Suite for Mother and Child

by Daniel Zwickel ben Avrâm MacJean

A Benefit Concert for the Water Protectors at Standing Rock
[To listen to “Jennifer” (a computer MIDI file generated by a music compuscript), followed by an exposition by pianist and composer Christopher Johnson, click HERE.]
“Suite for Mother and Child” had its genesis, around the tenth anniversary of 9-11, as a concept for a program featuring my solo piano music and songs. The idea languished until January of 2013, when I learned of the brutal slaying of 27-year-old Jessi Kingeter, the daughter of my friend Shanti Baker.

I recalled a piano composition I had recently come across, thinking it was called “Jessica.” Here is what he wrote on the music compuscript:

This piece came to me the day after Christmas, 2000. I had taken a telephone message, and I mis-remembered a name as Jennifer, as I was noodling on the piano.

Somehow, Jennifer became the name of the song. The original ending was conventionally consonant, not containing that bitter-sweet triplet figure in the soprano voice. I wondered why it came to me and wanted to stay, then I heard that the notes were singing "Jennifer", and finally knew why it had named itself.

When I heard of Jessi’s death, I cannot say why that song came back to me. After all, her name, I first heard, was Jessica. Then I read that her full name was Jennifer Jessica Jean Kingeter.

—Daniel, 31 Dec., 2012

As I thought about the song, an idea came to me. It is very brief, a mere eleven bars long, hardly the stuff of concert stage. Of course, Beethoven took a simple, “Da da da Dum!”, and look what he did with it!

I had composed and recorded a large work based on the liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass, from sixteen years as cantor in a Catholic Church. I employed jazz musician friends of mine, and marveled anew at how one could create something complex, beautiful, even stunning, all from a simple melody and a handful of chords. I would listen at the resultant composition and reflected, with humility, that I could never have written what emerged from my pianist friends’ hands.

So, why not take “Jennifer” and give it to several jazz pianists, have them play with it, and see what comes. I suspected that, although working from the same beginning statement, the individuality of the musicians would lead to completely different extrapolations – variations on a theme. Perhaps, if a critical mass were reached, of ‘X’ number of Variations, there would even be enough for a concert. And so a larger idea took shape.

It almost embarrasses me to claim membership in a composers group. Yes, I am a composer. Though as yet unpublished, I have received commissions and have recorded, and have been accepted into the Contra Costa Performing Arts Society’s Composers Group. But I felt too intimidated, at first, to play for them. When I finally decided to, and was driving to the workshop, I thought that the selected pieces should have a collective title. I’m not
sure just how it came to me. Perhaps it was the childlike quality of a suite of piano “miniatures” that was among the pieces, but “Suite for Mother and Child just seemed perfect.

Jessi’s was not the only death that haunted me. A friend in my church has asked for my help with a memorial musical project for a family she was close to whose daughter, a bright, popular and promising 19-year-old dance student at the University of Texas, named Haruka, was senselessly killed near her campus.

I was inspired to complete the work for performance, and in the process wrote a song for Haruka based on the “Jennifer” theme.

As I became involved with Standing Rock and the water protectors it occurred to me that they might benefit from a performance of my music, and so this concert was born.

Leonard Bernstein, upon learning of the death of President Kennedy, wrote: “This will be my reply to violence: to make music more beautifully, more intensely, more beautifully than ever before.” *

“Suite for Mother and Child” is my reply. May it be so.

— Daniel Zwickel ben Avrám MacJean
January 28, 2017

* The full text from Bernstein is worthy of note: “We musicians, like everyone else, are numb with sorrow at this murder, and with rage at the senselessness of the crime. But this sorrow and rage will not inflame us to seek retribution; rather they will inflame our art. Our music will never again be quite the same. This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before. And with each note we will honor the spirit of John Kennedy, commemorate his courage, and reaffirm his faith in the Triumph of the Mind.” — Madison Square Garden, NYC, Monday, November 25, 1963
The Story

While working on an arrangement for the Suite, it occurred to me that a story could be told in dance, and so I began thinking of this as music for a ballet. A story emerged, gaining clarity as I worked.

A young child, entranced with the idea of becoming a ballerina, has donned her mother’s tutu and is playing ballerina. She is joined by her mother, dressed in casual garb, and they engage in a playful *pas de deux*.

The mother leaves the stage, the child yawns and falls asleep. Her mother returns, kneels and holds her in her arms. After a while, she rises with her little girl and walks off, sleepily.

A older girl in tutu enters and dances, doll-like, to a piece that sounds like a music box. She is the young child, now a student. She concludes her dance, yawns and exits.

Her mother enters, in tutu, cradling a baby that is no longer there. She imitates the child’s dance, but wears a sad expression. As she finishes her dance, the mother slowly falls to the floor, still cradling the infant that is not there.

The concluding song of Suite for Mother and Child is called “Dance Like You,” an homage to Haruka. It is of a little girl who has been inspired by Haruka and is, dancing in her footsteps, as it were.

