

to listen, to hear
program note

I'm using the phrase "to listen, to hear" in this way: "to listen" is to make the effort to take in the point of view of another—it is a demonstration of respect and an opportunity to learn. Whereas "to hear" is to truly absorb and understand that point of view, and to be changed by it in some way.

This commission is, to me, the putting-into-action of the ideal form of exchange among composer, performer and audience. You, the audience, have entrusted the conductor, orchestra and board with the responsibility of bringing music to you that will do a variety of things for you (which I need not enumerate here). They, in turn, have entrusted me with the responsibility of bringing a piece of music to them and to you that celebrates your orchestra's 30th anniversary, that reflects your community as I have been able to experience it, and that gives something of myself at the same time. And I, in turn, trust that you will listen to and hear my music, just as I have tried to listen to and hear you.

I had the opportunity to experience some of this land and its people back on the first of February of this year. I'm sure you'll remember that day—it was the day the space shuttle went down. That same evening, there was a concert given here by the strings of the Prince William Symphony Orchestra. It was a beautiful concert, and especially meaningful against the backdrop of the events of that day. After the concert, there was a reception at which I was introduced along with the conductor and soloist of the concert. During the next hour or so, a number of people came up to me and made suggestions regarding my as-yet-unwritten piece. I was listening then, trying to take in as much as I could. The next day, members of the board graciously drove me around Prince William County and told me about its history. I was listening then too.

When I returned home, I began trying to hear all the things I had listened to while in Prince William County. There had been many voices, and they were by no means saying the same things. But there were common themes: the Revolutionary and Civil wars were—despite their distance in time from the present—never far from the surface of things. The tremendous competition for natural resources among rural, suburban and urban areas seemed intense and constant. And pride in the rich cultural heritage of the region seemed ever-present. (These are only three of many such observations I made at the time)

How to translate such things into a piece of music? Well, it isn't a good idea to do so literally, and so I didn't try that approach. What you are hearing this evening isn't exactly a work with a narrative story to tell (as if all the things I discovered here could be laid out in a row), but certain things will emerge clearly; here are two of them: there is music of war, and I think you will recognize this from its obsessive, almost overwhelming violence. There is also music of reconciliation, and this will be clear from the superimposition of many voices singing the same melody (a Civil War-era melody I found while visiting the Manassas Museum). As for the rest of the piece, I will leave that for you to listen and, I hope, for you to hear.

Joel Hoffman

