A Candle in the Dark - Concerto for Clarinet and Wind Ensemble

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A CANDLE IN THE DARK
CONCERTO FOR CLARINET AND WIND ENSEMBLE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Music and Dance

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Jason McChristian

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A CANDLE IN THE DARK
CONCERTO FOR CLARINET AND WIND ENSEMBLE

by

Jason McChristian

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC AND DANCE

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2012

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Dr. Brian Belet  SCHOOL OF MUSIC AND DANCE

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ABSTRACT

A CANDLE IN THE DARK
CONCERTO FOR CLARINET AND WIND ENSEMBLE

By Jason McChristian

A Candle in the Dark – Concerto for Clarinet and Wind Ensemble is cast in three movements. The work is an exploration of the qualities of the concerto form with its inherent narrative of the single solo protagonist and its dialogue with a larger ensemble. In particular, I was interested in discovering the virtuoso capabilities in the agility and expressiveness of the solo clarinet and, in general, exploring the possibilities of the wind ensemble. The title, added after the composition was finished, quotes Carl Sagan’s description of the use of reason and skepticism in a world preoccupied with superstition, with the solo clarinet representing the solitary candle. The material found in the first movement of the work is organized as a theme and variations built on a main theme of leaping ninths, and a sonority called the “progenitor” chord, variants of which appear in each movement and represent the “dark” referenced in the title. The second movement is cast in two major sections, a combination of fast interweaving lines and lilting dance-like themes and a gentle lullaby, built upon a second variant of the “progenitor” chord and a melodic cell called the “chromatic turn.” The final movement states a third variant of the “progenitor” chord and is constructed as the developmental revelation of a new syncopated theme amid joyous fanfares in a celebratory atmosphere that brings the work to a triumphant conclusion.
DECDICATION

This work is dedicated to

Dr. Pablo Furman, whose instruction over the years will forever influence my compositions.

Dr. Brian Belet, for showing me that, above all, if it sounds good, then it’s right.

Dr. Gordon Haramaki, who has taught me to challenge the conventional but, at times, to embrace it.
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INTRODUCTION

A Candle in the Dark—Concerto for Clarinet and Wind Ensemble is cast in three movements, the total duration lasting approximately twenty-four minutes. Each movement is part of a larger musical narrative, although the work is not specifically programmatic. Much of the musical material found in the work is derived from the main theme as well as a particular sonority called the “progenitor” chord. I used this sonority and the thematic material generated from the main theme to create overall cohesion among each of the separate movements. Movement I—A Candle in the Dark depicts a struggle, one that ends unresolved and is marked by a final visceral scream of the clarinet and orchestra. Recoiling from the earlier aggression, Movement II—Scintillating Magic, begins with soft bell-tolls to create a reclusive and withdrawn mood. The music slithers and dances but cannot shake the terrifying experience of the first movement. After a short cadenza, a lullaby ensues, and the movement concludes peacefully into the final movement. Movement III—A Filament Within begins with some of the tension found in the first movement but quickly rebounds, exposing joyful relief and triumph.

Movement I—A Candle in the Dark

Movement I is constructed of material generated from a main theme. The first three measures of this theme are developed more frequently than other parts of the theme. This motif (Ex. 1) announces the first and last main sections of the movement. The main theme is easily recognized with its angular profile.
Example 1: Main theme, movement I, mm. 2-4.

The sonority I call the “progenitor” chord, found throughout the work, is first heard sounded by the low brass in measure 6 (Ex. 2). As a result of the cluster of 2nds, this brooding sonority represents the “dark” referenced in the title of this piece.

Example 2: “Progenitor” chord, movement I.

Movement II—Scintillating Magic

Movement II also begins with the progenitor chord, sounded by the pitched percussion (Ex. 3), though it now lacks a D and is stacked in different voicing. The alteration of the progenitor chord of the first movement through the omission of a pitch, inversion, and change of timbre, gives the progenitor chord a new identity. This new inversion results in a brighter, more vibrant sonority.

