BEFORE DARK, HOW DISTANT THE PAST

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A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

Elainie Lillios, Advisor

*Before dark, how distant the past* is single-movement orchestral work lasting approximately six minutes. Inspired by “Leaving Aleppo” from poet Peter Balakian’s *Ozone Journal*, this piece reflects on history’s influence on current events and the importance of memory in times of strife.

Cast in a through-composed form, *Before dark* is a programmatic work inspired by imagery in “Leaving Aleppo” with further meditation on *Black Dog of Fate*, Dr. Balakian’s memoirs about his discovery of the Armenian Genocide and his grandmother’s survival of the death marches that ended in Aleppo, Syria. Modern-day Aleppo is plagued with civil war and has received significant international attention for the destruction and displacement of its population. *Before dark, how distant the past* contemplates these conflicts and the implications of their relationship on global history.

The harmonic language of this piece is derived from the spectral analysis of a church bell found in Maaloula, Syria. The bell’s most prominent overtones can be distilled into the hexachord, 6-45[25789B] along with the two quarter tones D quarter-flat and D quarter-sharp. These eight pitches comprise the entirety of the piece’s first half. The composition’s other sections employ the octachord 8-12[25789AB1]. This set contains both 6-45 (the “bell” hexachord) and its z-relation, 6-23 as subsets. Interleaved with the octachordal material is aggressive descending material derived from a tone row resulting from the combination of 6-45 and 6-23; this aggregate expands with the addition of three quarter tones, D quarter-flat, D
quarter-sharp, and E quarter-flat, to form a fifteen-note chord that marks the piece’s climax before a short denouement.

Structurally, *Before dark, how distant the past* draws inspiration from the idea of descent; descending gestures feature prominently in the macro- and micro-scale. The macro-level features a large-scale registral descent; high register opening material stated in the glockenspiel, harp, and piano evolves into the ending’s low marimba and contrabassoon sustains. Between these points, solos in the English horn, bassoon, bass clarinet, and contrabassoon trace a gradual descent into the lowest woodwind registers. Finally, downward runs permeate almost every section, culminating in rapid, overlapping descending patterns in the winds and strings near the end.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**Before dark, how distant the past**
for orchestra

Duration ca. 5 minutes and 30 seconds

**Instrumentation**
3 Flutes (3rd doubling Piccolo)
3 Oboes (3rd doubling English Horn)
3 Clarinets in Bb (3rd doubling Bass Clarinet)
3 Bassoons (3rd doubling Contrabassoon)
4 Horns in F
3 Trumpets in C
3 Trombones
1 Tuba
3 Percussionists
1 Timpanist
Harp
Piano
Strings

**Percussion Instruments**
Percussion 1: Snare Drum, Medium and Low Concert Toms, Glockenspiel, and Vibraphone
Percussion 2: Suspended Cymbal, Tam-Tam, Marimba
Percussion 3: Concert Bass Drum, Triangle, Wind Chimes, Orchestral Chimes
Timpani with large suspended cymbal

**Performance Notes**
Contrabasses are scordatura.

quarter tone flat.

quarter tone sharp.

indicates a gradual glissando while playing the indicated rhythmic values.

highest note possible.

Boxed figures should be repeated without regard for tempo for the indicated measures.
indicates cutoff for boxed figures

indicates scratch tone or overpressure for the stringed instruments.
indicates harmonic pressure on both of the indicated harmonic
nodes on the indicated string. Both fingers should be on the same
string. This should have the effect of a “filtered” harmonic
glissando. It is also important that the molto sul pont. indication be
carefully observed to achieve the desired effect.

Molto sul ponticello should be played as close to the bridge as possible, with the hair of the bow
overlapping the bridge by as much as a quarter inch.

+ ——> @ ——> + indicates a gradual change from stopped or closed to half-stopped (or
closed) and back.

play as quickly as possible

improvise using the indicated pitch classes in any octave.

Bassoon multiphonic, with the pitch content

(This multiphonic is listed as monovalent multiphonic #121 in Jamie Leigh
Sampson’s Contemporary Techniques for the Bassoon: Multiphonics. The
indicated fingering was notated using the Neue Bassoon font; the Neue
Bassoon font was designed by Spoke Designs, Toledo, OH and is available
through ADJ•ective New Music, LLC: www.adjectivenewmusicllc.com.)

indicates air sounds in wind instruments; the indicated pitch should be fingered, and
the performer should blow through the instrument without buzzing the lips or causing
the reed to vibrate.

Program Notes

Before dark, how distant the past was inspired by Armenian-American poet Peter Balakian’s
“Leaving Aleppo” from the collection Ozone Journal, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2016.
Both Balakian’s poem and my piece reflect on the city of Aleppo in Syria, which was the final
destination of many of the death marches of the Armenian Genocide in the early twentieth
century, including the one that Balakian’s grandmother survived. Modern day Aleppo is plagued
by the Syrian Civil War; bombings are rampant, and food is scarce as refugees attempt to flee to
all corners of the world to escape the violence. Before dark, how distant the past reflects on the
brutality the city faces, past and present, and the importance of memory in dark times.
Before dark, how distant the past

for orchestra

J. Andrew Smith
Strangling the air (♩=60)
Clouds of flowers (\(\approx 60\))

Wind Chimes

Play as quickly as possible

senza ped.

Clouds of flowers (\(\approx 60\))

Play as quickly as possible

senza sord.

sempre molto sul pont.

ff

ff

ff
With Muted Intensity $\approx 76$

Blooming $\approx 60$

Agitated $\approx 76$
Frozen blue, ringing (L=60)