

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: January 15, 2020 by the Orlando Philharmonic at the Plaza Live, Orlando, FL. Co-commissioned by the Orlando Philharmonic, American Composers Orchestra, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and Carnegie Hall, for violinist Jennifer Koh.

Duration: 28'

Instrumentation: Violin solo; 2*2*02; 2200; harp; strings (min. 54332)

Definitions of the word “sanctuary” center around sacredness, but also around safety. It keeps something or someone in and also keeps something or someone out. It can protect either the innocent or the guilty. It serves to set something apart as sacred, to sanctify. It protects from influence and preserves the purity of things and ideas.

The word has new prominence and resonance in our current cultural climate. Inspired by the role of Sanctuary in the lives of American people, including people I know and love, and in Jennifer Koh’s life as well as my own, I undertook a large-scale research project around this powerful word.

My task was simple: find instances of the use of “sanctuary” in a broad range of American writings, in order to reach a greater understanding of its layered meaning within American consciousness. I undertook the historical research for the *Sanctuary* project at the American Antiquarian Society in MA, where I was the William Randolph Hearst Artist Fellow in July 2018. I explored broadsides, poetry, political tracts and speeches, novels and children’s literature – vernacular as well as statesmanlike works – discovering writings that capture the off-hand use of the word in different eras of American history.

In all cases, “sanctuary” carries a sense of the inviolable. It is used to appeal to a sense of the absolute. It appears in the rhetoric of both sides of every important American struggle: Abolition, Suffrage, Secession, Manifest Destiny, Temperance, Marriage Rights, Civil Rights, and the foundational thinking of the Founding Fathers. It aims to bypass rational argument and addresses itself directly to sentiment, justice, moral rightness, piety, bigotry, romantic feeling or patriotism.

In the sources I found, sanctuary can denote separate spheres within one’s domain: his study or studio, her virtue, her boudoir, his private correspondence. It can be a safe place, away from bad influences like Drinking, or a “safe” space for debauchery to express itself freely away from corrective influences like

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women's company or the Law. Intimacy and love pierce the 'inner' sanctuary of the heart and spirit. The White Man's predations pierce the sanctuary of the Native American's beloved land. The presence of a loved one can turn a place into a sanctuary for the beloved. People build sanctuaries around their hearts or souls because they have been hurt, and new tenderness or desire can pierce those protective walls. Poetry can be a sanctuary from darker thoughts. Learning that one you love has done evil can make you feel the shame of having the sanctuary of your heart violated.

Sanctuary, the violin concerto, is in three movements that articulate a journey towards sanctuary. The first movement, "Speak," explores the emotional space within one's soul or mind that spins out ever more urgent appeals for succor or deliverance. Its epigraph, from 1859, is an anonymous quote from a poem in Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion: "Within the soul's deep sanctuary, thought, / Are shadow forms, dim present to my view, / Nor wholly spectral, yet embodied not, / And yet they speak to me with voices true..."

The second movement, "Threshold," takes its title from a contemporary biography of Abraham Lincoln entitled *Every-Day Life of Lincoln*, in which the author quotes a woman who had met the President in person: "...his face! – oh, the pathos of it!...I gazed at him through tears, and felt I had stepped upon the threshold of a sanctuary too sacred for human feet." In this long movement, the actual research comes to life: the movement begins with the orchestra in rhythmic unison, uttering the exact scansion of a collection of found phrases that use the word "sanctuary." The texts, listed below this note in order, can be followed as the movement is heard. I have set the word "sanctuary," which of course occurs at different times in each of the quoted phrases, exactly the same way, following the syllabic emphasis and contour of the word itself. Those who recognize the significance of the intervals I've chosen will notice that they spell H-C-B-A (transposed freely), a shuffling of the B-A-C-H motif first used by Bach himself and then, in homage to him, by hundreds of composers since, including Schumann, Brahms, Schoenberg, Poulenc, and Pärt. The cadenza at the heart of this movement is an expanded utterance of, and meditation on, a quote from Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 masterpiece *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "the heart...took refuge in that inarticulate sanctuary of music, and found there a language in which to breathe..." The cadenza is the threshold of the piece itself, taking us through struggle and distress to a place of release. What follows is an encounter with a personal memory of musical sanctuary: playing Chopin's Etude Opus 10 No. 4 very, very slowly, in order to feel myself crawling inside the yearning yet soothing chromaticism of the inner accompanimental line that runs through it.

The last word of Stowe's quote provides the title of the last short movement, which fills out the joy of finding sanctuary in music. Almost every musician and music-lover I know, including Jenny and myself, has found sanctuary in the music of Bach at one time or other in their lives. Here I remember and celebrate specifically the third movement, Allegro Assai, from Bach's A-minor violin concerto, complete with its 9/8 lilt and its extended bariolage.

So many people on our stages and in our audiences are immigrants and refugees. Personal journeys and tribulations also find us urgently seeking new ground. Music provides a sanctuary; through it we create sacredness and refuge for ourselves and for each other.

– Lisa Bielawa

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Threshold Texts

“The sanctuary made for me...”
–Virginia Stait, “Broken” (1924)

“...a city of refuge and sanctuary in a maddened world...”
–Idaho Daily Statesman, “Peace Through Strength” (1916)

“...an example to the oppressed, a sanctuary for the rights of mankind!”
–General La Fayette, from Journals of the Old Congress (1784)

“Home should be a sanctuary from the world without...”
–Grand Rapids Press, “Of Special Interest to Women: What is Home?” (1908)

“...rush into the mournful sanctuary of misfortune...”
–Savannah Daily Gazette, “Court of Common Pleas” (1817)

“...they made themselves the sanctuaries of the light...”
–Anonymous, Titan Agonistes (1867)

“They...heard no music in the sanctuary of silence...”
–Anonymous, Broken Columns (1863)

“Make a sanctuary for yourself...”
–New Orleans Advocate, “Women’s Federation Plans War Time Aid to U.S. for Members” (1914)

“...even in the sanctuary of your arms...”
–Anonymous, Princess of the Moon (1869)

“The dusty, crowded common street was a sanctuary...”
–Charlotte Daily Observer, “As It Seems to Me” (1908)

“I had stepped upon the threshold of a sanctuary too sacred for human feet.”
–Anonymous, quoted in Francis F. Browne, Every-Day Life of Lincoln (1886)

“...a sanctuary to which you retire to ponder, think, weep, write, read, pray...”
–Kate Field, journal (c.1858)

“...the enslavement of three millions of human beings in that land which should be the sanctuary of liberty...”
–George Thompson, “Complete Suffrage” speech, reprinted in The Liberator (1846)

“There is a sanctuary in the privacy of our lives...”
–Myra Hewes, “Shoals in the Path of Matrimony,” New York Evening Telegram editorial (1908)

“He would control the inmost sanctuary of her mind...”
–Ethel Wheeler, “An Experiment” (Short Story of the Day), Morning Star (1898)

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“...still returning to the sanctuary of the laws.”
–Congressional record, “French Spoliations” (1793)

“The sanctuary was a type of heaven. Such should home be...”
– G.H.W., “The Sanctuary of Home,” American Messenger (1853)

“...beyond the sanctuary of hills like these...”
–Anonymous, The Female Skeptic (1859)

“This is my sanctuary”
–“Louisa,” “My Woodland Sanctuary,” Universalist Union (1845)

“...the one retreat and sanctuary...”
–“John Paul,” “Clubs,” Springfield Republican (1868)

CADENZA:

“As if the poor, dumb heart, threatened – prisoned – took refuge in that inarticulate sanctuary of music, and found there a language in which to breathe...”
–Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852)

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