

## 5 | *Uncovered Grave*

### From Sketch to Score

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In a handbook of composition, one of the best possible ways to explain how composing functions in practice might be by means of a musical composition itself. For this reason, my contribution to the present volume is a four-minute piano piece entitled *Uncovered Grave* which was composed in a single night with this intention. Composing music happens in many different ways, with each work being a fresh adventure to evoke the sounds and music in our imagination. This chapter outlines the creative work involved in writing a self-contained piece and demonstrates the process in a way that may be found useful and relevant for a student of composition.

### From Film to Idea

*Uncovered Grave* was inspired by a short documentary film, *Never Forgotten* by Max Škach, depicting the UK Czech Embassy's extraordinary project to visit every single UK grave of Czech soldiers who fought in World War II. It is extraordinary how much of an impression a short film can make. This exquisite documentary – unshowy, factual, colourful, modest, and endlessly fascinating – created real a stir inside me. The different life stories, the contrasting cemeteries, the varying styles of gravestone and inscription, the changing seasons, landscapes, and times of day unfolded hypnotically in shots of great beauty. As I returned home, the image of one particular old grave being uncovered would not leave my mind. I began by making some hasty notes for the music before starting work:

... make a short piece, a memorial to someone I never knew and a tribute to the act of remembrance embodied in the rediscovery and uncovering of his grave. Write it in a single sitting if possible. Make this the piece for the 'Cambridge Companion to Composition'.

... reflecting on history: the lost grave of a Czech soldier who died in the UK defending his freedom in WWII is sought and uncovered after decades of neglect. The grave has to be wrenched by hand from long overgrown grass. The act of uncovering the grave is dramatically vivid in the film.

Someone who sacrificed their life 80 years ago (April 1941) in a time of world conflict has been rediscovered and their achievement brought to public attention for the first time. Also think about *where* I saw the film, just down the road from Porchester Terrace [in Notting Hill, London, where the decision to assassinate Gauleiter Heydrich was taken by the Czech Government in exile around this time.<sup>1</sup> A memorial to those who assassinated him hangs in the entrance hall of the Czech Embassy.]

. . . searching, discovery, celebration, remembrance . . . a single figure, each time higher as the grave is approached. The grave is discovered: *quick crescendo followed by an explosion*. Bells, bells, bells! Follow with a gesture of reverence – as when they bow their heads in the film, in homage to the departed: *sudden pianissimo*. Follow that with fragments of the two *Svatý Václav* hymns – one after the other as the piece comes to rest?

The work was indeed written at close to a single setting: it was composed throughout the night of 28–29 July 2021. Contrary to rumours, composers do not get much inspired when composing: it is a hard slog, basically – about as romantic as digging a ditch. Sometimes, however, the urgent impulse to catch something in sound can result in fresh music. This is what then happened. I sat at my piano, heard the piece in my head, played it, and worked it out on paper in a single sitting of about 6 hours.

People sometimes imagine that a composer writes their music in the order you hear it. In reality, that is the exception rather than the rule. Many composers in the past sketched their works in all kinds of different orders. The great Russian composer Igor Stravinsky remarked that openings were often the last things he wrote, reasoning that ‘one must know what one is introducing’.<sup>2</sup> I, too, have rarely found myself able to write my music in the order you finally hear it when it’s played. Often a new piece has to be assembled by its composer rather like a jigsaw or a mosaic, from the loose fragments which are all one can get down at first. Selecting from those fragments, discovering where each belongs and what its function is, defining the musical context, refining, and editing, and re-editing. It all takes time and thought, and above all, close attention to the sounds in one’s head. This continues at all times of the day and night, even whilst doing something else.

## From Idea to Sketches

For a more substantial piece, my process usually occurs over four distinct stages. The initial sketching is often very visual and often involves making designs, mixing words, images, and music, often in several colours, on

small white boards so the shapes can easily be adapted or erased. The next stage is the hardest to talk about. I improvise, partly on paper, partly in my head (often on walks), and partly on the piano. This can go on for a long time, as I struggle to find the sounds the piece needs. This is combined with some very systematic and technical working out of these ideas, and it eventually results in a scrawled rough draft of a 'short score', usually on only two or three musical staves. This short score will go through many further revisions and refinements. Eventually, once I am certain everything is as it should be for the passage concerned, I copy the final version neatly into the final full score, with all the music for each instrument in its definite form. With some composers, each of these stages will be quite separate. For me, and especially in the case of an orchestral work, all four stages are often happening repeatedly (even simultaneously) for different parts of the piece.

