SERAPH FOR PIANO AND STRING ORCHESTRA

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Music)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2013

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Abstract

*Seraph* is a fifteen minute composition for piano and string orchestra. In addition to traditional musical techniques such as variation and passacaglia, the work employs a distinctive approach to phrase structure, form, harmony, and compositional technique. An ascending natural minor scale serves as the main theme while other melodies, textures, harmonies, and motives interact in counterpoint with the theme. In addition, the theme undergoes its own developmental transformations and modifications, and it influences a distinctive harmonic language featuring extended, non-traditional chords and progressions that rarely repeat. Musical phrases and secondary melodies are unusual in length and mostly avoid expectations of cadence, while metric instability occurs through frequent meter changes. In addition to variation technique, the musical structure features episodes that contrast in compositional design through the development of less prominent motives and differences in approach to harmony. The piano part was partly composed through the use of transcribed improvisation, which serves as a basis for the harmonic and motivic structures heard throughout the composition. The piano part also features complex rhythmic divisions and technical demands for the performer while interacting with the orchestra in a variety of textures. As a whole, the work possesses several features which contribute to an original style and aesthetic.
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Acknowledgements

I offer my enduring gratitude to the faculty of music, staff, and my family for their support. I owe particular thanks to Dr. Stephen Chatman, whose guidance and continuous support has helped me to complete my thesis. I would also like to thank John Roeder and Dorothy Chang for their review and valuable feedback on my thesis document. I’d also like to thank student advisor Rayne Graham for her invaluable support and guidance. And finally, special thanks are owed to my family and my wife Jung Hee, for their support.
Dedicated to my wife Jung Hee, my daughter Kaelyn, and my son Lucian
1 Style and Aesthetics

Aesthetic Basis and Motivations for the Composition

Although the title for Seraph came late in the compositional process, the idea of a heaven-like world was a basis for inspiration and musical decision making from the beginning. Seraph is described as “a member of the highest order of angels,”¹ and there are several aesthetic features in the music that are influenced by the concept of Seraph and a heaven based world. The ascending scale-motive, shown in example 2.1-1, possesses an “approaching heaven” musical symbolism. It begins as a bass line and continues to gradually ascend both in the theme itself and later on in the composition. Continuing to ascend in the variations, it reaches a high register in the violins in variation eight, which can be seen in example 5.1-1. It is also symbolic that the original form of the scale-motive in Seraph does not contain distinctive rhythms typical of normal themes and motives. This design was chosen because the use of a traditional theme or motivic design would betray a “down to earth” symbolism. In comparison, many traditional themes and motives from musical works are often associated with characters, nature, and emotions, like the famous theme of Beethoven’s 5th symphony, which represents “fate”.² The lack of rhythmic motives in the scale theme 


² Beethoven’s secretary Anton Schindler wrote: “[Beethoven] himself provided the key to these depths when one day, in this author’s presence, he pointed to the beginning of the first movement and expressed in these words the fundamental idea of his work: ‘Thus Fate knocks at the door!’”. Jolly, Constance. Beethoven as I Knew Him; London: Faber and Faber, 1966; as translated from Schindler’s ‘Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven’, 1860.
of Seraph and breve durations characteristic of renaissance church music were chosen to symbolize a heaven based world. The goal was to mostly avoid the typical treatment of “motives” and “themes” since this would suggest a “human-like” symbolism. The concept for a variation design based on the scale-motive was also chosen since multiple contrasting themes could counteract the symbolism of a singular, heaven based world.

The use of a modal scale, as seen in renaissance church music, is also symbolic, but it also affects aesthetic decisions for harmony. Chords are chosen to support the atmosphere and mood of the composition and many contain perfect fifths. The use of this interval in harmony and motives in the work is also symbolic as the perfect fifth was an important musical interval in medieval church music. Similarly, the approach to counterpoint in Seraph symbolically references renaissance church music. There were also other musical design decisions which support the symbolism of a “heaven world”, including melodies that are extended to unusual lengths, unpredictable meter changes, and flowing textures that continuously evolve from the scale-motive and avoid abrupt textural changes.

