

Pursuit – Program Notes

Pursuit, subtitled *A Cinematic Fantasy*, is a 19-minute tone poem for chamber orchestra. It details the pursuit of a goal in the face of adversity, using progressions, textures, and melodic contours from the cinematic idiom to tell its story. *Pursuit* calls for one flute, one clarinet, one bassoon, one horn, one trumpet, percussion (mark tree, glockenspiel, snare drum, suspended cymbal, tam-tam), one piano, two violins, one viola, one cello, and one double bass.

The Story

Pursuit tells the story of many journeys. It can tell the story of a fabled hero and the trials faced along his journey. Or it can tell a more mundane story, perhaps one of a college student pursuing a degree, overcoming problem sets, and graduating. The narrative is up to the listener.

Regardless of setting, the basic premise is as follows. The protagonist is introduced (m1), transported to a setting (m17), and is given a purpose (m29). After self-reflection (m44), the protagonist is filled with determination to pursue a goal (m56).

Along the way, the protagonist encounters challenges (m83). After understanding the nature of the challenges, the protagonist cautiously tries to avoid them (m107). However, the challenges are too important to be ignored (m131), and they eventually overwhelm the protagonist (m140). The protagonist, having lost morale, falls into despair (m162). The challenges then gradually fade away (m185).

The protagonist, realizing this, gains a renewed sense of hope (m197). After being revitalized (m213), the protagonist continues on the journey (m225), eventually reaching an idyllic place (m247). The protagonist takes a moment to reflect (m279), and it appears that the goal is just in reach (m291).

Suddenly, the challenges reappear (m316)! The angered protagonist resolves to defeat them (m328). The protagonist wrestles with the challenges, and the battle goes back and forth (m349, m359, m377, m389). Eventually, the protagonist starts to prevail (m406) and overcomes the challenges (m414).

In an act of self-reflection (m430), the protagonist realizes that the challenges have become a part of their identity (m434), and thinks about the trials faced (m449) and how they have shaped the protagonist's character (m458). The protagonist embraces the challenges (m470), leading to a triumphant finish (m496).

Themes

The “protagonist theme” is stated by the flute in the first 16 measures. It consists of three motifs (m1, m5, m9) which recur throughout the work. The “challenges theme” is first stated by the snare drum, low winds, piano, and low strings. It consists of two motifs (m83, m85), the first of which is heavily percussive. These two sets of themes interact in various ways to tell the story.

In addition to motivic ideas, there is a dichotomy between “orchestra textures” and “chamber textures.” In particular, the chamber sections represent periods of introspection

(m1, m44, m162, m279, m430). Conversely, the orchestral sections represent periods of exploration.

Lastly, the key relationships in the piece form an important part of the setting. Broadly speaking, there are three main key areas: C major, E major, and F minor, which are equally distributed around the circle of fifths. C major represents the protagonist's home, E major represents the protagonist's journey, and F minor represents the challenges faced during the journey.

Composition History

An earlier version of this work was originally for a TEDx “Superpowers” event, where invited speakers talked about a superpower they have. Eliana (a cellist in MITSO) asked me to write a cinematic-style work to open the TEDx event and showcase members of the MIT symphony orchestra. Because I was asked to write it on short notice (two months in advance of the performance date), I was unable to write down my original conception of the work in time, so what ended up being performed was a half-baked version of *Pursuit*.

During my summer and winter breaks, I heavily revised the work. I expanded its original instrumentation (1 flute, 1 clarinet, 1 trumpet, 1 piano, 1 violin, 1 viola, 1 cello) to its current one to alleviate the pianist of the many roles it was trying to fill. (In the current version, the pianist still fills the role of “the rest of the orchestra”, *Pierrot-lunaire*-style.) I also doubled the original length of the work, 9 minutes, to 19 minutes. Lastly, I rewrote harmonies, added sections, and reworked lines to create the current version.