Composition of Two Electronic Music Sequences for “Germinal,” Opera in Three Acts

Final Report submitted for Indiana University’s Faculty Research Grant

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During the month of July and part of August, I created three digital tapes that will be integrated into the score of three scenes of Germinal, Opera in Three Acts. This work would not have been finished without the aid of the IU South Bend Summer Research Grant 2007. This grant provided the essential funding for the equipment needed for the design, creation, and composition of these digital tapes, as well as summer salary for half of the summer term.

The main focus of this work was adding new music to the preexistent orchestral texture, always keeping in mind two issues:

1) The nationalist character of the music, as it is related to the land where the action occurs, as well as where it will be premiered: Asturias. It is what I mentioned in my proposal for this project as “Asturianity.”

2) The seamless integration with the orchestral texture, so both layers become one unified block of music.

In order to accomplish this, I recorded various sounds from nature, using a Zoom H4 recording device. Some of the sounds included water running, crushed rocks, wood nailing sounds, and other machinery effects to be used as sound objects. These sounds were manipulated by software such as Reason and Logic Pro, which allowed me to transform them and therefore make them part of the composition. It was also important to have a second monitor, since I needed to view several programs open at the same time.

The sounds were then implemented in Reason’s sequencer, using a sampler module, which assigns keys in the keyboard to specific sound objects. These sounds are triggered
by the sequencer, as it plays, following my compositional plan. The result is a new composition that has strong reference to many sounds that are part of everyday work in a coal mine, without being too obvious. This digital tape helps propel the dramatic action in the opera. These are the backgrounds to all three scenes with digital tapes:

1) Act I, Scene 1. It is set inside a coal mine tunnel. Machinery and sounds of picks and shovels are very present. The sounds are transformed, so they fit a compositional plan of specific registers to emphasize or complement the registration in the orchestra. Rhythmically, the motives are also complementing the music in the orchestra. This helps unify the musical space of the scene.

2) Act II, Scene 3. This is one of the most dramatic scenes in the opera. The miners have arrived to a mine in the next town and they intend to extract all the miners working there (they are supposed to be on strike) and destroy the mine. Rhythm is a very important element of this scene. It becomes increasingly more active and complex as the action arrives to the most heightened moment in the scene: the main character, Catherine, comes out of the pit, which was not expected by either her own family or Etienne (also a main character of the opera).

3) Act III, Scene 3. This is a very short digital tape at the end of the scene. Its primary purpose is to create expectation and eventually resolution using the effect of an explosion that occurs in the tunnels of the mine. In this case, I chose to use a radically opposing approach: the orchestra, represented in this case by the percussion group, underlines the digital tape. The result is the second most heightened moment in the opera.

With this final report, I have attached an Audio-CD with the final version of the audio tracks that accompany the opera in three scenes. Even though these digital tapes are very short in duration, I believe that they are very important within the opera. They help propel the dramatic action and at the same time, they keep strong connections with the soundscape of Asturias, where the opera will be premiered. All of this is done keeping the coherence between digital and acoustic sections of the composition, thus becoming one single musical fabric. I look forward to the work in the next two years, as I prepare for the premiere of the opera in Spain. I give thanks to IU South Bend for the invaluable support in this final stage creating the opera Germinal.