**Contemporary Influences and Style**

Seraph demonstrates a distinctive aesthetic through its approach to harmony, intervallic relationships, phrase length, form, and compositional technique. While the overall aesthetic design of Seraph is not intentionally derived from or inspired by other contemporary compositions, there are identifiable influences and comparable works. For example, the approach of building musical compositions through very simple
musical materials can be seen in the music of Arvo Pärt. Like the music of Pärt, *Seraph* is based on a simple scale-motive and the harmonic language is related to this material. However, *Seraph* differs from Pärt's early music through its complex, non-repetitive harmonic style. This harmonic variety in the composition is made coherent through the emphasis of certain harmonic intervals such as the perfect fifth and perfect fourth as well as the consistent use of pitches derived from the scale-motive.

Another work that shares similarities in compositional design with *Seraph* is *Confessional* for Cello and Orchestra (1997) by Christos Hatzis. Both compositions feature the metamorphosis of intervallic content and harmony influenced by motivic material. As Hatzis describes, his work develops “the intervallic and melodic content of [a chant melody]… its constant metamorphosis account for most of the melodic and harmonic material.” However, *Seraph* differs in approach from *Confessional* through its use of transcribed improvisation and a harmonic language built on non-triadic harmonies.

Another contemporary concerto that has similarities to *Seraph* in approach to composition is *L'arbre des songes, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* (1985) by Henri

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3 Arvo Pärt (1935-). For example see compositions such as *Fratres* for Violin and Piano (1980), *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978), *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* for strings and bells (1977-1980), and other compositions.

4 Christos Hatzis (1953-), *Confessional* for Solo Violoncello & Orchestra (1997), Promethean Editions.

Dutilleux.\(^6\) A French composer influenced by such composers as Ravel and Debussy, his music often features impressionistic, non-tonal harmony. Although the harmonic language of \textit{Seraph} is not directly influenced by the compositions of Dutilleux or other composers, the stylistic approach and conception of harmony has a similar aesthetic. This can be seen in comparing the harmonic style of \textit{Seraph} with \textit{L’arbre des Songes}; while chord selection is governed by some principles and intervallic content, it is not a strict system as seen in some kinds of contemporary music. As in the music of Dutilleux, \textit{Seraph}’s approach to harmony is partly intuitive rather than purely systemic. In addition, as Allan Kozinn describes, Dutilleux’s music is “cloaked in a harmonic language that embraces dissonance without making it the point.”\(^7\) The harmonic style of \textit{Seraph} can be described in similar terms. Another less obvious feature in common to \textit{Seraph} is described by Dutilleux, who said of his violin concerto that he “felt incapable of writing a bravura piece.”\(^8\) Both \textit{L’arbre des songes} and \textit{Seraph} feature challenging solo parts, but neither explicitly develops the soloist’s part for virtuosic display at the expense of the orchestral accompaniment.

\(^{6}\) Henri Dutilleux (1916-), \textit{L’Arbre des Songes}, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra For Orchestra, Schott Music (HL.49007396).

\(^{7}\) Alan Kozinn, \textit{In a Retrospective Evening, a Celebration, Too}, The New York Times, June 28, 2012

The harmonic style and use of solo piano in *Prometheus* (1910) by Alexander Scriabin can be identified as another influence on *Seraph.*\(^9\) Interestingly, Scriabin called his work a symphony rather than a concerto, even though it strongly features the piano. Like *Seraph*, the piano solo of *Prometheus* is not intended for virtuosic display as the relationship between piano and orchestra is largely one of partnership rather than of conflict. The late harmonic style of Scriabin is also an influence through his non-triad approach to harmony, although *Seraph* derives harmonies from diatonic scales rather than synthetic scales.

