Normalizing Evil: The Last 100 Years, 1924-2024

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For Oboe, Bassoon, percussion (tubular bells and snare drum), Harp, Piano, and Cello

First performance June 2024 by American Modern Ensemble at Mostly Modern Festival, Saratoga Springs, NY

Duration: 7:30

I had a dream in which I heard the voice of Luxor (I know, that is a city in ancient Egypt; it was possibly Luthor, a villain in various versions of Superman and the Marvel universe). He said “You will do evil, and no longer think it is evil”. This gave me the idea for a piece in these times of fake news, AI, the rise of authoritarianism and fascism, the distraction of too much “information”. Our Polish friend Jacek used to comment in the early 2000’s that US news, like that in Poland under Soviet control, was propaganda. We have many pleasurable electronic escapes that many of us use – we all hear about it and do not always know that the “air we breathe” is not reality but what the eastern mystics call “mana”.

I was not sure how to express these ideas musically. In an attempt I have written 3 movements under 3 ideas: “Anything Rows”, “The Back and Forth”, and “Normalizing Evil”. Only the last of these is presented here.

The first uses the 12-tone row idea, just over 4 minutes exploring the instruments playing rows, inversions, time reversals, tempo changes, some rows easier than others to listen to. Many considered serial music as evil, as discordant (it is often dissonant to an ear trained to earlier European forms or popular music), but a bath of it could begin to seem more normal, especially a century after its invention.

For the second, I created 3 discordant “evil” sounding motifs interspersed with “pleasing” passages. Each of these 6 are presented in exposition, but with each section getting a bit longer than the last as information and tolerance of discord ramps up, and they return in a sort of development/recapitulation, a back-and-forth dialog, hence the title.

Neither of these seemed to match the dream fully so I continued to write. The third movement presented here explores group adoption of evil ideas. It uses a few events and movements of the last 100 years. These are

 1) Fascism of the 1920’s-mid 1940’s and its best-known proponent Adolph Hitler, but also the willingness of many to march right along. In particular, the music presents Hitler’s speech rhythms (in his rile-them-up cadences, not his regular speaking voice);

2) Movements in the US since around the 1970’s that has led to an admitted dictator coming to power in this country, using a few chant rhythms from his speeches (Tremendous; Very Bad, Lock Them Up).

 The tubular bells introduce these rhythms, and 4 other instruments (oboe, bassoon, piano, and cello) and at times the harp, alternate between their own tunes, protest themes, and the martial rhythms of the sample dictators’ speeches. There are 2 different protest songs (a Yiddish melody from Es Brent, by Mordechai Gebirtig, used as a protest during Hitler’s persecution and extermination of Jews and other groups, and “We Shall Overcome” from the Civil Rights movement in the US, and reused in modern times). The snare drum alternating with the bells creates an underlying militancy. The harp’s arpeggios and glissandi create a unifying frame for the whole movement, at times introducing the goings on and providing various moods. Later in the piece, the protest songs are played in the speech rhythms and a martial rhythm to signify the capture and mocking caricature of them by the oppressors (often with a sliver of freedom symbolized by the theme played in its original rhythm by bassoon or others). Tempo changes and more complex interweavings depict the increasing confusion with AI, the balkanized plethora of news sources, and photoshopped identities. The movement ends uncertainly, with the original tunes of oboe, bassoon, and cello. Perhaps a rediscovery of their original voices for one last gasp before expiring or going silent, with the future to be written after November 5, 2024 (and other dates in other parts of the world).