

## About Already Yesterday or Still Tomorrow

When my friend Delta David Gier first approached me to compose a piece for the South Dakota Symphony in 2019, I thought it was imperative that I come to Sioux Falls, meet all the musicians, learn their stories, and write a piece that reflected them and, hopefully, made them shine. Unfortunately my visit never happened; then the events of 2020 made travel nearly impossible for most people and also brought much of the music community to a screeching halt. Over the ensuing months, the source of my inspiration to create music for a specific group of people and a specific place evolved into an impetus that became more universal and also, despite the seeming contradiction, far more personal.

Like most people around the country, and all over the world, I have faced many challenges during the past year. Thankfully my wife and I have remained safe and healthy, mostly because we rarely go outside and have been ridiculously cautious when we do. The impact of our self-imposed house arrest has been a strange feeling of stasis, as if we've been somehow living the same day over and over again. Hours and weeks blur together, loosening the perception of the passage of time. It is a feeling that I imagine is very common in the present moment, though it has nevertheless been psychologically unnerving. Also, although we have luckily remained physically fine and have done our best to maintain a positive attitude through all this uncertainty, we have not been completely shielded from personal tragedy. We've had friends who contracted SARS-CoV-2 and we know several people who died from this virus, including two neighbors in our apartment building. The most difficult thing we faced was the death of my mother, Alaine Oteri, on April 3, 2020, during the Covid-19 peak in New York City, while we were unable to leave this apartment to personally tend to her final needs. As we subsequently learned through an investigative report published in *The New York Times*, she was one of over 100 victims who succumbed from the coronavirus at the elder residence where she spent the final decade of her life. This is the backdrop during which I composed and it has had a profound impact on the form, the rhythms, the timbres, the harmonies, and the melodies of the music I ultimately wrote.

Shortly before the lockdown and prior to composing a single note for this piece, I became mesmerized by the phrase "already yesterday or still tomorrow" from the poem "Morning Raga," included in a book of the collected poetry of the Black American poet Lorenzo Thomas (1944-2005), which I stumbled upon at The Strand, an iconic New York City bookstore. As I began imagining music which (like all of our lives since March) seemed to be always changing in unexpected ways but never quite going anywhere, Thomas's phrase felt like a perfect title for it. Technically this composition is a rondo, a form that has been explored by many European classical composers including the two composers with whom the premiere of this work shares a program, Felix Mendelssohn and Richard Strauss, who both composed fabulous rondos. In a rondo, there is a main theme that keeps recurring; other things happen, but the original theme always comes back. In my rondo, the main theme is a sequence of six-note chords, the first two of which utilize the entire 12-tone chromatic scale. Those initial two chords form a tone row, subsets from which the entire piece derives, though this music is resolutely tonal, centering on the pitch A. An A at 440 Hertz is the pitch that orchestras tune to, so to me it feels like a metaphor for the truth. It is also the first letter of my mother's first name Alaine, though there's a more complicated back story to that which figures in this music as well.

When I was growing up, my mother spelled her name Elaine with an E. However, after meeting someone else named Elaine in the 1980s, she suddenly started spelling it Alaine which was the name she used for the rest of her life. She didn't want to share a name with anyone. I admire her quest for singularity, but it sure was a pain in the neck to get anything done for her later in life since she never bothered to do it officially. She merely handwrote As over the printed Es on everything in her possession where her name appeared, from her marriage certificate to her divorce papers! Mysteriously she was eventually issued a social security card with an A, but I was still never able to get a legal ID for her. The two opening six-note chords of the chromatic main theme have A and Eb as their roots, whereas the more diatonic sounding breakaway sections, which only use 6 of the 12 pitches and simulate major and minor tonalities, hover harmonically between A and E. Before the final appearance of the main theme, which is actually the opening material played backwards, there is a triumphant climax ushered in by a trumpet that lands us harmonically in Ab, which is 415 Hz (how A would have been tuned in the Baroque era), perhaps a metaphor for the malleability of truth over time or an unofficial name change.

Finally, there is also a back story to the approach to rhythm in *Already Yesterday or Still Tomorrow*. The syncopation of phrases as well as the tempos constantly change (through a series of metric modulations), but it is always in 5/4 time. This meter should be familiar to anyone who loves the second movement of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, which contemporaneous music critic Eduard Hanslick decried as "disturbing to listeners and players alike." The popularity of the Dave Brubeck Quartet recording of saxophonist Paul Desmond's "Take Five" or Lalo Schifrin's original theme for *Mission Impossible*, as well as Tchaikovsky's classic, have proven Hanslick wrong, though admittedly 5/4 can feel somewhat unsettling, as are these current times. Perhaps even more unsettling though are the full measures of rest that are scattered throughout the score. These are intended as loud silences, utterances that are beyond what is verbally or musically possible.

The South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Delta David Gier, will give the world premiere performance of *Already Yesterday or Still Tomorrow* at the Washington Pavilion in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on Saturday, January 23, 2021 at 7:30pm, Central Standard Time. They will perform the work again at the Oscar Larson Performing Arts Center on the South Dakota State University campus in Brookings, South Dakota, on Sunday, January 24, 2021 at 2:30pm CST. The performances will be broadcast on South Dakota Public Radio as well as streamed online worldwide.

—Frank J. Oteri, October 28, 2020