**The Influence of Concerto Design**

*Seraph* can be described as a concerto, but it also possesses features which are not typical of the traditional concerto form. However, these features are also true of many contemporary works, including the violin and cello concertos by Hatzis and Dutilleux already discussed. For example, there is no cadenza section or passages of overtly virtuosic display in *Seraph*. In fact, the piano has no solo sections in the composition at all although it is very sparsely accompanied in the opening measures. Nevertheless, there are also features of a more traditional concerto style; piano and orchestra alternate in dominant and subsidiary roles in the music, as well as equal partnership. Another aesthetic difference from traditional concerto design in *Seraph* is that the music is rarely a “competition” between soloist and orchestra; the piano solo and orchestra work together rather than vying for attention.

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Transcribed Improvisation and its Influence on Compositional Design

Another significant and unusual aesthetic feature of Seraph is the use of transcribed piano improvisation as a basis for the design of the composition. The piano part heard in the opening 35 bars of the composition were recorded and transcribed. This transcribed improvisation serves to influence harmony, motives, and musical textures later in the composition. Aesthetically, it means that the composition is partly a spontaneous creation that is also developed through traditional, non-improvised means.
2 Musical Structure and Form

2.1 Phrase Grouping and Design

Seraph often features melodies of extended length that avoid cadential formulas, although some occasional references to traditional models of phrase design are present.

Example 2.1-1

The scale-motive, seen in example 2.1-1, often lasts longer than 30 seconds. The motive is often developed with continuous textures in the variations and counter melodies are often of similar length in design.

Another notable technique in Seraph is the overlapping of sections and textures. An example of this technique can be observed in examples 2.1-2 and 2.1-3.

Example 2.1-2
Example 2.1-3

The melody shown in example 2.1-2 is presented with clear rhythmic and pitch motives resembling a classical period structure with antecedent and consequent. However, the sense of cadential arrival on D in measure 24 overlaps with a new texture in the piano part, as shown in example 2.1-3.

While rhythmic cadential effects are often avoided in *Seraph*, examples of more typical phrase structures are occasionally found. Consider the opening chords of the piano part, which rhythmically suggests cadence. It develops as a period-like structure containing antecedent (measures 1-4) and consequent (measures 5-8), shown in example 2.1-4.

Example 2.1-4
The antecedent and consequent phrases are closed by a cadential formula involving durational accent and pitch. However, the harmonic language of this phrase is consistent with the style of *Seraph*. For example, the tonic and dominant relationship of the classical antecedent and consequent are not strictly followed as the antecedent ends on the subdominant scale degree instead of the dominant. However, a suggestion of the classical style period is present in the final chord with the tonic scale degree bass line which gives the phrase a sense of harmonic arrival and closure. It should be noted that the final chord of the consequent phrase does not contain a third (i.e. F♯ or F natural), which is a departure from traditional consequent phrase harmony.

Aside from these approaches to phrase structure, *Seraph* employs extended melodic grouping structures which last for entire variations. An example of this is seen in the violin I line from variation nine, shown in example 2.1-5.

**Example 2.1-5**

![Example 2.1-5](image)

Here, the Violin I part decorates the scale-motive in descending motion. The rhythmic design suggests continuous forward motion, although there is some repetition and development in this extended melody. For example, the first three bars are repeated in
measure 205. In measure 208, the melody begins with a similar contour, but in
measure 211, develops with repetitions of the rhythmic figure present in measure 204.
In addition to the continuous forward motion of the melody present in this variation, the
bass line and accompaniment also suggest continuous forward motion through the
similar use of continuous rhythm.

2.2 Variations, Episodes, and the Influence of Passacaglia

The large scale form of Seraph consists of a series of sections which are either
variations or episodes. Variations strongly feature, modify, or develop the main scale-
motive while episodes develop less prominent material such as countermelodies and
function to provide contrast with the variations.