The stages of *Uncovered Grave* were slightly different; in its rapid evolution over the course of a single night's work, I began with a sequence of different types of improvisation:

1. A first improvisation 'set' at the piano, clarifying general moods and textures.
2. A second improvisation 'set' at the piano with pencil/pen and manuscript paper to hand, at right angles to the piano. This stage was chaotic and largely produced disjointed fragments that were mostly discarded (Example 5.1).
3. Multiple pages of improvisation in writing at the manuscript paper, with only occasional reference to the piano. Again, many disjointed fragments were produced, with only a very few retained from the previous stage, but certain ideas began to solidify as material was gathered together (Example 5.2).

Working on a piece so intensively and quickly feels somewhat akin to slalom skiing – the general direction is fairly clear but can be altered by the details of each move being decided at high speed in the excitement of the moment. At any point, a faulty choice of pitch, rhythm, or register could derail the entire enterprise. But at the same time, a sense of exhilaration, creative exuberance, and imaginative release is produced which is not, in my experience, found in any other human activity.

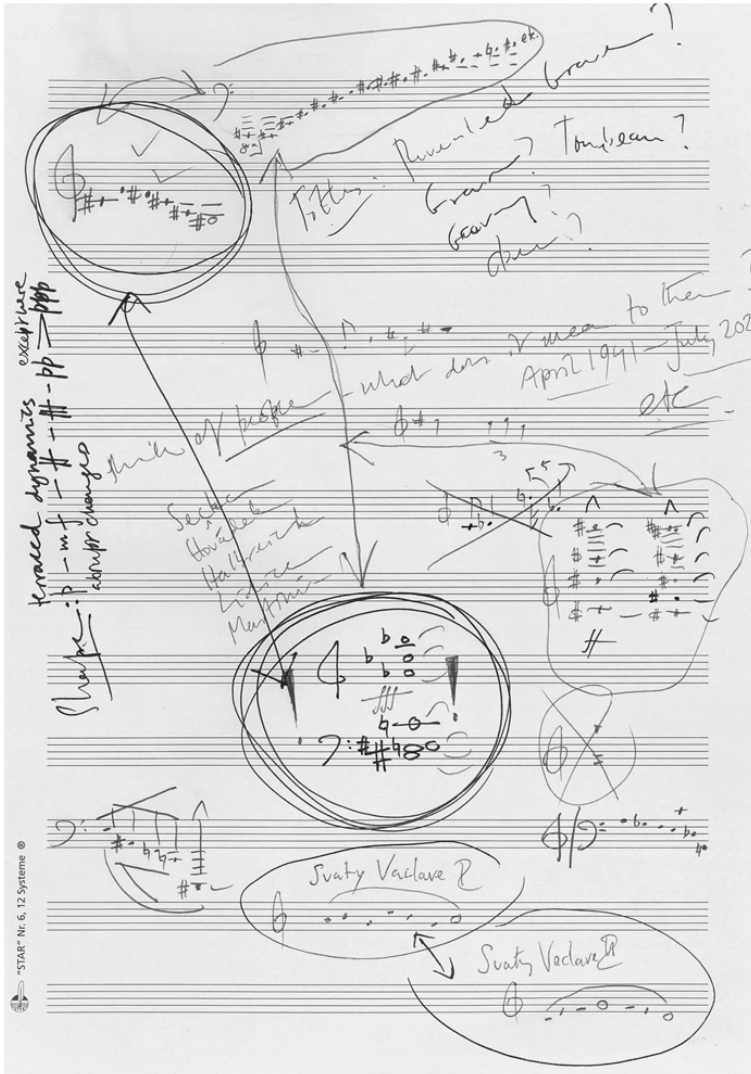
As harmonic and melodic elements appeared to start stabilising, I began to form a document which I term the 'pre-final draft' (Example 5.3) as the structure of the piece started to come together. In spite of the messy surface, this is close to the final form of the piece in terms of both musical material and the order of events. What is not finalised is either the tempo – there is

Example 5.1 Early-stage sketch from *Unknown Grave*.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for 'Unknown Grave'. It consists of ten staves of music. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The manuscript is heavily annotated with handwritten notes and symbols. Key annotations include 'Sunt Vachae' circled in the second staff, 'Fast & continuous' in a box on the fifth staff, 'No Slower down this is too frantic' on the sixth staff, and 'use = 4.0 - 1.0' with a circled 'C#' at the bottom right. The score is marked with 'pppp' and 'ff' dynamics, and includes various accidentals and rhythmic markings.

no metronome mark – or the question of durations which, although fully indicated, are understood as being completely approximate at this stage. A comparison between the draft (Example 5.3) and the final piece (Example 5.4) will show that the durations of the final score in many cases changed considerably. Pedalling, though of great importance to the texture of the work, is not notated at this stage either because I know it so have no need to notate it yet, or because it is not yet finalised.

