

CHAPTER I

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1.1 Background of Research

Symbolism became prevalent in music as it did in literary works, as the movement began to emerge in the late 19th century. It was a tool utilized as a response to the Realism and Impressionism movements; it emphasized the importance of suggesting rather than stating, focusing on the subjective interpretations of the individual. While some forms of symbolism technically had existed before then, they were tied and limited to existing narratives such as biblical or mythological stories. This also meant that earlier traditions of symbolism pertained to familiar, more universally understood concepts.¹

The 20th century saw a significant change in philosophy that affected all areas of life including the language of music. During this age, the shift of concern toward sound composition allowed for new, groundbreaking compositions to be made by many different composers. It is impossible to name one general theme or thinking that all the composers followed. This absence of trend became the trend; eclecticism was embraced more than ever during this age of invention. Tonal music was still relevant, but the attention to sound itself marked the beginning of a new musical language, one that was not necessarily bound by previous trends. Composers were free to choose between innovation

¹ Nicole Myers, "Symbolism," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. Accessed September 2024.
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/symb/hd_symb.htm.

or purposefully recalling past compositional techniques and ideas. With many composers writing in different styles throughout their lives, it is difficult to categorize them into a single style. As such, looking at a piece as its own entity is particularly appropriate from this era and onward.

During the composer's musical journey for the past year by the time of this research, the resulting compositions have been analyzed to show a repeating pattern of conveying the narrative of a piece in such a direct way that it borders on definite and inambiguous, which was not the intent. The pieces were composed with the intent that listeners may glean a personal meaning from them based on an open-ended presentation of the narrative. From this, the composer sought to explore different methods previously unused in personal works to achieve better integration between narrative and intention.

In this research, five works will be analyzed to study how various composers from the 20th and 21st century implemented symbolism to convey different narratives. This will be done to find which compositional techniques and musical materials are being used in each piece to serve its intended purpose of communicating a narrative or program. The methods implemented by the various composers will be studied to find in what context symbolism is applied and why it works in said context. The findings of this study will then be used to compose an original work that similarly incorporates symbolism that serves the narrative of the composition. The entire creative process will be documented and evaluated to provide an answer to the questions posed in the problem statement.

The compositions selected to provide reference for the purposes of this study were George Crumb's (1929 – 2022) *Black Angels*, Olivier Messiaen's (1908 – 1992) *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, Krzysztof Penderecki's (1933 – 2020) *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, György Ligeti's (1923 – 2006) *Lux Aeterna*, and Leyland Kirby's (1974) *Everywhere At The End Of Time*. These pieces were chosen because of the weighty philosophies behind them, alluding to themes of transcendence, timelessness, psychological matters, or death. However, the methods by which these philosophies were conveyed varied based on each individual's stylistic, technical, and thematic choices. These five pieces all incorporated symbolism in ways unique to each composer, but they can be categorized as symbols by Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857 – 1913) definition.

The concept of *Record Keeper* warranted symbolic language as it is intended to emphasize the unconscious mind through the intuitive, highly subjective expression of the individual. In previous personal compositions, attempts at conveying the narrative were typically done with a highly-intuitive approach, which allows for a flexible freedom and workflow or composing process. This approach becomes the default as it did not involve a particularly rigorous system that governed the music. It also eased the pressure of composing because the burden of creating and adhering to a ruleset was not present. Starting and finishing a piece became a lighter load on the creative mind. However, the composer also finds that this method can be improved upon as it is somewhat ambiguous—the “success” of a composition relies on arbitrary

chance as the strengths of intuition fluctuate and are not measurable. The need for a new approach rose from this predicament, and so, while creating the concept of *Record Keeper*, the opportunity to explore the language of symbolism in my musical journey showed itself. This study is intended to approach contemporary composition by conveying the concept through the musical materials more deliberately.

Themes of the human mind have always been a strong personal interest to the composer. With the topic of dreams selected to access this part of the mind, the work borrows from the notion—developed by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung—that symbolism is the innate language of the unconscious, which often communicates in abstract, uncanny forms.² Jung’s writings have become one of the most influential sources of inspiration in building the framework in which the composer views topics. Thus, the aforementioned composers’ musical language and their ability to portray vivid scenes through the means mentioned above aligned with the spirit and intuition going into this piece. Upon completing this study, the composer aims to have found a previously unexplored means of integrating symbolism to convey the narrative of a personal musical work. The results of this study also aim to provide a point of reference for other composers that intend to write works of a synonymous nature.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Considering the background of the research as established before, this research aims to add perspective to and answer the following question:

² C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969).

How can symbolism be applied in the context of *Record Keeper*?

1.3 Purpose of Research

The research aims to analyze past composers' works incorporating symbolism as reference points for application in new musical compositions. Through this process, this study seeks to uncover a previously unexplored musical approach to convey concepts more effectively than previous personal compositions. Pursuing an effective and clearer integration between concept and music in personal works is also an important concern of this research.

1.4 Benefits of Research

This research aims to provide a reference for composers who intend to compose music by incorporating symbolism. This research will show one approach to symbolism in composition based on the analyses of the specific pieces mentioned above.