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Black Aggie: A Tale of American Folklore

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BLACK AGGIE: A TALE OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE – THE MUSIC AND THE MAKING

A Thesis
Submitted to the Mary Pappert School of Music

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Music

By
Gabrielle Elliott

May 2013
BLACK AGGIE: A TALE OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE – THE MUSIC AND THE MAKING

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ABSTRACT

BLACK AGGIE:
A TALE OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE – THE MUSIC AND THE MAKING

By
Gabrielle Elliott
May 2013

Thesis supervised by Professor Lynn Emberg Purse

Black Aggie: A Tale of American Folklore is a musical work written for wind
symphony and synthesizer. The piece has the possibility to be performed in two different
ways. It can either be performed by a live wind symphony or can be played as an
electronic realization with media. The piece was inspired by the legend of Black Aggie –
a peculiar grave statue with a series of fantastical stories surrounding her existence. The
media presentation is to be played along with the live or synthesized performance. The
media consists of photographs and footage of key elements in Black Aggie’s legend. All
of the media was manipulated with Photoshop and transferred to the video editing
software iMovie. The realization of the music was created using Finale, Logic Pro, and
East West Symphonic Gold. The music and the media together create a vivid depiction of
Black Aggie’s legend.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Inspiration and History</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Aspects</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cemetery</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cemetery Comes Alive</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chase</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realization of the Piece</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Score</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF EXAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. Black Aggie: The Inspiration and History

Black Aggie: A Tale of American Folklore is based on the legend of Black Aggie and the peculiar events surrounding her existence. Black Aggie is the familiar name of a statue of ill repute that has strong historical ties to its surrounding community. Originally located in the Druid Ridge Cemetery in Pikesville, Maryland the statue has since been moved to the Dolly Madison house in Washington D.C. Originally, the statue was a decoration for the Felix Agnus grave site but quickly grew to become a legend. Because of the many mysteries Black Aggie brought, her presence became a huge sensation in the Baltimore area. Tale after tale seemed to surface of her foreboding evil. The spirits of the other graves were said to gather around her and at the stroke of midnight her eyes would glow red. Anyone who met her gaze would be struck blind and death would come to those that passed under her shadow. This peculiar statue’s story is the inspiration for the musical work Black Aggie: A Tale of American Folklore.

I chose to highlight the legend of the young college boy who as a fraternity hazing prank decided to challenge Black Aggie. He approached the statue at midnight and faced the consequences. According to legend, Black Aggie rose to the occasion and this was the last time such a prank was suggested. The statue was soon moved to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. to let the rumors settle. It was finally brought out again and put in the courtyard of the Dolly Madison House where it has peacefully rested until today.

II. Performance Aspects

Black Aggie: A Tale of American Folklore was written for wind symphony with the addition of the synthesizer. The can be performed two different ways. The first option
is a standalone electronic realization of the music with media. The alternative performance is meant for a live wind symphony played along with the media presentation. This particular instrumentation was chosen because of the many options of instruments to create almost limitless timbres to portray the story of Black Aggie. The timbres of the woodwinds, brass, string basses, percussion, and electronics play very important roles in creating the entire backdrop of the piece.

III. The Cemetery

The piece begins conveying the innocent scene of the tree branches gently rustling in the cool breeze in the Druid Ridge Cemetery. Although the landscape is beautiful, there is a sense of something grotesque. The music portrays this scene by using the woodwinds to create almost harmonious lines that intersect one by one until stacks of chords in contrasting keys are sounded together. The opening section has a contrapuntal feel while still creating tightly woven harmonies. An example is seen in measures 8-12.

This section of the piece has many examples of familiar harmonies with the addition of a

![Example 1: Measures 8 through 12 of Black Aggie](image_url)
few unexpected notes that do not naturally occur in the key to create a foreboding atmosphere. The music parallels the boy who is just beginning to become aware of his surroundings. He has entered the well kept cemetery and feels a sense of uneasiness but cannot recognize its cause. The consonant chords represent the beautiful landscape while the dissonances portray the boy’s impending fate.

The next section is in the same character as the previous section and is a continuation of unsettling harmonies. The opening theme (a B flat octatonic scale) is played by the alto flute and the clarinet. The theme is then doubled with the alto flute and marimba while the glockenspiel begins to playfully travel through different sets of augmented chords. This section is portraying nightfall settling. There is the light scurrying of some field mice, a few birds, and the rustling of leaves. Nothing seems out of the ordinary. In the soprano saxophone and the bass clarinet, the boy's theme is established.