Example 3: Progenitor Chord, Movement II.
The important motivic element of this movement is what I call the “Chromatic Turn” (Ex. 4). This figure is defined by alternating major and minor 2nds. This chromatic turn is used as a motif and allows for an easy change of key.

Example 4: “Chromatic Turn” variants, movement II.

As seen in Example 5, the chromatic turn creates harmonic instability, as none of its pitches appears to be foremost in a hierarchy. Although the chromatic turn is prominently used in this movement, hints of it can also be found in the outer movements.

Example 5: “Chromatic Turn” flourishes in flute and solo clarinet, movement II, mm. 10-13.

Movement III—A Filament Within

Movement III—A Filament Within begins with a variant of the “Progenitor” chord, presented in the bass clarinet, bassoon, euphonium, tuba, and string bass. (Ex. 6)
Example 6: Movement III variant of the “Progenitor” chord.

\[ \text{Example 6} \]

This voicing results in the “dark” timbre from the first movement, while the octave E flat creates a new tonic.

One important element of the third movement is that the main theme is not presented in full form at the outset. Instead, the theme is implied through iterations of the individual cells that will finally make up the theme. The solo clarinet line (m. 15) includes material suggestive of the elements of the main theme of the third movement.

Example 7: Hints of main theme in solo clarinet, movement III, mm. 15-22.

\[ \text{Example 7} \]

Measure 23 reveals a near-complete version of the main theme, but it is treated as a Klangfarbenmelodie between the solo clarinet, piccolo, flutes, and oboes distorting the theme’s identity. The main theme is truly presented in its final form in measure 33 (Ex. 8). In the following examples the “chromatic turn” is found near the end of each phrase.

Example 8: Entire main theme in solo clarinet, movement III, mm. 33-37.

\[ \text{Example 8} \]
While I conceived an idea of the narrative early in the composing process, I did not decide on the title and the subtitles until after the piece was completed. These phrases come from my interest in science and skepticism, an inspiration for many of my compositions. One of my favorite writers on these subjects is Carl Sagan who used the phrase “a candle in the dark” to describe the use of reason and skepticism in a world preoccupied with superstition and the paranormal. In my composition, the solo clarinet often represents this solitary candle, at times a faint dot of glowing ember, at times fully ablaze.
I. *A Candle in the Dark*

II. *Scintillating Magic*

III. *A Filament Within*

**Instrumentation**

Solo B♭ Clarinet
Piccolo
Flutes 1,2
Oboes 1,2
B♭ Clarinets 1,2
B♭ Bass Clarinet
Alto Saxophones 1,2
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone
Bassoon
Horns 1-4
B♭ Trumpets 1,2,3
Trombones 1,2
Bass Trombone
Euphonium
Tuba
Timpani (4)
Percussion 1
Snare Drum, Bongos (2), Anvil, Wind Chimes
Percussion 2
Bass Drum, Triangle, Wood Block
Percussion 3
Crash Cymbals, Suspended Cymbals, Xylophone, Glockenspiel
Percussion 4
Chimes, Tambourine, Tam-tam, Congas (2)
Percussion 5
Marimba, Slapstick
Percussion 6
Vibraphone, Crotales
Piano
String Bass
A Candle in the Dark
Concerto for Clarinet and Wind Ensemble

Jason McChristian
(2011)
Suddenly slower $\dot{=} 72$  molto accel.

Whimsical $\dot{=} 132$
*Repeat these pitches in the order given at a fast speed (roughly 4-6 notes per beat).*
II. Scintillating Magic
III. A Filament Within

Tumultuous \( \frac{3}{4} \) 138-144

*Repeat these gestures, stay close to the rhythmic given. Breathe when needed. Avoid synchronization.*
\[ \frac{3}{4} = 132-144 \frac{3}{4} \]\n
Floating