

The Forty Steps—Program Note

First of all, I would like to say that it is a great honor to have been chosen for this project. So often artists (whether visual, literary, aural or otherwise) can feel like their work does not contribute—at least not directly—to the stream of cultural discourse in the political, economic and social worlds. This was an opportunity to do just that: to make a direct statement concerning a topic that has been and will continue to be at the center of the world stage—the question of how to produce and sustain positive collaboration among people of very different backgrounds.

I am well aware of the responsibility of this task, and of the fact that in composing a piece that addresses such a large issue, there are many ways to fail. For example, if the piece is a simple cry for peace it will resonate well with those who think that it's a simple problem but will be marginalized by those who understand it is an almost unimaginably complex set of problems. If, on the other hand, the piece is too abstract and universal in its message, it runs the risk of saying nothing pertinent. But equally, if it tries to make a detailed political proposal it will surely fail since music is not suited to such things beyond a superficial level—and would in any case have almost no likely musical value at all.

So part of my solution is to show in this piece both the connections and the differences between the Western and Arabic musical traditions. Fortunately, the concept of the piece—a concerto for oud, cello and orchestra—seemed an ideal way to present these fascinating, rich, often contradictory elements, because each of the two solo instruments can individually represent its respective tradition in a direct, audible and visual manner and yet AT THE SAME TIME, each can converse intimately with the other on a purely musical level. And the orchestra can be a sort of mediator—offering a fertile musical foundation against which the two protagonists spin out their separate yet joined-together musical stories.

A couple of examples of how this was accomplished: you will hear a number of sections in which the two soloists are playing essentially the same music together. Nevertheless, the oud part will be embellished with traditional Arabic ornaments and non-equal-tempered notes, while the cello voice is a realization of a conventional Western-style fully-notated cello part. Maybe a good analogy is a pizza with the same basic ingredients

throughout, but with one set of spices on top of one half and a different set on the other.

Another example lies in the three cadenzas, one in each movement. In the first two, the oud is presented with an opportunity to improvise...yet it is not a completely open-ended opportunity. The oud player is asked to improvise using the harmonic and melodic materials of the piece (which are Western in conception), *and to marry these to Arabic improvisation techniques and styles!* The third cadenza continues the same degree of freedom for the oud player, but this time it is a double cadenza—the cellist is asked to participate but with Western improvisation techniques and styles at the same time. The result, of course, will be not the one or the other, but a distinct and fascinating conversation between both.

Lastly, I'd like to clarify the significance of the title, *The Forty Steps*: My friend David Aaron, who is a scholar of ancient Hebrew as well as Arabic culture at Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College, confirmed for me that the number 40 has special significance in both cultures. This number resonates in terms of significant things happening across the spans of 40 days, weeks and years...in remarkably similar ways in both Hebrew and Arabic writings and traditions. I decided to incorporate the number in three symbolic ways: the piece contains 40 different notes (no more, no less), 40 contiguous sections and 40 separate instrumental parts, not including the two soloists. These characteristics help give the work unity and consistency, but they are not intended to be directly heard. I also wanted to make the symbolic statement that the road to peace is not a short one (very few steps), but that it is also not infinite either (40 steps is a large number but one that can easily be imagined).

Above all, I hope this work will be a musically rewarding conversation between two cultures whose traditions are at the same time profoundly different yet profoundly connected.

Joel Hoffman
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