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Sam joined the audience for the first performance of Edmund Hunt's Vita Hominum last December. Afterwards he reviewed the work for Unknown Magazine, a student run art publication

Navigating the Sublime: Vita Hominum and Disorder

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by **Sam Campbell**

Vita Hominum. St. George's Church, Jesmond, Newcastle. Beginning with a crystalline soprano line which is then lapped and submerged in a shimmering pool of voices, it interweaves with the echoing grandeur of the church acoustic. Here begins a tumultuous musical journey, sung by an English choir but narrated in the Latin words of an Anglo-Saxon saint. These words at some times are intensified and obfuscated in a flurry of colliding harmonies, at others accentuated by triumphant melodies which soar through the dissonance, or plummet in dramatic downward glissandi. There is a constant restlessness, but a restlessness which inches towards peace. Despite its overall length of 18 minutes, the piece is surprisingly compact as a whole, occupying its own space outside of normal time. It distills the past and the present, appealing to universal images of mystery and clarity, danger and safety, disorder and order. The music is at once sublime, and a means of understanding the sublime itself.

I first heard this piece in December of last year, at its very first performance. Vita Hominum, or 'The Life of Man' in English, is the fruit of a collaboration between the composer Edmund Hunt and The Singers, a chamber choir based in Newcastle, as part of the Adopt a Composer scheme run by Making Music. The piece is in equal parts wonderful and strange; the strangeness blurring its impalpable edges, the wonder binding it into a single entity – making the strangeness beautiful.

One important aspect of the performance, and how the audience experiences it, is its spatial element: specifically the use of procession and recession, as well as the transition of sections of the choir as movements progress. When I asked Donald Halliday, the musical director and conductor of The Singers, whether spatial movement in Vita Hominum made it a piece which is more difficult to grapple with than usual performances, he told me that on the contrary he 'didn't feel challenged at all. The very first live music I heard was a marching pipe band in the Highlands. The music approached, passed and carried on into the distance – and I loved that [...] it made me very aware of and sensitive to the relationship between performance and place.'

Indeed, the use of procession is a technique which most people will have encountered before, although there is a feeling of movement throughout Vita Hominum which I believe goes beyond this. The manner in which movement is used in the performance makes this 'relationship between performance and place' an integral and noticeable part of the overall experience, using the enclosed space of the church to intensify the spectacle of the moving choir. One member of the The Singers' bass section, Steve Locks, remarked that movement in the piece 'brought a disparate sound together at the beginning and then dispersed [the choir] in a different way at the end which implied a sort of progression'.

Moreover, movement is perhaps the catalytic element of the piece through which the theme of reordering disorder is realised. Spatial movement is an important aspect of the concept of disorder, as social space is an arena which reflects the order of a society. One definition of 'disorder' in the OED states that it can be manifested as a 'breach of public order'. Therefore, any assembly of people which appears incongruous or unusual in relation to the normal state of an environment can be described as such a breach. Even a benign or benevolent scene, such as the relative disorder of the choir, mirrors somewhat the concept of public disorder. Even from the perspective of the performer it can be 'almost scary' – as Locks, who was part of the leading quartet in the final procession, told me – to sense the procession of 'the mass of the choir' within the previously undisturbed space of the church.

The words of the piece, taken from the work of the Venerable Bede (Benedictine monk, theological scholar, and native Northumbrian), reflect notions of the internal and external struggles of humanity throughout the course of life. There is an allegory of encountering a storm, before coming through it and going on in peace. Edmund Hunt, writing in a blog post for the Adopt a Composer scheme, described this process as ‘an ongoing journey from uncertainty and fear, through the storms and troubles of life, to a place of tranquillity’. In this sense, reordering and the process of emerging from a state of disorder is captured literally in the piece.

However, Halliday told me that he did not initially feel a connection with the words used in the piece, and that many of the texts they looked at ‘seemed too long, and felt objective and a bit cold for [him]’. It was only after time and the opportunity to become ‘better acquainted with the piece’ that the words began to seem ‘admirable’, according to Halliday. In this light composition and practice is an ongoing process of creating an order. The words seem alien in their original context, but given the new musical context they create a more meaningful emotional interaction. There is a constant conflict and disorder about the very act of reordering – the old text has been deconstructed in order to create a new and individually beautiful piece of art.

Looking at the piece in its wider context, I also want to consider how music as a form has the ability to imitate the processes of deconstruction and reordering; of progress, which is more often than not what disorder is a speculative attempt at instigating. The fabric of the composition reflects this, as it ebbs and flows and reforms – like the idea of revolution as being something which returns again and again. There are instances of this process within the structure of the piece. Halliday puts it that ‘all music is a balance of disorder and order, almost always with the piece resolving into order at the end.’ He points out the middle part of the piece as a particularly apt example of this rhythm of disorder and reorder. The ‘Tempestas’ begins with a ‘warning cry’ and eventually descends (literally, with the use of glissandi) through a stormy panic, before eventually ‘[resolving] beautifully’ in ‘peaceful,

balanced phrases’. This then moves into what Hunt intended to be an imitation ‘of calmly lapping waves on the shore’ in the ‘Christus est stella matutina’. In this section, there is a transitory period of repose, of quietude between the turmoil and the final stage of *Vita Hominum*’s metamorphosis. The final stage of this transition is the ascent into a triumphant ‘Alleluia’, completing the movement from a place of sublime fear to one of sublime joy. This example, as pointed out to me, is one which magnifies the inner, hidden subtleties and nuances which music harbours: the change from dissonance to harmony; the final flourish of a cadence which ties a piece together and gives it its final shape.

Where *Vita Hominum* transgresses in this respect, though, is its refusal to completely grant that final solace. Both the actual music and the structure of the piece maintain a sense of disturbance which won’t quite go away. I share this notion with Halliday, who says, ‘I am not so sure the tranquillity at the end of the piece is completely assured. The solo quartet sings the words ‘*deo gratias*’ several times with different harmonies. The last ends on a fifth based on G combined with a tritone based on C – it’s soft, but hardly tranquil!’ There is, then, still something not entirely settled. Even without close analysis of the end of the piece, it is easy to identify how striking – jarring even – it is to finish the final movement with such a glaring sense of incompleteness. The flow seems to be heading towards another period of peace before a final, glorious celebration, yet instead the voices end on a phrase of uncertainty. The disorder is suspended. A reordering is implied but not realised.

The effect of this is a sense of the ongoing flux of order and disorder, in which there is no final destination. *Vita Hominum* masterfully encapsulates the subtle, ephemeral essence of order within its captivating use of musical light and shade. It ends at a liminal space between the two realms of clarity and mystery, giving the piece a unique resonance in keeping with its turbulent themes.