Example 2: B flat octatonic scale in the clarinets and alto flute measures 18-19

Example 3: Boy's Theme measures 23-24
Throughout the entirety of the piece, the boy’s theme is never dissonant. His theme represents innocence which will greatly contrast to the theme of Black Aggie which will appear later in the piece.

IV. Cemetery Comes Alive

The music is soft and lyrical. The visual scene is the boy leaning against a tree and he is falling asleep as everything turns to dark. One by one the cemetery ghosts begin to wake. They discover the boy and know that if he stays in the cemetery he will have to face the consequences of Black Aggie. The other ghosts have no malicious intent and no authority to interact with the boy to warn him. Black Aggie is the last to awaken at the stroke of midnight. In the music, the stroke of midnight can be heard by the chimes and

Example 4: The Stroke of Midnight measures 27-30
the brass. They both play a steady 6/8 rhythm. In the legend, the other ghosts are seated at
the base of her statue. Black Aggie can sense that the other ghosts are uneasy and she
begins to become upset. The music reflects her tantrum. The piccolo and the flute become
the most active of the instruments with sixteenth notes as the rest of the instruments begin
to follow suit. The music increases in momentum until Black Aggie’s first themes
appears. The theme is presented first in the trumpets harmonized with the brass and the
saxophones. Much of the harmonies are perfect fifths. The fifths create the sense of
regality associated with Black Aggie. In addition, the brass instrumentation contributes to
her queenly presence. A brief saxophone chorale is presented correlating to Black Aggie’s
realization that the other ghosts have nothing to hide. Her demeanor becomes peaceful
once again. By this time, the boy has awoken and seen the other ghosts. Especially
terrified of Black Aggie’s glowing red eyes, he decides to run.

V. The Chase

Previously, the piece consisted of many meter changes and overlapping parts.
However, in measure 114 the meter changes to a constant 6/8. There is a strong focus on
percussion in this section. While the flutes have the most lyrical melody, the
glockenspiel, snare drum, timpani, and marimba have rhythmic lines which add
momentum. In this scene, Black Aggie has become aware of the escapee. The saxophones
begin dissonant rhythmic pulsing. The accented pulse in the saxophones is comprised of
altered dominant chords.

![Example 5: Black Aggie's Secondary Theme in the Chase Scene measure](image)

Black Aggie’s secondary theme is
juxtaposed with the boy’s theme and this creates
harmonic tension between the two opposing parts.
The boy’s eighth note theme is tonal with a strong rhythmic drive propelled by the percussion. His theme is realized in the piccolo, flutes, clarinets, and saxophones. Black Aggie’s theme is syncopated and is harmonized in a highly dissonant fashion.

Through the chaos, the glockenspiel outlines important rhythms such as the rhythms of the boy’s and Black Aggie’s theme. Even as tension builds and the harmonies become increasingly dense, the glockenspiel allows the rhythm of the themes to still be recognizable. Black Aggie’s theme becomes more apparent as the chase scene progresses. There is a sense of urgency as her theme travels between instrument parts and builds multiple layers. Measure 161 is a distinct change from any previous section. There is an unusual quarter note triplet pulse representing Black Aggie’s aggressive drudging footsteps. The climax of this section is propelled by the climbing fifths in the flutes, oboes, and string basses. The harmony becomes severely more dissonant with the addition of the marimba. The high point descends into a series of chromatic lines. The

![Example 6: Chromatic Lines in The Flutes measures 161-162](image)

rhythm of the chromatic lines is vaguely reminiscent of Black Aggie’s secondary theme. Instead of the lines climbing in an upwards motion as before, the chromatic lines are descending in cascades until the boy’s theme has returned. He has barely escaped the clutches of Black Aggie. He is unharmed but is tired from the chase. The rhythm of the theme is intact; however, a few notes are changed to show he is no longer as robust or naïve as before he entered the cemetery. Instead of strictly arpeggiated eighth notes of an A minor chord, the boy’s theme introduces the new notes F and B. The momentum starts
to wane as instruments drop to a piano dynamic and begin playing in their lower registers.

The piece has lost much of its rhythmic energy but begins to explore an experimental pallet of sounds used by the percussion. The harmonies are sustained by a bell like sound in the synthesizer while the percussion creates an eerie atmosphere. One of the techniques used in the piece is an upside down cymbal played by soft mallets over top of the timpani. The timpani is slowly tuned as the cymbal is struck. The next prominent sound is the wind chimes which contrast to the low rumble of the timpani. Also, a cymbal is bowed to create a sharp metallic sound to add to the unearthly atmosphere of this section of the piece. The bowed cymbal sounds as if Black Aggie herself is shrieking in the distance because of her defeat. The music slowly fades out and slows in tempo. A descending diminished arpeggio is combined with the unearthly sounds until the music of the cemetery has faded away in the distance as the boy runs off never to return again.