Whereas traditional variation forms often call for sections of proportionate length and
the metamorphosis of individual parameters such as melody, harmony, phrase
structure, rhythm, etc., the variations of Seraph continuously introduce new material in
counterpoint to the original scale-motive. In other words, the scale-motive is often
treated as background material rather than as a traditional melody or theme. This style
of variation is typically associated with passacaglia, although there are also some
differences in Seraph. The scale-motive is initially developed like a passacaglia: it
appears as a bass line that serves as a basis for developing new musical materials.
Unlike the passacaglia, the idea itself is varied in different ways including length,
rhythm, pitch, and register, as the theme is not always present as a bass line following
the initial variations. The passacaglia design is most evident in the opening and first
variations. As would be expected in this style of composition, the scale-motive when it
appears in the bass line undergoes only minor alternations. However, most of the composition does not feature the scale-motive as a bass line, indeed it does not return to this arrangement until the final variations.

Another significant formal feature of Seraph is that the variations and episodes are not always equal in duration as the scale-motive itself undergoes extensions and modifications.

Example 2.2-1

While there are small tempo changes in the composition, Seraph consists of a series of variations and episodes that range from 27 to 100 seconds.
2.3 Variations: Examples and Compositional Technique

Development of the Ascending Scale-Motive

The scale-motive is developed using different techniques including melodic decoration, rhythmic decoration, extension, fragmentation, inversion, as well as contrapuntal devices. The scale-motive undergoes rhythmic and melodic decoration throughout the composition. In the theme section and first three variations, the bass line carries the theme and undergoes only small rhythmic alterations with each statement. In variation four, a fragmented version of the theme is significantly decorated and the register is transferred up to the Violin I section as seen in example 2.3-1.

Example 2.3-1

In this variation lasting 13 measures, the scale-motive has been reduced to only the first five notes (D-E-F-G-A), marked with boxes. This underlying pitch skeleton is decorated with new melodic and rhythmic motives as well as frequent meter changes. The first three notes of the theme (D-E-F) are audibly present due to their metrical position and pitch emphasis throughout the first three bars, although the use of mixed meter generates rhythmic unpredictability. Starting in measure 48, a descending version of motive is also present (A-G-F-E-D) and is marked with dotted slurs. The final D is not shown in the example.
In variation five, shown in example 2.3-2, the theme is extensively decorated in the violin II part with elaborate melodic and rhythmic decorations. The scale-motive is indicated in the example with dotted slurs. In addition, the theme is modified by extension and inversion beginning in bar 64 when C is reached. Instead of continuing to the high D as expected, the line reverses direction and descends as shown with dotted slurs until arriving at D at measure 70. Following this, the decorated theme continues to descend from the high D. Due to the meter changes, rhythmic design, thematic extension, and decoration, the theme is strongly disguised within a contrapuntal texture in this variation (bars 58-70).

Example 2.3-3

In variation nine, the violins decorate an inverted version of the scale-motive with added rhythms and intervals, shown with boxes in example 2.3-3. Later in the variation, the theme is further extended and altered.
Development of Subsidiary Motives

In addition to the scale-motive, characteristic intervals and motives are presented and developed throughout the composition. In the theme and opening variations for example, the intervals of the perfect fifth and perfect fourth are frequently used to generate motives and pianistic textures. The chords of the right hand from the piano part consistently feature the interval of fifths and fourths in the opening of the composition as seen in example 2.1-4. Another example of material based on perfect fifths and perfect fourths is shown in example 2.3-4, where the right hand of the piano part similarly develops these intervals.

Example 2.3-4

In the following variations, these intervals are similarly used to invent textures for the piano part.

Example 2.3-5
In variation six, the perfect fifths and perfect fourths are used to create a rhythmic texture in the piano part, shown in example 2.3-5, that is developed throughout this variation.

