

Spring 2017

## Sketches of a Life

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# **Sketches of a Life**

Alexander D. Morris

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# Introduction

Sketches of a Life is an original short work for chamber orchestra by Alexander Morris. It is written for two flutes, oboe, soprano saxophone (can be replaced by a second oboe in any setting), two clarinets in B flat, bassoon, bass clarinet, and strings (preferably two to a part, more per part is acceptable, never one on a part, except for the double bass, as it may become difficult to hear over the winds). This piece was conceived first in 2015, at the time titled ‘Ten Sketches for Orchestra’, under the instruction of Dr. Daniel McCarthy. It was originally meant to be a lengthy work for a large orchestra where the movements were not related, except under a general theme, such as fantasy, outer space, or perhaps nature. For academic and practical reasons, it was decided that a shorter work of a smaller instrumentation would better suit the time constraints of the semester and from there, the general look and feel of the piece, as presented in this project, came to be.

Over time the piece finally came to be in a presentable state, at this point titled ‘Sketches’, and still with no story behind the music. It was read for the first time by the Renova chamber music festival orchestra in June of 2016, which takes place every summer in Pennsylvania. It was here that the story behind the music was first given consideration. Under pressure from the members of the orchestra, as well as the conductor, to talk about the piece, the story that was thought up on the spot was funny, elaborate, and a bit sad.

This work is a humorous musical skit about the life of an unnamed character. Each movement offers a small glimpse into the life of this person at various ages and although the final movement ends by slowing down and getting quieter, the intention was not to portray death but the memories of this person slipping away as they grow old. Therefore, the title ‘Memories’ was

chosen, instead of something along the lines of 'Goodbye' or 'Transformation', which were at one point considered but would have heavily implied the death of the subject.

As it stands today, the first movement, titled 'Rondo' is the only movement not completely about the unnamed character. It depicts the circle of life, hence the name. It implies that more sections, or experiences when compared to someone's life, are added as the movement goes on, but it always comes back to the main theme. The second movement, 'Festival', is a jump into the future. Our unnamed character is working at a festival where one will hear preparations being made before the opening day. The third movement is 'Crisis'. Our subject has a midlife crisis which eventually resolves, but still gives an edge of uncertainty in the last measure. The last is 'Memories', which was described above. The only thing to add is that the movement, though about memories and therefore implying we will hear themes from the past movements, presents completely new material. This is because the character has slipped into dementia and some of their memories, at least the ones depicted here, are not their own.

The piece underwent some instrumentation changes in order to be performed. There were limited rehearsal dates that conflicted with many of the string performers' schedules, so it was decided to replace most of the strings with low brass. Double bass was replaced with tuba, cello with euphonium, and viola with horn. The violin part was kept, but was reduced to only one part, taking the best of both parts and condensing it down to one. This led to some balance issues where the brass overpowered the woodwinds at times. Had there been more time before the performance, some recomposition would have fixed this issue. It was finally performed on March 11, 2017, conducted by the composer himself.

In the analysis section of this paper, more will be discussed on the composer's intentions with respect to each movement, as well as a theoretical analysis.

## **The Main Goal of This Project**

This project serves as a learning experience for composer, performer, and listener. Writing a piece is easy with today's notation software. Having it performed is another matter. Without extensive knowledge of every instrument, or in depth collaboration with each instrumentalist while the composing process is still taking place, it is challenging to write a work that is idiomatic and balanced. While still enrolled at a university with all of the resources available, and free, it would be foolish to waste the opportunity to compose and perform a larger work to really push the boundaries of what has been written so far in a student's career. While not technically demanding, or experimental by any means, Sketches of a Life shows a student's first attempt at a larger work, bringing together so many instruments to create one cohesive sound. During the process, the success of various aspects may be assessed. Ranges, techniques, and idiomatic ideas for each instrument are learned, solidified, and implemented. An invaluable skill has been learned and practiced: Organizing a large group of performers, all of whom have very busy schedules of their own, find rehearsal times that work for all, and get the piece into presentable condition with limited rehearsals. This is often the only way a new composer will be able to get such a large work performed, especially with such an odd instrumentation (or at least an instrumentation that isn't used for the average ensemble which rehearses and performs regularly).