VI. Realization of the Piece

To realize the musical work Black Aggie: A Tale of American Folklore, I began initially composing on manuscript paper. Then I used the program Finale to create the score. After the score was completely entered into Finale, I exported all of the instrument

![Figure 1: Logic Pro Track Level Automation](image)
tracks as MIDI files and then imported the tracks into Logic Pro. From there, I was able to manipulate the instrument tracks until the sounds were the right dynamic level and blended appropriately.

I used the Hyper Editor and removed the region level automation that Finale had imported. Then I went to track level automation and manually adjusted the dynamics. For the instrument sounds themselves, I used East West Symphonic Gold which is a package of acoustic samples. To create the unconventional percussion sounds, I recorded those live. Then I took the recordings and imported the audio files into Logic Pro with each percussion sound having a separate track. The recorded sounds mixed with the acoustic samples blended well together to create the unearthly atmosphere of the piece.

VII. Media

For the media presentation, I prepared by visiting the Druid Ridge Cemetery in Pikesville, Maryland and took many pictures and short videos. I captured the surrounding landscape, other statues and mausoleums. Although Black Aggie’s statue no longer resides in the Druid Ridge Cemetery, I found the grave site of Felix Agnus and his family. Felix Agnus’ grave originally contained Black Aggie’s statue until it was moved to the Dolly Madison House because of the many rumors and terrors associated with it. The grave has a darkened circle where Black Aggie’s figure used to rest.

Figure 2: Likeness of Black Aggie Manipulated in Photoshop
pictures were organized in Photoshop and then manipulated. The challenge was creating an eerie atmosphere with the pictures I had taken. Since the pictures were taken during the day, they were well lit and the weather was fair. I used Photoshop to manipulate most of the photographs in order to make them appear as night scenes. First I duplicated the image to a new layer and used a strong gaussian blur. Then I changed the layer mode from normal to overlay. These changes created a glow effect. Next I added a dark blue color layer and changed the mode from normal to color burn. Lastly, I dialed back the opacity. Once the pictures were manipulated, I created a movie in iMovie with the additional video I had taken outside of the Druid Ridge Cemetery. The video was filmed with a 13 megapixel camera in HD. I filmed the subject’s feet wandering through the woods and finally resting. For the chase scene I filmed the subject’s feet running and the hand of another subject portraying Black Aggie. The hand reaches out to grab the boy’s feet and misses only by a few inches. All that can be seen of either subject is the hands or the feet at all times.

VIII. Conclusion

Black Aggie: A Tale of American Folklore was created to evoke an experience mixed with fright, shock, suspense, and beauty. The combination of the music and the visuals generate a haunting experience. The music, although portraying the occurrences in the visuals, oftentimes is the center of attention in the project. Both the media and the music have very important roles to fill. The music crafts a lively backdrop for the story while the media explains the exact scenes which correlate to specific instances in the music. Although Black Aggie is no longer located in the Druid Ridge Cemetery, I was very grateful to discover this cultural gem. The influence Black Aggie has had on the
surrounding community is immense. She is a historical symbol that has captivated generation upon generation.
Works Cited

   18 August 2012.
BLACK AGGIE
A TALE OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE
FOR WIND SYMPHONY
GABRIELLE ELLIOTT
INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo
2 Flutes
Alto Flute
2 Oboes
2 Clarinets in Bb
Bass Clarinet
Bassoon
Soprano Saxophone
Alto Saxophone
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone
4 French Horns
2 Trumpets in Bb
2 Tenor Trombones
Bass Trombone
Euphonium
Timpani
Snare Drum
Cymbals
Triangle
Glockenspiel
Marimba
Chimes
Keyboard Synthesizer – Bell and String Patch
Double Bass
Black Aggie
A Tale of American Folklore

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Score

Gabrielle Elliott
Picc.
Fl. 1
A. Fl.
Bsn.
Ob.
Bb-Cl. 1
B. Cl.
A. Sax. 1
A. Sax.
Hn. 1
Hn.
Glb.
Mbb.
Chm.
S.Dr.
Timp.
D.B.
Synth.

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Picc.
Fl. 1
A. Fl.
Ob.
Bb-Cl. 1
B. Cl.
A. Sx. 1
A. Sx.
T. Sx.
B. Sx.
Hn. 1
Hn.
B♭ Tpt.
Fl. 1
A. Fl.
Ob.
Bb-Cl. 1
B. Cl.
Hn. 1
Hn.
B♭ Tpt.
Gbk.