

James Lee III (b. 1975)

Sukkot Through Orion's Nebula

Written: 2011

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 12 minutes

The Sphinx Organization, established in 1996 and dedicated to building diversity in classical music, claims that music of Black and Latino composers “accounts for less than one percent of classical music performed each year.” To remedy that situation, Sphinx launched the Sphinx Commissioning Consortium – a group of thirteen orchestras, including the Grand Rapids Symphony. The Consortium pledged to commission a new work from a Black or Latino each year and all thirteen orchestras committed to presenting that piece in the year after its completion. Tonight you are hearing the third commission from the Consortium, James Lee’s *Sukkot Through Orion’s Nebula*.

James Lee III was born in St. Joseph, Michigan and completed a bachelor’s degree in piano, and a master’s and doctorate degree in composition from the University of Michigan. Some of his primary teachers included William Bolcom, Bright Sheng, and Michael Daugherty. “I want to compose music to reach to the inner soul of the listener,” he says, “that elevates them regardless of race and religious affiliation.” He provides the following comments about tonight’s work:

“*Sukkot Through Orion’s Nebula* is a festive work for orchestra. *Sukkot* is a Hebrew word for the “Feast of Tabernacles.” In the biblical days, this holiday was celebrated on the 15th day of the month of Tishrei (late September to late October). It was the most joyous of the fall festivals that God mandated the Hebrews to observe. It was also a thanksgiving celebration for the blessings of the fall harvest. *Orion’s Nebula* refers to the Orion constellation in space. The structure of this nebula forms a roughly spherical cloud that

peaks in density near the core. The cloud displays a range of velocities and turbulence, particularly around the core region.

This work is constructed in seven sections: (1) Reminiscences of the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) open the work with percussive, forceful sounds of the snare and bass drums. This is further enhanced by the horns, which imitate the calls of the shofar (a ram's horn sounded on those holy days). (2) The full orchestra continues to a cadence foreshadowing the grand advent of God. (3) The woodwinds follow with joyful flourishes and dance like celebrations, which imitate the people's reception of the Messiah. As this music continues, the motives pass on to the percussion section, piano, harp, and eventually the strings. (4) Previous melodies and motives are developed and transformed among the orchestra. This section celebrates the Second Coming of God. (5) Orion is the one constellation mentioned specifically in the Old Testament. The muted brass, singing violins, percussion instruments, and woodwinds are intended to evoke celestial images of the Messiah coming down out of heaven through the Orion constellation, then the redeemed saints traveling through the constellation, and finally the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. Violins soar in the higher registers, which tend to have a quality of weightlessness. Trills among the strings cease as they continue to climb to heights of bliss in paradise. (6) The bass and snare drums provide a reprise of the "shofar themes." This continues with orchestral exclamations of joy. (7) There are several passages of call and response among the ensemble in the final celebration, which continues until the work ends with an explosion of sound.