A note of explanation: the concluding “coda” ends with a recording of an energetic setting to the English text to the traditional prayer Ave Maria. Haruka’s family is Catholic, and the iconic “Madonna and Child” occurred to me, as a parallel to the Mother and Child. I wished to end on a hopeful note, even celebratory, and so I chose to conclude the concert with my composition “Hail Mary.”
PROGRAM

Prelude and Introit

“In the Stillness Of the Morning” / “Listen To Your Heart’s Song”

“Suite For Mother and Child”

“Jennifer and Variation”
“As I Watch You Sleeping” / “Music Box” /
“Lullaby for Uncle Fester”
“Dance Like You”

Coda:

“Sing To the Heart!”
“Deux Gymnopédies” / “The Room Is Quiet”
“Hail Mary”


**Lyrics:**

**“In the Stillness Of the Morning”**

In the stillness of the morning,  
In the shadows of my soul I perceive the Divine.  
And so I say, “Namaste, my brothers and sisters.”  
Namaste, blessed be. Amen.

**“As I Watch You Sleeping”**

As I watch you sleeping in my arms,  
Faerie dust and moonbeams all around us,  
As I watch you dreaming in my arms  
Quietness and peacefulness surround us.

Lullaby, sweetness, lullaby;  
I'll not let the darkness harm you;  
only light will touch your face.

Lullaby, sweetness, lullaby;  
I could watch you dream forever,  
knowing you will wake to me.

Ev'ry time I look at you I see myself,  
all my fears revealed  
Ev'ry time I look inside I at you there  
and my soul is healed I see myself, all my fears revealed  
As I watch you sleeping,  
As I watch you dreaming in my arms

**“Lullaby for Uncle Fester”**

Sleep, little one, sleep, my darling  
Floating upon the gentle stream.  
Through the forest, cool and green,  
Sleep, my darling, sleep.
Sleep, little one, sleep, my darling
Rising through fleecy clouds so grand,
Gazing upon the peaceful land,
Sleep, my darling, sleep.

Close your pretty eyes,
And before you realize
Into a dreamland you’ll fly,

Changed in the wink of an eye
Into a fairy princess, fairy princess ...

Sleep, little one, sleep, my darling
Resting within the hand of God,

Safely within His warm embrace.
Sleep, my darling sleep

“Dance Like You”

There was a time when my fondest dream
was to dance like you, dance like you;
Through your eyes I now realize that
different dreams come true.

Whirling through the stratosphere,
brilliant-hued stars from the heavens appear.

Now you are gone, but the dance lingers on
and the mem’ry of you will reveal
all the wonders of the simple day-to-day.

There was a time when my fondest dream
was to dance like you, dance like you ...

“Sing To the Heart!”

Imagine ... imagine ....
Imagine in our darkness shines a light with which we see
A hope and promise of a world where we can truly be.
Imagine living in a world where justice will prevail.
And working with compassion in our hearts we cannot fail.

Imagine creating a world where people live as one;
Imagine now, my friends, our transformation's just begun.
   [Sing to the center of the universe.]
Sing it out loud and clear, so that everyone can hear.
   [Imagine people feeling that they're no longer apart.]
Sing to the Heart - Sing to the Heart!

   Baruch ata Adonai,
   Eloheinu melech ha'olam;
   Halo lechol shirayich ani kinor.
   Baruch ata Adonai!
       [We praise You, Eternal God,
        Sovereign of the universe
        Behold, I am a violin for all your songs.]

Now sing!
Sing to the center of the universe;
Sing it out loud and clear, so that everyone can hear.
Sing to the Heart — Sing to the heart!

“The Room Is Quiet”

The Room Is Quiet; peace has descended here.
We lift up our voice in prayer; let compassion banish despair.
From deep within us, the still, small voice we hear,
Offering balm to our wounds.

Inward we turn, stilling our mind, emptying all.
Our eyes close, stillness
Peace fills our consciousness, ego vanished.
The Room Is Quiet ... .
“Hail Mary” (Ave Maria)

Hail Mary, full of grace art thou,
Among women, blessed, blessed art thou
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,
Our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ.

*Ave Maria! Ave Maria!
Sancta Maria, Sancta Maria.*

Holy Mary, mother of God,
We beseech you, pray for us sinners now,
And at the hour of our death. Alleluia, amen.

*Ave Maria! Ave Maria!
Sancta Maria, Sancta Maria.*

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam,
Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam
Shechecheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higyanu lazman hazeh.

[Blessed are you, our God,
Creator of time and space,
Who has supported us, protected us
And brought us safe to this moment.]

Holy Mary, mother of God
Holy queen from heav'n above.

Grace us with thy saving pow'r.
Heal us with thy saving grace.

(Sancta Maria.)

*Ave Maria, Sancta Maria. (Hail, Maria, holy Maria)*
Blessed mother of God. Amen