

**Subject:** Organ symphony

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**From:** Aleksey Nikolsky

**To:** John Oosthuizen

Hi John,

Happy New Year! I hope you enjoyed your holidays. I spent mine to record my symphony, write its description, and finalize the score. It took longer than expected. But finally everything is ready. Below is the link to the audio: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/2ogi5g2hmba6uo9/Organ%20symphony.flac?dl=0>

It turned out to be quite good quality - you'll hear some detail if you listen in good earphones, like Sennheiser HD 600. Of course, this is a machine-generated playback, so with all the tweaking I did it still lacks human touch. But it serves well to give a general idea of all the intricacies of harmony, meter, rhythm, and texture and to provide a convenient reference for double-checking the text against learning the score in some wrong way. Please do not take this recording as a model for your interpretation. This music should be played expressively. It can be smoothened to generate a stronger flow or harshened to make it sound more struggling.

This is the score:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/rbe85yhxgqz9hv4/Symphony%20for%20organ.pdf?dl=0>

I was able to specify all the registers that I engaged in the Jeux soundfont (there are over 200 sounds in it - plenty to choose from). This should give you at least some idea about the possible registration on the organ that you have access to. I enclosed some registers into parenthesis - wherever it would be difficult to switch the registration due to the lack of time, while a new timbre would be beneficial. In a number of places, the same stop can be used in a different register (e.g., bass vs. treble) to refresh the timbre. At the very end of the composition, it would be great to dynamically fade out (if the swell pedal allows).

I didn't mark any fingering (including thumbing). It's possible that some things need to be corrected for greater fluency. The pedal part is very virtuosic in the climax. Two cadenzas are quite demanding on hands. The hand-to-feet coordination is quite demanding. Overall, my approach to organ is rather unusual.

I constructed a Youtube video for the convenience of listening to music and seeing the program notes at the same time. But its audio quality is worse than the link above. And the notes are not as thorough as the ones I am placing below.

<https://youtu.be/rr8ruKTOVc>

Please feel free to ask questions and propose changes you deem appropriate. Best,  
Aleksey

## **The Way of the Mind [Itinerarium Mentis]**

This musical composition is inspired by the book "Itinerarium Mentis in Deum" (1259) by St. Bonaventure, one of the leading Western philosophers of the Middle Ages who set the intellectual foundation for the blooming of the Renaissance. This book elaborates and summarizes the Neoplatonist theory of "intellectual ascent," which was forged by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (an anonymous author, probably a pupil of Proclus) some 700 years earlier.

According to Bonaventure, the world is a ladder for ascending to the ultimate Truth in a way similar to learning about an artist by investigating his art, where God is regarded as a Creator in an artistic sense. Bonaventure adopts the 6-winged seraph as an epitome for his 6 chapters and an epilogue that symbolize the seraph's 6 wings and 6 successive revelations of Truth that elevate the human mind by means of contemplating all things created. Each revelation enables some advance from the

initially limited knowledge to the "excessus" (i.e., "exceeding" an original limit) and eventually, to the "ecstasis" (i.e., literally, "standing outside" of the self). At the summit point of this intellectual journey through the hierarchy of all 6 angelic "spheres", the traveler becomes "one" with God and completes the transformation of human affective mind into the ultimate Knowing.

Following Bonaventure, in my music I show the 6 stages of elevation from a mere reflection on the corporeal elements, through realization of the mind's own powers to discovery of the Divine essence. Musically, this is shown through the progressive tonal integration: from isolated 12 tones to melodic and harmonic intervals, then to 3-tone motifs and chords, growing in number of tones and in variety of characters, crystallization of melodic phrases and musical modes, leading to the emergence of a continuous melodic line, themes, metric pulse, tonicity, and harmonic progressions.

My scientific research on the perception of tonal organization of music has greatly helped me revise my original 1994 composition. In this 2022 revision, I tried to emphasize the gradualness of the transformation of the initially disconnected rhythm-metric, melodic, harmonic and textural elements into, respectively, a coherent musical movement, continuous melodic line(s), functional harmony, and a well-structured musical texture.

The entire composition consists of a chain of episodes united by the reuse of the same motifs and the general tonal development. Semantically, the music progresses at first towards a more diverse characterization, then becomes engaged in conflicts and intense developments, generating a powerful heroic momentum and passing through 4 extensive climactic waves until it reaches a qualitative breakthrough, becoming transfigured into a beautiful yet distant serene image.

