Musical Arrangement of Robert W. Smith's Divine Comedy Movement IV. "The Ascension" for Brass Ensemble and Piano
by

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Musical Arrangement of Robert W. Smith's Divine Comedy Movement IV. "The Ascension" for Brass Ensemble and Piano

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#### Abstract

I have arranged the fourth movement of Robert W. Smith's Divine Comedy Suite, "The Ascension," for an ensemble consisting of Bb trumpet, F horn, tenor trombone, euphonium, tuba, and piano. I spent the fall semester and winter break of 2018 writing the arrangement while consulting with Professor Charles Allen Kenny and Dr. David Loucky for instrumentation and editing feedback. The beginning of the spring semester I spent dedicated to organizing the ensemble and rehearsal dates, as there was not an established MTSU brass ensemble at the time. I led several rehearsal throughout February, including a dress rehearsal the day of the performance. "The Ascension" for Brass Ensemble and Piano was premiered on February 24 ${ }^{\text {th }}, 2019$ with the help of Professor Angela DeBoer, Professor of Horn and organizer for the concert on which this was performed.


## Table of Contents

I. Background Information and Interest 5
II. Methodology 8
III. Rehearsal Reflections and Edits 12
IV. Conducting Technique 14
V. References 17
VI. Full Score and Parts - "The Ascension" 18

## I. Background Information and Interest

I have been studying and performing works by Robert W. Smith since some of my first concerts in middle school beginning band. As a young student, I always looked forward to his compositions for their thematic interest and the even distribution of melody to all voices in the ensemble. I had no classical music background before picking up the euphonium, and since my instrument was not part of a standard orchestra, my only exposure to musical literature was through my school band programs. For better or worse, band music was the entire world of music to me for years.

As I began pursuing music education as a career, I was able to articulate a deeper reason why Robert W. Smith's music stuck with me for so long even as I studied the great classic symphonies played by orchestras of Beethoven's and Stravinsky's time. Band music has been considered a lower form of art compared to the orchestra, reserved for military marches at best and beginning bands of children who were most suited to playing variations of nursery songs and crowd-pleasing pop tunes at worst. As a euphonium player, my musical opportunities were limited to the wind ensemble, and I experienced the pressure of performing high-quality art music with the limited library of high-quality band music. Smith wrote music that was accessible to students like me, whose entirety of musical experience came from band. My personal music education philosophy is to engage the students in any way they can find joy and confidence in order to develop their connection with music, and Smith's body of work ranging from sixth grade beginner band to high school wind ensemble lends itself well to my method of teaching. I believe that the
teaching of core musical concepts can be done from any material, and the material chosen must develop the student's ear slowly over time in order to grow with their own maturity.

I first played this specific piece in high school marching band, once in my ninth grade year and again as a senior. Both times I was engrossed with the beauty of the piece built with such simplistic themes. As I studied it more and more in this last year, I was able to appreciate how simple concepts of form and color could be woven into such a complex-sounding composition, making it a perfect transition piece for young bands to apply their fundamental skills into a more substantial performance.

The connection to Dante Alighieri's epic poem, The Divine Comedy, was also of high interest to me, as all four of the movements in Smith's suite are representative of stages in the poem. Movement I. "Inferno" is directly related to the first volume of the epic, depicting Dante's lost soul through a lone oboe solo, soon swallowed up by brass and percussion as he tours Hell. Movement II. "Purgatorio" follows the volume of the same name, and is characterized by a relentless rhythmic background representing the perseverance of penitent souls in Purgatory. The final volume is told in Movement IV. "Paradiso," where Dante is led into Heaven. Between the second and third volumes, Robert W. Smith adds Movement III. "The Ascension" to represent Dante's experience being flung up to Heaven. In the poem, Dante is amazed that a mortal soul such as his could ever be lifted to such extremes, told through the transformation of the opening chorale and fluttering accompaniment to the triumphant fanfare call and fast-riding finale.

