

Vla. ³

Vc. ³

B. Cl.

Vln. I ³

Vln. II ³

Vla. ³

Vc. ³

III.
IV.

II.
III.