### **1) Isolated things**

The episode *Misterioso* (bars 1-20) shows the disconnected and dispersed existence of atonal particles of pitch and rhythm (dodecaphony). This represents how the world appears to a human infant - as a set of immediately tangible objects. Two little episodes, *Impulsivo* (bars 20-30) and *Con moto* (bars 31-46) forge a thematic nucleus via the polyphonic imitations of brief motifs. This is akin to a young child forming a mental "self" identity and discovering the connections between some of the surrounding things (i.e., the "stable me" observing the flow of objects that appear and disappear as I move around).

### **2) Discovery of the 'forest' behind the 'trees'**

This section, *Cantabile* (bars 47-78) is large and coherent - based on a single leading theme that employs a peculiar heptatonic mode (B, C#, E, F#, G, A, Bb). This mode is restrained to the upper part, while two other parts each retain their own modes and thematic material, isolated from the upper melody.

This extensive episode represents the revelation that things don't disappear as we stop seeing them and that they form an ensemble - a worldview of a world, living in which is enigmatic but beautiful.

### **3) Discovery of contradictions, conflicts, and frustration**

This section starts with the recapitulation of the *Misterioso* that opened the symphony (bars 79-83). It is suddenly interrupted with an open question. The *Eccitando* episode (bars 84-93) discloses the

clashing polytonality of 3 contrasting parts, each with its own theme, mode, and rhythmic "modus". They all start interacting in the immediately following *Strappato* episode (bars 94-105), unleashing the messy streak of development - thematic, tonal, and metric. The intense elaboration leads to the emergence of the ascending "trichord motif" through a chain of polyphonic imitations in the *Piu marziale* episode (bars 106-118). This first thematic unit that unites all the parts becomes immediately challenged by the reappearance of dodecaphony and the outburst of an atonal cadenza (bars 119-127).

This entire chain of tiny episodes represents the struggle of a vigilant mind that is trying to make sense of the reality.

#### **4) Discovery that conflicts are reconcilable**

Bars 128-154 mark a new round of tonal and metric integration. *Esitando e vagamento* opens with 3 parts disputing the same inverted trichordal motif. The tenor carries out a descending version of that motif, intertwined with the "insidious" chromatic intonations. The bass keeps "insisting" on the detached notes of the very same motif. And the soprano "timidly" tries to break away from the lower parts. The alto kicks in to add to the commotion of the motivic struggle. The immediately following *Tenace* episode (bars 155-164) resolves a polymodal and polyrhythmic collision by inducing a chain of polyphonic imitations of the ascending motif. For the first time, all parts form harmonic relations and participate in a joint climax. But suddenly, the return of the dodecaphonic *Misterioso* puts the achieved tonal integration under question. A second cadenza, *Ineguale, alla zoppa* (bars 164-176) creeps in to restore the ugly dissonance and engage in an intense syncopation (up to the 3rd order - i.e., the 3rd division of the beat).

Evidently, reconciliation of contradictions is possible, yet fragile - calling for an effort to protect its fragility.

#### **5) Heroic labor of cultivating values**

In response to the defiant cadenza, the episode *Massicio e marziale* (bars 177-207) introduces a consistent ongoing pentametric movement and integrates both manuals by sharing the same mode and chords (exclusively perfect 4th-chords). Yet, both manuals remain harmonically and thematically autonomous from the pedal, triggering a conflict and causing a huge climax. This is as though the chords strive to establish a consonant harmonic progression but are obstructed by the melodic impetus of the deep low and overwhelming pedal.

The first wave of climax runs out of power before the onset of *Sfidoso e infocandosi* (bars 208-224). This episode resurrects the ascending trichord motif, elaborating it into a lengthy triumphant melody in the bass. The manuals keep opposing the diatonic pedal part by featuring dissonant chromatic 4th-chords that always include the tritone. Harmonic opposition is accompanied by a rhythmic one: the manuals engage a 2nd-order syncopation (groups of 16th-notes, twice shorter than the beat), while the pedal, the 1st-order syncopation (groups of 8th-notes). The tension escalates, forming a 2nd wave of climax - even more conflicting than the first. As though a persistent attempt to instill concordance that took place in the previous episode has backfired, so that more consonant bass now has to face much more dissonant treble parts.

The *Piu massicio* episode (bars 225-243) marks the onset of a new, still more dissonant and powerful wave of development. Both manuals' and pedal parts become thematically integrated (by

the ascending 4th motif), while retaining modal autonomy. Chords increase in density, complexity, and tension, calling for the urgent release. This entire section represents an effort to civilize the world in order to tame the destructive tendencies of elemental forces of nature. Yet, civilizations are known to achieve their goals only temporarily - followed by their decline and demise. Similarly, a heroic effort by an individual is bound to fall short of its goal at some point in one's life. This inescapable future failure adds a tragic flavor to one's achievements.