In variation nine, the piano part also utilizes the perfect fifth and fourth intervals to develop a fast moving, broken chord texture. A clear example of this can be seen midway through the variation in both hands of the piano part in bar 216 shown in example 2.3-6.

Example 2.3-6

In addition to the perfect fifths and fourths in this texture, a melodically decorated version of the scale-motive in contrary motion is observed in the left hand with alternating half-note and quarter-notes.
2.4 Episodes: Examples and Compositional Technique

Example 2.4-1

Seraph also contains sections called episodes which contrast from variations through the development of secondary motives and approach to harmony. Example 2.4-1 shows episode one, in which some of these compositional approaches are evident. Material from the opening bars of the piano part (see example 2.1-4) appears in the string orchestra, the first restatement of material other than the scale-motive in the composition. In addition, this episode contrasts in harmony with the variations through its destabilization of tonal center as it shifts from a B♭ Lydian scale to an F natural minor scale. While the scale-motive is suggested, the compositional approach observed in this episode contrasts with the variation sections.
Episode three takes two bars of transcribed improvisation from the piano part of variation three (example 2.4-2), and develops it into an entire section of the composition (example 2.4-3). In addition, episode three modulates and functions as a bridge to variation six in the scale of E♭ natural minor. The absence of the ascending scale-motive in this episode results in a contrasting section.
2.5 Notated Piano Improvisation

As has been briefly discussed, the piano part from bars 1 through 35 were improvised and later transcribed to form the theme and opening three variations. In improvising, the intent was to use the ascending scale-motive as a framework for developing harmony, motives, and textures. In addition, the improvisation was planned to increase in rhythmic and textural complexity as it unfolded. The strings parts, composed after the piano part was transcribed, complement the harmonic style and textures of the improvisation. The strings function to accompany the written-out piano improvisation in these opening variations through increasing counterpoint and harmonic density as the music progresses. Only minor changes were made to the transcribed piano part in an attempt to preserve a sense of free improvisation. However, other sections of the work were initially sketched out first, but underwent significant revisions throughout the composing process in response to the improvisation.
3 Harmony

3.1 Harmonic Language: Chords

The theme of *Seraph* is an ascending D natural minor scale, which is also used to develop the harmonic language of the composition. *Apollon Musagète* by Stravinsky is a composition which similarly uses a diatonic scale as a basis for unconventional harmony.\(^\text{10}\)

Importantly, there are some principles behind chord selection in *Seraph*; many of the harmonies are constructed with fourths and fifths instead of thirds and extended with 7ths, 9ths, etc. Some examples of these harmonies, all built over a D bass note, are shown in example 3.1-1.

Example 3.1-1

The eleven harmonies shown are characterized by their variety, as only the Dsus4 and Dm7 chords are reused. The chords also show consistency in intervallic content as well

as pitch collection. For instance, six of these eleven D chords omit F, the chordal “third” that would appear if this music were traditionally tonal. Another intervallic consistency is that many of these chords use the perfect fifth and fourth intervals above the bass. Nine chords contain the perfect fifth interval (A) above the bass, while six chords contain the perfect fourth. In addition, many other intervals are commonly used such as 9ths and 7ths.

An analysis of the structures of chords over bass E in the composition similarly demonstrate the harmonic variety and intervallic construction of chords found in Seraph as shown in in example 3.1-2.

Example 3.1-2

Unlike the chords over D, some of the chords over E contain notes that are foreign to the D natural minor mode. For example, measure 40 contains an E major seventh chord, although it is used in a modulation passage from episode 1. However, some of the E pitches have been altered to E♭ in a few of the D minor variations, resulting in modal mixture. As with the chords over D, chords over the bass note E are similarly diverse; eight of these nine chords are different. In terms of intervals, the perfect fifth is normally unavailable since the mode which possesses a B♭, except where E♭ is the
bass note. Furthermore, the fourth against the bass is contained within four of these nine chords. The use of the third is far more common in these chords with seven out of nine occurrences. Like the chords harmonized over D, these chords demonstrate the frequent use of added intervals such as 7ths and 9ths. A similar analysis of other harmonisations in Seraph also demonstrates a diversity of harmonisations and intervallic similarity of chord constructions.