From the score's program notes: "'The Ascension' is the third of four movements in The Divine Comedy. The movement begins with Dante on the Mountain of Purgatory. Having been instructed and purified in Purgatory, he is prepared for his journey to paradise. Beatrice, his guide, lifts her eyes toward the sun. Following her example, Dante looks to the sun and is at the moment transformed ('trans-humanized') in preparation for his great adventure. He is surprised to discover wonderful music, the music of the spheres, surrounding them. Swifter than thought, their flight of incredible speed begins. Dante and Beatrice, accompanied by sounds of wondrous beautify and intensity, ascend to the Sphere of Fire."

## II. Methodology

The first step to my project was obtaining permission from the publisher of Robert W. Smith's work in order to arrange, print, and perform the piece. The process was a bit longer and more complicated than expected, since Smith has had his music published by both C.L. Barnhouse and Alfred Music. I had purchased my score from a website that listed the former as the publisher, but when I contacted them I was told that the specific product had been transferred to the latter. Once I was able to contact the correct company, I waited two weeks for my official form to come. With legality out of the way, I was free to contact my preferred players to create my ensemble. I worked my way down from the Wind Ensemble into the Symphonic Band roster for the semester to ensure I had an ensemble that could be trusted to work on their parts at home. This would leave my rehearsal time open for experimentation with conducting, phrasing, and part editing as needed.

My focus for this arrangement came from an idea of conical vs. cylindrical instruments. Cylindrical brass, such as the trumpet and trombone, are made mostly of straight same-sized tubing that comes to an abrupt flare at the end and produce a brighter sound. Conical brass instruments, on the other hand, expand in tubing gradually across the entire length, such as horns, euphoniums, and tubas, have a characteristically more mellow sound that I wished to use to imitate the woodwind tones from the original piece. A main component in this piece is the tonal shift between brass and woodwinds, often repeating each other's phrases and building off of one another into climaxes. I translated this tonal contrast to fit the characteristics of brass tubing size families. Examples of this can be seen in recall to
the opening chorale in measure 97. The opening quartet is played in its original form by two trumpets, a horn, and a euphonium. The original score as this quartet replayed in measure 97 by a woodwind ensemble; my arrangement substitutes the woodwind tone for that of two horns and two euphoniums.

Another consideration I had during the arranging process was the physical limitations of brass instruments in dexterity as opposed to their woodwind counterparts. Much of the original score dictates fanfares to brass while woodwinds play soaring lines of triplets, something that would be nearly impossible for a trombone or tuba to accomplish. My decision here was to dictate highly acrobatic sections of music to the trumpets and euphoniums, both instruments with valve systems rather than the slide of a trombone, and both with quicker response time than the horn or the tuba. This can be seen in the euphonium line of measure 40, which is originally played by flute and oboe. By limiting it to one player, not only was I able to thin the texture to contrast with fuller climaxes in the arrangement, but it also was easier for one player to line up all of their quick notes.

There was also the problem of the smaller ensemble size, where in a larger ensemble multiple players could read the same part and support each other in order to take breaks and breathe. My ensemble was one to a part, and so it had to be assumed that each part could be played all the way through by one person. I was able to maneuver this by splitting one long melodic line into two interlocking parts, as seen in measure 28. The ascending triplet line is original scored for several woodwind parts at once, likely for ease of breathing while keeping the line continuous. To replicate this on a small ensemble scale, I divided the single line into
two euphonium lines where one player is able to rest while the other plays in that spot. The result is difficult to time correctly, but with focus and player-to-player sensitivities to blending, it creates the illusion of one single never-ending euphonium line.

The decision to add a piano part came about from a number of concerns during the arranging process. One of which was the dexterity concern for brass instruments, considering the delicate nature of some of the moving parts. Measure 11, for example, has a sextuplet pattern that continues in the woodwinds but at a very quiet dynamic. A brass player at this dynamic would find it very difficult to maintain a smooth sound for such a long time, leading into the other problem of breathe support and sustaining. I was able to take both of these into the piano part, which not only could be played indefinitely at high speeds, but could also add another color to the tone of the ensemble.