Next, the performers have a lot to gain from performing a brand-new piece of music from an unfamiliar composer. The harmonic language may be new to their ears and there may be musical devices not often seen before. When performing traditional composers, such as Mozart, Beethoven, or Hovhaness, one has the advantage of knowing what to expect. A new piece by a

new composer should sound like nothing they've heard before and the performers will have a new musical signature to commit to memory.

Most of what a performer can gain from this experience applies to the listener as well. As a composer, one should want as many people to hear one's music as possible. The more people who like hear it and like it, the higher the chance that someone will share it, or at least the composer's name, with more people. More and more people learn about the composer and become familiar with his or her works and general style until the composer is well known, at least in the area. From the composer's perspective, this is similar to planting multiple seeds and hoping as many grow as possible. As a society, we have a standard repertoire of music that is determined by the tastes of the listeners. The listeners choose what to immortalize into their culture.

## **Setting the Scene (Parameters)**

The music for *Sketches of a Life* was composed with Finale computer notation software. It was written intermittently over the course of 2 years. A semester and a half was used to polish it, print the parts, find performers, rehearse, and perform it. The ensemble was comprised of students from the University of Akron. The piece needed to be conducted, and considering time constraints, the student decided to conduct the piece himself. It would also be easier, given the limited number of rehearsals, to have a conductor who already knew the piece well, because, in this case, he composed it.

## Analysis of the Work

The first movement is a rondo. The form is A-B-A-C-A'. It is largely pandiatonic in the key of C major, with some chromaticism in the B section. It is in common time and marked at quarter note = 120. The recurring A section presents the following motive in figure a.



Figure a



Figure b

The motive is not played by a single instrument, but is dispensed amongst the winds, each holding a pitch, creating an A minor seventh chord (figure b).

The B section (measure 8) starts with a canon of duets, beginning with flutes and followed by oboe and soprano sax then clarinets and finally violins. The canon begins in C major pandiatonic but introduces chromaticism when the melody is manipulated in different ways. There is a short episode of low voices (measure 16), with particular emphasis on beats one and three. This episode contains no melody, but a motive that undulates from open fourths and fifths to thirds. The duet canon returns (measure 20) highly modified but not unrecognizable, and the undulating continues in other

instruments. Once the main melody dies away (measure 23), we are again left with the same episodic material which leads into a final appearance of the melody (measure 31). This time, much more chromaticism is introduced. Clarinets have a descending second inversion C sharp diminished triad (measure 26). The melody is most evident in the low voices, oboe/sax, and violin, who present its modified form in descending figures. Flutes pick up the figure the clarinets had

(measure 31) but it's inverted and uses a D diminished triad. The flutes lead into a short transition in the brass, violin, bassoon, and bass clarinet which takes us back to the A section, which repeats identical to the first time.



*Figure c*

This B section is, in itself, a rondo with the form A-B-A'-B''-A''-C. With the A and B sections dove tailing with each other.

The C section (measure 46) takes the main theme of the rondo and presents it quite plainly in pizzicato violin and staccato flute. It begins with a conversation between bassoon and bass clarinet (figure c), accompanied by the brass. Imagining the brass as the intended strings, which would be pizzicato, gives a much different feel than what was performed, allowing the bassoon/bass clarinet conversation to be more easily heard. Before this ends, violin and flute present the main rondo theme a few times (beginning measure 48) and the bassoon/bass clarinet build up to a definite musical period (measure 52), though the following material is the same. Other instruments pick up the conversational material and continue with punctuations of the rondo melody. This builds up and more instruments are added until the whole ensemble is playing, leading directly into the final A section (measure 60) which is now modified and sequences the third measure up a step twice. The final chord, C major, is built from the top down, beginning with flute and adding the other instruments every eighth note. There are two final punctuations by bass clarinet, bassoon, horn, euphonium, and tuba.



