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FYE-1600-46

November 13, 2020

"The Sphinx's Story": An Intertwining Melody of Emotions and Complexity

The Sphinx, one of the most well-known monsters throughout the history of humanity, is represented through different cultures and iconic landmarks. A Sphinx's traits can be described with great variety due to the different cultural exploration, but the consistent factor is the Sphinx's portrayal as a combination monster, including a human's head atop a lion's body, while acting as a metaphor for knowledge. While the Sphinx originated in the Egyptian culture as the Great Sphinx of Giza, it has stood the test of time, in the Greek culture, by evolving into a female head atop a lioness body. One of the most notable Greek adaptations of the Sphinx is the story of "Oedipus and the Sphinx" (Graves 10). In this story, gods sent the Sphinx down to guard the entrance to Thebes, due to their disapproval of the inhabitants there. In addition, the Sphinx would ask a riddle to any passerby, and if they said the incorrect answer, they would be devoured. One day, Oedipus flees to Thebes and decides to challenge the Sphinx; as a result, she asks him a riddle regarding the four stages of life. Surprisingly, Oedipus answers correctly, and the Sphinx jumps off the cliff to her death (Graves 10). This story is fundamental to the understanding of the Sphinx and her many characteristics. To further this explanation, I composed a piano piece to describe the ebb and flow of the story, as it unfolds for the reader.

Through choosing the medium of a piano composition to act as a cultural artifact, I can further explain and add depth to the Sphinx and her interactions with Oedipus, in this well-

known and simple story. In other words, my piano composition adds meaning beyond the actual words of the story, and through every crescendo, accelerando, and changing rhythm of the piece, I can show the emotions and the tone of each part of the story. Since music has the unique ability to bring a story and its characters "to life" through intense emotions, a meaningful symbiosis occurs between the words and the music. As words explain the actions in the story, music can add meaning by articulating the actual sounds that mirror the story's events. The Sphinx represents the theme of knowledge, and nothing demonstrates this better than music. Music is the ability to manipulate knowledge to create something expressive that evokes an emotional response.

My composition is divided into three different sections, modeling the parts of the "Oedipus and the Sphinx." For example, the first three lines model the arrival of the Sphinx at Thebes and Oedipus's decision to face the Sphinx. The next lines mirror the riddle, and the last three lines highlight Oedipus solving the riddle, resulting in the Sphinx jumping off the cliff. In addition, I specifically change the key signature for each of the three sections based off the expert musical composer, Robert Schumann's "The Carnaval, Opus 9." This piano piece is written with twenty sections changing in tempo, tone, and theme. However, one of the sections is called "Sphinxes," consisting of a series of pitches in three measures with the first being Eb, C, B, and A, the second being Ab, C, and B, and the last being A, Eb, C, and B (Schumann). I use these specific pitches for the notes in my composition (Schumann). As a result, I use Schumann's idea of what pitches effectively model the nature of the Sphinx, to add depth to the story. Now, my composition not only tells the story of "Oedipus and the Sphinx," it also embodies the Sphinx through the specific arrangement of these pitches. In other words, it brings her "to life" every time these pitches are heard in the music.

As this is established, I can now use specific musical notations and rhythms to help the story unfold. For example, the first four measures use the same pattern of Eb, C, B, and A quarter notes in the bass clef, while the treble clef uses four whole notes following this same pattern. These four measures crescendo, highlighting the Sphinx's creation by the gods, and every crescendo represents one aspect of her monstrous body being created. Next, a rapid series of the same pitches, with strong chords in the bass clef, portray her arrival in the human world, as well as highlighting the complexity of knowledge that is the fundamental premise of her power. Next, a measure is used to transition the melody to a quicker pace where I implement an accelerando. As the same four notes are played in the treble clef, the left-hand changes from eighth notes, to triplets, to sixteenth notes, mirroring Oedipus's quickening heart rate as he accepts the idea of facing the Sphinx. Lastly, the section ends with three chords that are complex and powerful, demonstrating Oedipus's face to face interaction with the Sphinx and her pure strength and knowledge.

The second section changes as the pitches move to Ab, C, and B along with the tempo slowing and becoming much quieter. This models the riddle that the Sphinx gives Oedipus, as she attempts to trick him to his death. The crescendos and diminuendos, in measures fourteen through eighteen, represent the rise and fall of her melodious voice as she almost purrs this monstrous riddle to Oedipus. The listener feels like they are lost in a trance as she speaks to them through such powerful words. Next, the quarter notes transition to eighth notes as the dynamic slowly increases, showing the severity of the riddle and the possible death that Oedipus faces. All of a sudden at the end of measures twenty-one through twenty-three, the tone changes with two sharp sixteenth notes in the same pitch pattern. This represents the Sphinx gnashing her powerful teeth and jaws, as Oedipus watches this monstrously beautiful creature before him.

The last section uses the pitches, A, Eb, C, and B, which highlights Oedipus solving the riddle and the Sphinx jumping off the cliff. The initial whole notes in the treble clef and the repeating quarter notes represent the Sphinx quietly waiting, while Oedipus thinks about the riddle. The crescendos and diminuendos represent the rise and fall of her heavy paws as she prepares to devour him. However, in measure thirty, it is revealed that Oedipus correctly solves the riddle, and the eighth notes speed up the rhythm, giving a sense of the Sphinx's realization that she must die. Lastly, the composition nears the end with accelerating eighth, triplet, and sixteenth notes. As they get louder, it represents her screams as she throws herself from the cliff with a powerful velocity. Finally, the composition ends with three strong chords as the Sphinx plummets to her death.

Overall, the powerful and rich tones, quickening tempo, and strange but cohesive piano pitches highlight the Sphinx's monstrous aspects, alongside providing an in-depth discovery of her emotions that cannot be displayed solely by the text. By listening to this composition, the Sphinx can be seen in a new and increasingly complex light, as the listener learns the Sphinx's point of view compared to Oedipus's interpretation of the events.

I used two sources to accomplish my creative project, including the ancient tale of "Oedipus and the Sphinx," retold in 1960 in *The Greek Myths,* by the widely renowned, Greek mythology expert Robert Graves, and I also referenced Robert Schuman's composition "The Carnaval, Opus 9." First of all, Graves was able to acquire the many dispersed elements of Oedipus and the Sphinx and combine them in a historically accurate portrayal of this ancient tale, while also adding validity by containing source information from specific texts, like Homer's *Odyssey*. Overall, the retelling of this ancient tale is crucial in understanding the relationship between humanity, represented by Oedipus and the Sphinx, and it allowed for the modeling of

the figurative relationship between humanity, knowledge, and music. In addition, Robert Schumann's "The Carnaval, Opus 9" was the main inspiration behind my creative artifact as it gave me a compositional template to design my piece. I was able to channel Schuman's creative ability and the idea of the Sphinx, by talking to my professor, Dr. Carolyn True, as she explained the type of music and themes that inspired Schuman's compositions. Furthermore, Schuman's compositional format of having a beginning, middle, and end perfectly mirrored the three parts, the exposition, the climax, and the resolution, of the "Oedipus and the Sphinx." The culmination of these two sources allowed me to create my own rendition that united literature and music, two mediums that ensure the longevity of this time-honored tale.

I would like to thank Dr. True, my Applied Music teacher, for all of her support and encouragement in creating this composition, along with Professor Hughes's guidance and his recommendation that I should submit my work for this competition.

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Pledged

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