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RICE UNIVERSITY

Oculus
for chamber orchestra

by

Drew Baker

A THESIS SUBMITTED
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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

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“Oculus” is comprised of a single movement for chamber orchestra. The title refers to the circular opening at the top of a domed structure such as the Pantheon in Rome. An oculus allows natural light to flow freely in and out of a dome. The expansion and contraction of light can dramatically alter the overall appearance and mood of a space. I attempted to create a musical atmosphere where the sound is expanding and contracting on a variety of levels.

Fluctuation occurs initially through the use of orchestration. The piece begins with various instruments fading in and out on a unison B natural. This results in the subtle manipulation of the overall timbre. Following the introduction, a few simple motives appear in the percussion, harp and piano. These ideas provide the harmonic basis for the entire work. Generally speaking, “Oculus” is based on the octatonic scale.

The stasis of the opening gives way to a more regular harmonic rhythm. The initial motives are transformed into a steady oscillating texture that begins in the strings. The pitch content and instrumental forces become increasingly dense leading up to the first climax. Once the sound recedes, a repeating motive begins on the pitches B flat and C. Initially, the rhythmic setting of the motive is somewhat irregular. Over the course of this section, however, the rhythm becomes steadier and expands along with the instrumentation. Eventually, the oscillating texture returns in the winds and percussion. After a final climax, the piece slowly makes its way back to the opening B natural.

The harmonies, rhythms, and timbres that define this work undergo constant manipulation. Expansion and contraction occur within the individual phrases as well as in the overall structure. While the materials are simple, the ever-changing texture provides definition and contrast.
Slightly faster $d = 70$
Fl.
Ob.
Cl.
Bsn.
Hr.
Trp.
Tmb.

Perc. 1
Perc. 2

Harp
Piano

1st Vln.
2nd Vln.
Vla.
Va.
Db.
72 with increasing intensity

Poco accel.