3.2 Harmonic Language: Chord Progressions

While traditional tonal systems rely on hierarchy where certain scale degrees and harmonies have more importance and function (e.g. tonic and dominant), Seraph treats scale degrees largely as equal in weight and importance. This is partly because the scale-motive itself largely treats each scale degree to be of equal importance.

Although many sections in the music are homophonic, large sections of the composition are polyphonic in texture. For example, the opening bars of the piano improvisation demonstrate a homophonic texture in the composition.

Example 3.2-1
The harmony from the opening measures is shown in example 3.2-1 in a simplified arrangement that demonstrates the voice leading and common tones implied in the progressions. The first three chords share all tones in common except the bass; D chords with the third replaced by a second. In the fourth chord over G, some new pitches are introduced resulting in a G minor ninth chord, but some notes are also common from the previous chords. As this is a simplification of the progressions, these “common tones” are only implied, but it is noteworthy that D and A are common to the majority of these chords. Another observation is that D is only absent over bass C, while A is present in every chord in this passage.

Example 3.2-2

In variation three, the progressions are more triadic in construction in comparison to the opening chords, as shown in example 3.2-2, but the use of common tones over a changing bass line is also observed in the first three measures of this passage.

In variation twelve, the harmonies feature complex constructions further demonstrating the distinctive style of Seraph.
Many of these chords, shown in example 3.2-3, contain five or six individual pitch classes, creating a thick harmonic texture in this passage that can be considered to be the climactic section of the composition.
4 Orchestration

The piano and orchestra relate to each other in different textures and arrangements throughout the composition including melodic decoration, exchanging material, and exchanging subordinate and superior roles.

Melodic Decoration

An example of a melodic decoration is seen in variation six when the piano part increasingly elaborates the violin I melody as shown in example 4.1-1.

Example 4.1-1

The right hand of the piano part increasingly adds rhythmic and melodic decorations to the violin I line, which become increasingly complex as the variation unfolds.


Exchanging Material

An example of exchanging material between the piano and strings can be seen in examples already discussed. For example, the opening piano music as seen in example 2.1-4 is later reinterpreted by the strings in episode one, shown in example 2.4-1.

Exchanging Subordinate and Superior Roles

The piano and strings also exchange subordinate and superior roles throughout the composition. The piano part is most dominant in its role in the opening and ending variations of the composition as seen in examples 2.1-3, 2.1-4, 2.3-6, and elsewhere in the composition.

Example 4.1-2
In contrast, the strings have the superior role in variation eight where the piano is silent and in variation ten, where the piano accompanies the Violin I melody, shown in example 4.1-2.
5 Conclusions

*Seraph’s* overall tonal plan, form, and treatment of the scale-motive is outlined in example 5.1-1. The theme, thirteen variations and five episodes explore contrasting textures and compositional techniques as discussed. As also shown in the example, the scale-motive undergoes significant metamorphosis throughout the composition. The introduction of E♭/D♯ as modal mixture as seen in episode one and variation five results in shifts to scales where this pitch is later emphasized in episode two, three, and variation six. In addition, episode four strongly empahsizes D♯ to the exclusion of D♭ for most of the section, utilizing the pitch collection A-B-C-D♯-E-F-G. Episode five and the final three variations serve to revisit earlier variations with new arrangements and bring the composition to a close.
Bibliography


\[ \text{Vln. II} \]

\[ \text{Vln. I} \]

\[ \text{D.B.} \]

\[ \text{Pno.} \]

\[ q = 132 \]

\[ \text{P} \]

\[ \text{D.B.} \]

\[ \text{Pno.} \]

\[ 141 \]