

Birthday Quartet

for Violin, Viola, Violoncello, and Piano

Composed May 9—October 20, 2013; Aug.29—October 9, 2015

Duration: about 30 minutes

In early 2010, I had a peculiar dream of a respectful conversation with Elvis Presley. He said I should write a symphony based on speeches by Martin Luther King Jr. Well—who can refuse the King of Rock and/or Roll? Especially since I share my birthday, January 15, with MLK, and classical radio stations frequently play a composer's music on his birthday.

The speeches of Martin Luther King are copyrighted, and the MLK Center is notoriously litigious. Thus this cannot be a choral work, nor can it have direct references to texts in the score. Instead I use the rhythms and inflections from speeches that are incorporated in themes. The first movement uses a few phrases from the “How long? Not long” speech of March 25, 1965 at the Alabama State Capitol. The second movement is based on the Buddhist mantra “Gate gate, paragate, parasamgate, bhodi swaha”; this can be roughly translated (as by Ram Dass) as “Beyond, beyond the beyond, beyond the beyond the beyond, hail the goer.” The third movement returns to MLK and uses bits of the “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech given on April 3, 1968 in Memphis Tennessee. The first version of the fourth movement (started writing it Aug. 28, 2013) used the final section of the Dream Speech given at the March on Washington on August 28, 1968, with narrator. After hearing the chamber version, I thought this first version of the fourth movement was not suitable, and I withdrew it.

On August 29, 2015, I started writing a second version of the last movement. The beginning uses the rhythm of the words “And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” The music then departs from the text, with the motives from “table of brotherhood” and “I have a dream” used repeatedly. Next comes “Let freedom ring” along with other phrases from the speech. The movement closes with “Free at last, free at last (repeated), thank God almighty we are free at last!”

After writing this version for clarinet quartet, I orchestrated the score, which was performed by the Raleigh Symphony Orchestra in 2016; the last movement was performed by the Durham Symphony. However, I was displeased with my orchestration, and in 2023 I withdrew the symphonic version.

The premiere performance of this piece was of the chamber edition for violin, clarinet, cello and piano on February 18, 2014, with the original fourth movement, without narrator. I made this additional chamber version for piano quartet at the same time.

Accidentals hold through the measure and not beyond, and do not refer to other octaves. Sometimes I include courtesy accidentals to avoid confusion.

Bill Robinson

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cover photograph; March on Washington, August 28, 1963