The piano part at the beginning is taken directly from the original score, which featured a piano part within the percussion section. This inspired me to dive into the percussive aspects of piano, and for the rest of the piece I utilized this to cover percussion parts that would otherwise be unfit for brass players. This is seen in measure 22 , where the piano plays a steady rhythm on the right hand that takes the place of a timpani part. Using the piano as the percussion section was helpful in measure 36 as well, where the impact notes of the piano left hand are able to give a more clear attack to the bassline notes in the second tuba.

Another method that I used to help designate part assignments was my knowledge of the players I intended to have on each part. I chose to arrange my piece for brass ensemble not only because I am most familiar with the tonalities, ranges, and limitations of brass instruments, but also because I am most familiar with the individuals within the brass studios.

## III. Rehearsal Reflections and Edits

By far the hardest part of completing this project was organizing rehearsal time. I was unable to set a rehearsal time in stone because I had no players to offer time schedules, so when I contacted my musicians I could only give tentative dates for them to consider. Often, once I had a full ensemble enlisted, I would offer a rehearsal time and realize that nearly half the ensemble was unable to attend. At this point I had to consider either changing personnel or changing the rehearsal time, which was difficult because of my own crowded schedule. I spent a lot of time anxious about making the process as comfortable for the players as possible, since this was a volunteer ensemble, but there came a point where the only reasonable time to meet was 9pm Tuesdays nights. I was overjoyed when everyone agreed to meet! I ended up with an all-male ensemble without noticing, and it actually was a very nice touch to the sing/chant part at measure 88 to have all voices in the same range.

The first rehearsal was nerve-wracking for me, as even with teaching experience it is always most difficult to rehearse your peers. There were times it was difficult to keep the entire group on task, especially considering the late meeting time, as everyone was already tired by the day of classes and other ensemble rehearsals. We were able to pull through, however, and with more time came more familiarity with the piece, both for me and for the ensemble. Our rehearsals took place in a music building classroom, so we only had access to a standing piano rather than the grand used in performances. This led to some balance issues within the ensemble, and rehearsal time had to be reserved in order
to communicate the role of piano in the work. Often the piano parts could not be heard from behind the heads of the brass players, and an exercise I utilized was having the brass players sing their parts while the piano played along. The piano was also helpful when rehearsing the chant part at measure 88. I was able to have the pianist read and play from the score both choral parts so the brass players could internalize their pitches while they listened and sang along.

One of the edits that had to be made during rehearsal had to do with the logistics of only having one player per part. In the original score, measure 40 begins a trumpet solo with Harmon mute, which changes to full trumpet section at measure 48 without mute. With a full ensemble, only the soloist would have to use the mute, so the rest of the section could enter in time while the soloist removes the mute. However, in this small ensemble setting, the first trumpet was required to play the solo muted and then only a beat and a half later continue the line without mute in measure 48. This mute change was extraordinary quick, and wasn't consistently attainable by the first trumpet player. To make up for this, we decided to omit the last note in the trumpet solo so that the performer could use all three beats of the measure to remove the mute and set for the next line in the music. The trumpet soloist ends on a tonic note in measure 47 that is doubled in other parts, and the music swells with the addition of second trumpet, first and second trombone, and second euphonium. The increased volume due to the addition of multiple voices was enough to disguise the faded end of the trumpet solo, so even with the final not omitted the music did not feel incomplete.

## IV. Conducting Technique

Conducting is a highly personal and communicative skill that I was nervous to display in front of my peers, especially since many of them had taken the same conducting method classes with me. I was lucky to have my late-night setup after all, as I was able to watch my own conducting from a reflection in the window! I made sure to establish all the standards of conducting that we had been taught: confident posture, low stand out of the way, symmetrical hand height, and steady baton acting as an extension of my arm. All of this was just preparation and setup however, and being able to communicate effectively through gesture while also keeping the ears open for critique was quite difficult.

Almost immediately I realized that some of the ideas I had before rehearsal would not work out in the real ensemble. For example, my intention for the beginning quartet was not to conduct, and rather let the players interact with each other as if in a chamber setting. This didn't work out, though, due to the arch form of the ensemble's placement; the euphonium player on stage right could not make eye contact with the horn and trumpet players on stage left. The idea was quickly scrapped, and I instead opted to give very gentle beat and gesture during this passage.

