

Landscapes – Program Notes

Landscapes is a suite of three pieces for string orchestra. Each piece portrays a different landscape: “Prairie” depicts a Midwestern tallgrass prairie, “Rivulet” depicts a small stream flowing down a forested mountain, and “Tundra” depicts an alpine tundra landscape.

Prairie



Schulenberg Prairie, Illinois

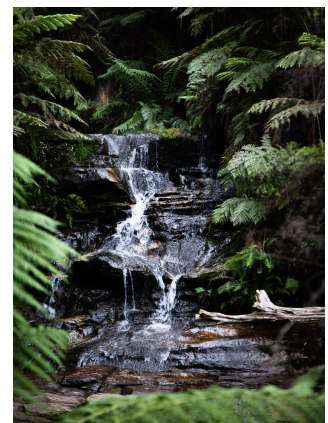
I grew up in Lisle, a small suburb of Chicago. Lisle is known for its Morton Arboretum, a nature preserve that covers almost seven square kilometers. My parents would regularly take me and my siblings to the Arboretum, and one of my favorite places to explore was the tallgrass prairie. There were pathways mowed through the prairie, though the surrounding grass grew so high that it was sometimes impossible to see the nearby forests over the grass. The first movement of *Landscapes* is written to evoke both the feeling of intimacy inside the prairie and the feeling of vastness as viewed from outside.

“Prairie” opens with a stream of moving eighth notes that represent the swaying of the grass in the wind. In the middle section, the listener is lifted out of the prairie and into the sky for a view from above. The soaring melody evokes a sense of awe at the grand, rolling meadows that stretch as far as the eye can see. The listener is then gently returned to the prairie for a final restatement of each theme.

Rivulet

The second movement, “Rivulet”, is the shortest work in the suite. It was inspired by my family’s annual hiking trips; many of our destinations, such as the Appalachian mountains or the glaciers of Iceland, had mountainous areas with small streams winding through lightly forested terrain. This movement captures a stream’s journey from mountain top to river valley.

The fluid, parallel harmonies in “Rivulet” evoke the impression of flowing water. Additionally, melodies are traded mid-phrase between the different sections of the orchestra, representing the braided way in which the stream weaves through the rocks in the mountainside. The contrast between duple and triple meter gives a sense of instability and unpredictability. Lastly, the closing *senza-vibrato* chord is the moment when the stream finally reaches the valley floor, where it meets the calm waters of the main branch of the parent river.



Cascade Falls,
Australia

Tundra

The final movement, “Tundra”, opens with an unwavering drone in the violins depicting a snowy and barren landscape devoid of life. Mountains rise on the horizon, and although the scene is breathtakingly beautiful, a sense of aloneness develops as the music descends and fades away at the end of the first section.

The middle section depicts the slow passing of the winter days, with silences broken only by the call of birds circling the sky and looking for food. Eventually, the music becomes more animated and the textures slowly turn to rapid, furious sixteenth notes,



Sahale Peak, Washington



A golden eagle

representing the clouds that bring rainfall at winter’s end. When the clouds part, the sun reveals a beautiful, illuminated landscape teeming with life! Flowers bloom as the lower strings play a grandiose restatement of the opening theme.

Alas, the tundra biome’s six-week summer is brief. The fleeting major section dissolves, only to reveal the barren landscape that was once there before. The work concludes with a tremolo that envelops the entire orchestra, representing the blizzard that coats the terrain with a thick blanket of snow.

Composition History

Landscapes was originally conceived as a piece for middle school string orchestra, in response to a competition for easy string orchestra pieces held by the Illinois Music Education Association. I had to work with extremely constrained writing guidelines, including:

- Only whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, and eighth notes were permitted.
- Only the keys of A, D, G, and C major (and relative minor keys) were allowed.
- Accidentals had to be used sparingly. (I used a very... liberal definition of “sparingly”.)
- First violins could only play up to third position; everyone else had to stay in first position.

I wrote the first movement during my sophomore year of high school and submitted it to this competition. Thankfully, I did not win; looking back, I don’t know how I convinced myself a middle school orchestra could play what I wrote. Dense polyphony, unconventional key relationships, and strange phrase lengths were out of the question.

The following year, I wrote the third movement intending to submit it to the same competition... but I did not realize was that the competition was not annual. I was disappointed, so I decided to look through my old works to find a piece that could reasonably complete the suite. I found a string quartet piece from seventh grade, which I arranged for string orchestra and now is the second movement of *Landscapes*.