## 6) Discovery of spirituality and transcendentalism

The next 2 episodes (bars 244-286) form the 4th and final wave of climax, distinguished by the ongoing "florid" melodic passages. *Recitante* temporarily breaks the consistency of the pentametric pulse and launches the continuous fast motion by 16th-notes. For the first time, chords start supporting the melody, albeit without securing any tonic, and disturbed by an ongoing chain of modulations. Nevertheless, the heavily chromatic melody obtains quite comfortable harmonization. *Grandioso* marks the onset of the most homogenous section in the entire symphony. The "florid" part features the diminution of the earlier triumphant melody (from the *Sfidoso* section), arranged as a talea in isorhythmic motets. The pedal and the lower manual merge into a single stream of complex polymodal chords (each chord forms a separate "vertical" mode, following Scriabin's doctrine of turning melodic modes into harmonic modes). In bar 267, this stream of chords finally solidifies into a theme (based on the ascending 4th motif) that moves monumentally in 3/2 (in contrast to the earlier unstable 5/4 movement). The tension culminates in a cluster of black-keys in bar 284, which marks a final qualitative break-through.

## 7) The bliss

Coda (*Sereno*, bar 287-end) emerges as a qualitatively new cathartic synthesis of 3 constituents: the principal theme, its accompaniment, and its opposition. The theme is arranged as an expressive arioso, based on the descending trichord motif in a non-octave equivalent hypermode Eb-F(F#)-G-A-Bb-C-D-E-F#(F)-G-A-B-C#-D. The pedal carries the accompaniment in the same hypermode (Bb-C-D-E-F#-G-A-B-C# with an accidental alteration G# as a result of the dubbing in parallel 2nds). And the upper part opposes the modality and regularity of the lower parts by its stubborn atonality, ametricity, and dodecaphonic athematicity. Somehow, this defiance does not prevent all parts from forming harmonic and textural concordance - perhaps, better characterized as "pan-tonality" (coexistence of tonality, modal tonicity and atonality), implemented in a manner similar to Charles Ives.

The term "sinfonia" (Italian for "Symphony") that I chose to categorize the genre of this musical composition was popular during the 17-18th centuries (albeit used by such 20th century composers as Britten and Berio). Originally, it meant a medium-size piece of music for an instrumental ensemble, usually an orchestra, written in a non-strophic (i.e., not song-like) complex music form and featuring some dramatic content. Also, the etymology of this word - Greek *syn* (together) + *phone* (sound) - implies the harmonious concordance of sounds, the attainment of which constitutes the essence of this composition.

I preferred to use an organ instead of the orchestra (traditionally used for symphonies), because the entire composition represents a personal experience that better suits a *single* performer than a large

group of approximately a hundred people. Organ - which earned the reputation of “a king of musical instruments” - is the only musical instrument capable of substituting an orchestra. However, its principal limitation - the inability to phrase music by ongoing gradual dynamic changes - gives the organ music a notable “cerebral” flavor, in contrast to other musical instruments that appeal to emotions (some more than others). This meditative nature of the organ perfectly suits the program which I have chosen to follow.

My treatment of the organ originates from the French tradition of approaching the organ as an orchestra. I have found inspiration in organ music of such composers as Olivier Messiaen, Maurice Duruflé, Marcel Dupré, Charles-Marie Widor, Leon Boellmann, Alexandre Guilmant, César Franck, and Valentin Alkan.

Yet another source of inspiration for me was the music by the fusion electric keyboardists, such as Keith Emerson and Rick Wakeman, as well as jazz organists like Joey DeFrancesco, Larry Young, and Pat Bianchi. These jazz and fusion influences were especially instrumental in generating the climax waves in my symphony. All of them are achieved by means of setting a metric groove with the help of syncopation and cross-rhythms. Such use of organ contrasts the Western classical tradition, where the dynamic limitations of organ has made solo organ music somewhat “static” - most organ composers who wrote large-scale works broke them into discrete long movements that each presented a more or less “frozen” character. This is in contrast to large-scale works for piano, violin, cello, guitar, or flute solo that usually contain more pronounced transformations of character, complex interactions of few characters, collisions, dramatic development, etc. - all incorporating ongoing dynamic changes. In this work, I have attempted to overcome this fundamental “static” limitation of classical organ music. I am interested to know if my attempt has been successful.