One of the recurring challenges with conducting this piece was negotiating how to cue each tempo change. Measure 22 begins the first change in mood and tempo and is presented with a two-measure long chord held in all the brass. Often I would forget that the piano enters in the second measure, since the ensemble
decrescendos and the horns do not enter until the third measure with their riding rhythm. I was able to take some strategies from my Conducting II class and mark large cues in colored pen across the score to remind me. The preferred method for marking cues in a score is in a long slanting line that physically draws the eye from the top of the score down to the part in which the cue is needed.

I also experimented with conducting different time signatures over what was written. Measure 36 begins a section in $3 / 4$ time, but the written bass line notes are placed three eighth notes apart rather than the two eighth note division that would be expected of the time signature. The meter of $3 / 4$ time is a simple triple meter; simple meaning that each beat is divided into two notes, and triple meaning that each measure has three beats. The recurring rhythm in this section, however, was more reminiscent of a compound duple meter; compound meaning that each beat is divided into three notes, and duple meaning that each measure has two beats. So even though the written music was notated in $3 / 4$, the music as it sounds was felt in 6/8. My job as the conductor is to portray the music physically in a way that encourages the players to perform with the intent of the music, not necessarily the notation of the music, so I made the decision to conduct the $3 / 4$ passage in $6 / 8$ instead. This change was accomplished smoothly for the most part. One problem that we encountered was rhythm in measure 43 for the first trumpet and horn melodic lines. In measure 43, the $6 / 8$ feel is interrupted by a half-note quarter-note rhythm that appears for that measure alone. As a result, the trumpet and horn players often had trouble feeling the difference in rhythm and would be unsure of where to place the quarter note at the end of the measure. Though difficult, the
most reasonable resolution was for me as the conductor to adjust my technique for the good of the ensemble as a whole. I would conduct $6 / 8$ time all the way up until measure 43, where I would abruptly give a $3 / 4$ measure just once, then continue with the $6 / 8$ pattern from measure 44 onward until the next style change. Measure 48 remained in the written $3 / 4$ time just as the section at measure 36 , but at this point the entire ensemble is playing quarter notes together with three beats to the measure. It was here that it made most sense to return to the standard 3/4 time conducting pattern in order to give the best cues to the ensemble.

## V. References

Adler, Samuel. The Study of Orchestration. $3^{\text {rd }}$ ed. W.W. Norton \& Company, 2002. Print.

Smith, Robert W. The Ascension Full Score. Belwin Mills Publishing Corp. (ASCAP), 1994. Print.

# "The Ascension" For Brass Ensemble and Piano 

Arr. Jacinda Drenckpohl

INSTRUMENTATION

2 Bb Trumpet

2 F Horn

2 Tenor Trombone

2 B.C. Euphonium

2 Tuba

Piano






Bb Tpt.
14

F Hn.

,


Tbn.







28

Bb Tpt.
28


Tbn.


Euph.

Tba.











Bb Tpt.

F Hn.


Euph.


Tba.



Tbn.


Euph.


Tba.


Bb Tpt.


F Hn.

Tbn.


Euph.


Tba.










Bb Tpt.

F Hn.


Euph.

Tba.

Pno.
















Bb Tpt.

F Hn.


> Tbn.












## Trumpet I \& II The Ascension

From The Divine Comedy

Robert W. Smith, Arr. Jacinda Drenckpohl









$\left[\begin{array}{c}f=2,\end{array}\right.$




## Horn I \& II The Ascension

From The Divine Comedy
Robert W. Smith, Arr. Jacinda Drenckpohl

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d=72
$$















## Trombone I \& II The Ascension

From The Divine Comedy
Robert W. Smith, Arr. Jacinda Drenckpohl






## Euphonium I \& II The Ascension

From The Divine Comedy
Robert W. Smith, Arr. Jacinda Drenckpohl







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(cresc.) _


Tuba I \& II The Ascension
From The Divine Comedy
Robert W. Smith, Arr. Jacinda Drenckpohl






Piano The Ascension
From The Divine Comedy

Robert W. Smith, Arr. Jacinda Drenckpohl

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d=72
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