

Program Notes
Piano Sonata No. 1
Elegy for the Victims of the Boston Marathon Bombing
Jacob Harris

By Jamie Chelel

The Boston Marathon bombing has cast a long shadow over the city of Cambridge, home to the Tsarnaev brothers and those who knew them.

I had the privilege of becoming part of this exceptional community when I moved here as a music student and what struck me is that former classmates of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev each have a light in their eyes -- a glimmer of hope that has helped them navigate the painful reconciling of fond memories and a new bitter reality.

One such classmate is my boyfriend, Jacob Harris, a composer and pianist. He gave voice to his mourning in the form of a piano composition called *Elegy for the Victims of the Boston Marathon Bombing*.

It begins in the key of D minor with a half-step teetering on the edge of all-consuming grief. Historically in Western classical music D minor has represented death, as heard in Mozart's *Requiem*. The half-step inflection -- the going back and forth between two adjacent notes -- is also seen in Mozart's work. We hear it in his A minor Piano Sonata K.310, which he wrote in wake of his mother's death.

Themes in *Elegy for Victims of the Boston Marathon Bombing*:

- Theme A, the opening phrase beginning with the half-step inflection, represents pain and longing.
- Theme B recalls reminiscence. Its sighing melody evokes innocence and nostalgia.
- Theme of Longing, as Jake and I named it, embodies the most desperate moments. It is a prayer for strength in the face of unfathomable questions. It is wonderment and grief in one swirling package.
- Theme C is the reawakening to beauty.

All of the themes presented in the opening section return throughout the piece, changed, flipped, arranged and rearranged in a formal organization known as a sonata. Sonatas generally consist of three sections and in this case, an ending coda.

The first section, the exposition, introduces the themes.

The second section, known as the development follows. Here themes are explored from different angles. This section is full of emotional progress and growth heard through dramatic key changes and unexpected harmonies.

This is followed by the recapitulation section, where we revisit the thematic material one last time, looking back at the journey thus far.

The final section begins with a fugal cadenza which allows the listener to step back and be surrounded by the themes as they are systematically presented, one by one. This is a compositional style mastered by J.S. Bach that remains popular to this day.

The piece closes with a coda, almost a therapeutic coming-to-terms with the losses that followed the bombing. The hands on the piano move apart to opposite ends of the keyboard, the right ascending into the heavens and the left accepting its place on Earth. At several points the hands reach back fleetingly towards each other, the space between them filled with a sense of both longing and acceptance. The two chords at the far ends of the keyboard that close the piece envelop the space in the middle with healing and a sense that one can safely open their eyes again towards the world.

The evolution of the themes throughout the piece directly reflected Jake's own emotional journey to reclaim the world as a place still imbued with beauty and possibility.

In the *Elegy*, Jake also reflects on the personalities of those he loves in this city, imbibing a sense of their wit and compassion through the music.

The serenity the music ultimately achieves comes from its resolution in D major, the vibrant parallel major to the opening grief-soaked D minor. By the piece's final notes we end where we begin, but from a different perspective -- one that lets the light in.

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