orchestrated lightly, usually only three to five instruments playing at a time. Towards the end there is a duet in the clarinets and a duet between horn and euphonium that happen simultaneously (beginning measure 28). The pitch material changes here to a G Lydian mode. It serves only to give the ear a break from the modified octatonic scale used previously, as it's coming back in the A' section. The duets lead into a 5/4 measure (also used to break up the monotony of 4/4 measures that have led up to this point, including the first movement), where the flute leads the listener into the A' section (measure 33). The main melody is very clear and there are ostinatos in the low voices. The festival has begun, people are flooding in. This goes on, not as long as the original A section, and is cut short by the coda (measure 42). There is no transition. In the score, it is to continue straight into the coda, however, in the performance it was performed with a break. The material here is unrelated but does not constitute a new section, it's only five measures long. The oboe restates the main melody (measure 47), modified just a bit at the very end. The festival is over.

The third movement is called 'Crisis'. It's in binary form, A-B. It features two very distinct sections that share little material and depict the crisis, section A, and the character working towards a solution, section B.

Section A, the crisis itself, is highly chromatic, featuring secundal harmonies in two main ideas. The first idea is pairs of instruments working together to create different motives. The second idea is the whole ensemble clashing together in polymetric sections.

Figure e (above)

Figure f (above) Figure g (below)

consonant harmonies instead of the dissonance heard before. There is a string of sixteenth notes that begin in the violins in measure 27 (figure g), also like a recurring idea in the A section. It works its way in and out of the different instruments. It remains unbroken for 11 measures. After that, it continues every other beat. There is a climactic moment when all voices are accenting

The movement begins with a bold statement from flute and oboe (figure e) which outline an F sharp major triad and a C major triad respectively. Though both are major chords, the first and third notes played of each beat form minor seconds and the second notes form a tritone, which sets the tone for the rest of the A section. This is followed by three cluster chords from the rest of the ensemble (measure 2). The following measures are just a back and forth of pairs of instruments and the whole ensemble giving polymetric feel (figure f). The quarter note voices are in the marked meter. The eighth note voices are putting emphasis on beat one and the second subdivision of beat two, giving a feeling of a 6/8 meter. The A section leads into the B section with descending figures in all instruments while also getting quieter.

The B section (measure 24) begins with a figure similar to what the flute and oboe had at the beginning. This new idea is either alone, or, when with another voice, creates pleasant,

eighth notes (measure 51). This is where the crisis and solution come to a head. A line in the flute comes in halfway through this ‘argument’ (measure 55) and is based on the sixteenth note passage from the beginning of this section. The B section material comes back at a mezzo piano dynamic after the whole ensemble builds up to a fortissimo but never resolves. There is a short codetta (measure 64) which contains the same back and forth buildup seen a few measures earlier and ends exactly how it began, this time with the c major triad in clarinet.

There’s no melody in the third movement, it’s all motivic. The closest thing to a melody is the flute passage in measures 55 – 58, but it’s only stated once.

The final movement is titled ‘Memories’. As described in the introduction, it’s not about the death of the character, but their descent into dementia. The memories being portrayed here are blurred together and not anything we’ve heard in the past movements. Dementia can cause people to remember things that didn’t actually happen to them. This is what’s being shown here. There is only one section of music here, which makes worth noting the fact that each movement’s form gets smaller. The first movement is A-B-A-C-A, second is A-B-A, third, A-B, and lastly, A.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Flute 1, Flute 2, Oboe, and Clarinet in Bb 1. The score is in 4/4 time and features a dynamic marking of *p* (piano). The Flute 1 part has a melodic line with a slur over the first two measures. The other instruments play sustained notes or chords.

Figure h

The opening statement (figure h) is new material but the same musical device used at the start of the first movement is used again. There is a definite motive, and it is played in its entirety by the flute, but other instruments play just part of it and hold onto their last note, creating an e flat major triad with an added fourth (a-flat), or, simply, a cluster chord. The overall feel of this movement is ethereal, floating through a mass of

notes. It is quite metric, and again is pandiatonic to c, sometimes c minor, but it doesn't sound minor until the final measures.

