Sunken City

(Concerto for Piano and Winds, in Memoriam New Orleans)

by

Kyle Gann

(2007)
Instrumentation:

- piano solo
- flute
- alto saxophone
- tenor saxophone
- baritone saxophone
- horn
- 3 trumpets
- 2 trombones
- bass trombone
- electric bass (or acoustic)

Duration: 25 minutes

Score in C
Sunken City
(Concerto for Piano and Winds in Memoriam New Orleans)
(2007)

Given my usual idiom, Sunken City (Concerto for Piano and Winds in Memoriam New Orleans) was a departure, whose direction was determined by the medium. Anthony Fiumara asked me for a work for piano and the Orkest de Volharding of Amsterdam. Being an American of postminimalist tendencies, I could have responded with a one-idea piece of continuous textural transformation, which would hardly have been outside my stylistic proclivities. But to write a slowly changing sound continuum for brass, reeds, and piano seems impossible; the piano will barely have space to be heard. The first requirement that imposed itself was that orchestra and piano would have to alternate, which led me to the dramatic shape of a true concerto. I've always wanted to write a piano concerto, but had always thought of strings, woodwinds, drums. I considered the few classical models for piano with brass, and was not impressed. (I am familiar with two wonderful concerti for piano and winds, Stravinsky's and Kevin Volans's; but both employ larger woodwind forces, which I didn't have available.) The successful model for brass, reeds, and piano that came to mind was 1920s New Orleans jazz.

At the same time, I had just been deeply touched by Spike Lee's documentary When the Levees Broke, detailing the tragedy of the government-allowed destruction, and subsequent forced evacuation, of much of New Orleans. (My childhood was dotted with visits to southern Louisiana, where my mother grew up, and some of our oldest friends became Katrina evacuees.) In the documentary, officials from New Orleans visit Amsterdam to see how levees are supposed to be built. So there was my Amsterdam connection, dovetailing with the New Orleans
jazz, and I acquiesced to my subject matter as irresistible. The title Sunken City, I thought, might draw a link between Amsterdam and New Orleans - though, hopefully, never with similarly catastrophic connotations.

The first movement is pure fun, the Mardi Gras New Orleans of my imagination, a stylized portrait of the energy level and harmonic language of the 1920s music of Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and Bix Beiderbecke. Precedents to this kind of symphonic jazz exist, of course, in Copland, Gershwin, and Milhaud, that are bound to be evoked here, but I hoped that the deliberate naivete would all the better set up the second movement's desolation. There are two simple main themes, or perhaps only motives, used in the piece: an alternation of two notes a step apart (sometimes expanded to a third, as in the opening), and a rhythmically irregular repetition of a single note. Only one actual quotation appears in the first movement, a re-voiced chord progression from Frankie Trumbauer's song "Jubilee." Premonitions of the tragedy cloud the coda, which ends in a hasty retreat. The much longer second movement is a kind of interrupted chaconne, based on its opening 17 chords (spelling out the repeated-note theme). Successive variations suggest stages of grief, outrage, nostalgia, and acceptance, but finally the piano drifts into Jelly Roll Morton's "Dead Man Blues" (or rather, its chord changes, with some abstracted bits of the tune), which spreads into the orchestra. The last few minutes return to the chaconne chords, no longer in strict order. The single pitch that runs through all 17 chords is A; the "Dead Man Blues" passages are in B-flat, and the major seventh A above B-flat major provides the movement's rare moments of solace.

The obvious model for a two-movement work with a vastly larger second movement, of course, is Beethoven's Op. 111 (also Mahler's Eighth Symphony). With Beethoven in mind, I had planned to suggest some sort of transcendental acceptance, but as a friend reminded me, there can be no acceptance of what happened in New Orleans; not the natural tragedy, which was so foreseeable (and actually didn't happen, since Hurricane Katrina devolved into merely a level 3 storm before reaching the shore), but the unforgivable political tragedy: the levees never built to last in the first place, the uncaring abandonment of the population to heat, thirst, and death by drowning, the politicized gutting of government agencies meant to respond to disasters, the turning back at gunpoint of honest citizens trying to escape the city by walking over bridges. My friend was right, and the piece ends as the Katrina debacle itself has so far ended, in bitter inconclusiveness.

- Kyle Gann
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
change to flute

in tempo

Ossia:
Sunken City
Sunken City
Fl.
A. Sax.
T. Sax.
B. Sax.
Hn.
Tpt. 1
Tpt. 2
Tpt. 3
Pno.
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
B. Tbn.
E. Bass

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
G \( \frac{j}{= 112} \), slightly faster and with abandon

Sunken City
(piccolo)

Fl.

Tpt. 1

Tpt. 2

Tpt. 3

Tbn. 1

Tbn. 2

B. Tbn.

E. Bass

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Fl.

A. Sax.

T. Sax.

B. Sax.

Hn.

Tpt. 1

Tpt. 2

Tpt. 3

Pno.

Tbn. 1

Tbn. 2

B. Tbn.

E. Bass

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Fl.
A. Sax.
T. Sax.
B. Sax.
Hn.
Tpt. 1
Tpt. 2
Tpt. 3
Pno.
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
B. Tbn.
E. Bass

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
ii. After

Desolate

Piano

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Fl.
A. Sax.
T. Sax.
B. Sax.
Hn.
Tpt. 1
Tpt. 2
Tpt. 3
Pno.
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
B. Tbn.
E. Bass

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
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Sunken City
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Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Fl.

A. Sax.

T. Sax.

B. Sax.

Hn.

Tpt. 1

Tpt. 2

Tpt. 3

Pno.

Tbn. 1

Tbn. 2

B. Tbn.

E. Bass

Sunken City
Sunken City
accel.

Fl. 
A. Sax. 
T. Sax. 
B. Sax. 
Hn. 
Tpt. 1 
Tpt. 2 
Tpt. 3 
Pno. 
Tbn. 1 
Tbn. 2 
B. Tbn. 
E. Bass 

without mute 
Solo

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
with building excitement

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Fl.
A. Sax.
T. Sax.
B. Sax.
Hn.
Tpt. 1
Tpt. 2
Tpt. 3
Pno.
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
B. Tbn.
E. Bass

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
floating, distant

Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
Sunken City
February 6, 2007, Germantown, NY -
July 1, 2007, Dallas, TX

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Germantown, NY

Sunken City