Again, there is a lack of melody, just motives that don't often repeat. Clarinet is meant to be the main voice after the first fermata (measure 5). Its line is picked up by soprano sax and violin (measure 7), each taking it in a different direction like a choose your own adventure, but with music. The climax of the movement comes at the beginning of measure 9 (it's a short movement). From here, it's downhill, quite literally. There are descending triplet figures in bassoon and euphonium against prominent eighth notes in the horn, creating a polyrhythmic feel (measure 10). This is supposed to signify the different memories getting jumbled together, mixing past with present. There is a final ascent showing how people with dementia can be completely disoriented one day and of the right mind the next. Then a definite drop-off in flute, clarinets (measure 18). The pitch material becomes more chromatic. There's a short duet between the violins. The low voices pick up an ostinato that descends chromatically and continues on, getting quieter and quieter, until the movement is over.

## Conclusion

Overall, this project has been a learning experience in far more than just the composition of music. Time management is important, but sometimes the time available is taken for granted. Getting this piece out onto paper and performed reaffirmed just how important it is to manage one's time, and do so far in advance of when events will begin taking place.

Invaluable compositional techniques, do's and don'ts, and an overall approach to new music in the future have been acquired. Talking with the performers and learning what they have to say about the way the music has been written, what works well for their instrument, what doesn't, even what they personally like and dislike about how the music sounds, is a great insight on how to approach future compositions.

Also, studying one's own piece this much is eye opening. Things are discovered that were not intentional while the composing was taken place, but they are there nonetheless. Noting what these are and why they worked will, if they did, will serve new works better.

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## **Alex Morris** Composition Recital

Like, half the school is playing  
on it anyway but you  
should come.

Flute ensemble, Bassoonaroo, Roo Reeds,  
and a mini band. There's gonna be tacos.

Five, actually.

Saturday. March 11<sup>th</sup>, 3pm

Appendix 2 – Program from the recital

*The University of Akron Buchtel College of Arts and Sciences  
School of Music presents*

***Alex Morris - Senior Composition Recital***

**Into the Sun**

- I Fast
- II Slow
- III Moderate
- IV Broad

Cody Ray, Trumpet  
Jason Klinect, Horn  
Andrew Wegierski, Trombone  
Alex Showers, Euphonium

**Sketches of a Life**

- I Rondo
- II Festival
- III Crisis
- IV Memories

Melanie Stoll and Allison Zuk, Flute  
Zach Abbey, Oboe  
Ephraim Miller, Soprano Sax  
Tyler Ferguson and Bethany Stone, Clarinet  
Anthony Fimongnari, Bass Clarinet  
Hailey Coffman, Bassoon  
Daniella Greene, Violin  
Jason Klinect, Horn  
Alex Showers, Euphonium  
Stephanie Lumpkin, Tuba

**Flatline**

*The Five Tacos:*  
Eden Dunning, Flute  
Zach Abbey, Oboe  
Tyler Ferguson, Clarinet  
Will Drayer, Bassoon  
Alexis Trout, Horn

***Intermission***

Overture

*UA Flute Choir:*

Allison Zuk, Brandon Waller, Erin Latham,  
Gina Lanese, Lianna Bartlett, Gillian Straight,  
Gentry Tidwell, Jamilynn Miller, Melanie Stoll

Silence of the Angry  
Woodsticks

*UA Bassoonaroo:*

Jacob Steiner, Will Drayer, Hailey Coffman,  
Coltan Foster, Carolyn Hupalowsky, Bridget  
Davey

Introductions and  
Allegro  
(Trashcans)

*Roo Reeds:*

Andrew Gresham, Oboe  
Eric Olmos, Clarinet  
Sarah Miracle, Alto Saxophone  
Patrick Hickey, Bass Clarinet  
Carolyn Hupalowsky, Bassoon

3:00 p. m.

Saturday, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Guzzetta Recital Hall

*This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Music in Composition*