Example 5.2 Mid-stage sketch from *Unknown Grave*.



Arrows abound, frantically linking bits or changing their order as material gets shuffled around and new ideas unexpectedly arise. In the final manuscript 'fair copy', any remaining details are apparently finalised, mainly through several further play-throughs at the piano, testing the weight and time needed for each melody and resonance to articulate properly and with the appropriate lilt (what jazz musicians term 'feel'). I say that details are 'apparently' finalised since there is one detail which I change spontaneously when playing the work now: the G# in b.5 is now

Example 5.3 'Pre-final draft' of *Unknown Grave*.

Handwritten musical score for 'Unknown Grave'. The score is written on ten staves. The first staff has a circled section with the word 'SLOW' written above it. The second staff is labeled 'UNCOVERED GRAVE'. The third staff has the instruction 'Lots in cutaway - bending'. The fourth staff has 'mf' and 'p' markings. The fifth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The sixth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The seventh staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The eighth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The ninth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The tenth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Handwritten musical score for 'Unknown Grave'. The score is written on ten staves. The first staff has a circled section with the word 'SLOW' written above it. The second staff has 'mf' and 'p' markings. The third staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The fourth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The fifth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The sixth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The seventh staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The eighth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The ninth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The tenth staff has 'p' and 'pp' markings. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. There are also handwritten notes in Chinese characters and English, such as 'Stop (end of piece)', 'poco molto', 'poco very clear distinct', 'for Librettist/Scene in memory of the tenor', and '28/29 July 2021 (pre-final sketch)'. The score is written on 'STAR-2000 - SKIZZENPAPIER' paper.

repeated before the playing of bar 6 – an extra bar (of 3/4) was added for this purpose, which has been amended in the published score; it will remain, since without it the piece seemed wrongly paced.

## From Sketches to Score

I often think about music in terms of harmony, and this element drives much of my creative process. This is not an analytic chapter, so microscopic detail on this issue is not covered, but some remarks on this area may help clarify my intentions in this sketching process. It is clear to me that I could never compose a satisfying piece at fast speed without reference to some framework, however intuitive. As far as I am aware of it, I conceive of harmony not merely as static chords but as the ebb and flow of tension from the start to the end of the work. This may be generated in various ways, but in my music, acoustics supplies the key. Consonant intervals – by which is meant simple intervals low in the harmonic series – are contrasted with more dissonant intervals much higher up in the harmonic series (or to all practical purposes, contradicting the resonances of the harmonic series) and with clear, tensely inharmonic resonances.<sup>3</sup> In addition to such ebbs and flows of tension, the music will at certain points relate to some kind of tonic pitch.

In *Uncovered Grave* this works as follows: bars 1–5 are entirely built from the lower overtones of F#, with the F# a minor third below the lowest note of the piano as a theoretical unheard fundamental. The presentation of these lower overtones is necessarily in equal temperament and is often deliberately misleading as to their true derivation. This is in part to render in sound the sentiment of being lost, of searching for something, as mentioned in the score. In bar 1, the opening figure sounds as if it is in C# Dorian. The following bars enlarge the harmonic field but never state F# as an explicit tonic: E remains the lowest pitch of these bars, which in this context is no kind of possible tonic. G#, a 9th or 18th harmonic of F#, is used from bars 5–6 as the junction to the following harmonic area (bb.6–11), derived from the overtones of a theoretical G a whole tone below the lowest pitch of the piano. Again, the presentation is deliberately misleading and similarly avoids any feeling of tonic G, though it is implied as a possibility in bar 9. Here the lowest pitch is D, and there is also a strong feeling of D as a possible tonic in these bars, as the pitch classes employed read thus: D-E-F-G-A-B-C#-D. F# and G fundamentals underpin most of the rest of the music, the tensions between them generating the

Example 5.4 Julian Anderson, *Unknown Grave* (2021).

*for Libor and Sabrina Sežka, in memory of the 'Never Forgotten'*  
**- UNCOVERED GRAVE -**  
*for piano* Julian Anderson  
(2021)

*Lost, uncertain, searching*  
 (♩ = 46 ca.)

PIANO

1 *p dolce* 2 3 4 *grace - notes slowly (always)* 5 *mf espr.*

Ped. \_\_\_\_\_

6 *p dolciss.* 7 8 9 *quasi f* 10 *mf espr.* 5

(Ped.) ^

11 *p* 12 *poco* 13 14

(Ped.) ^

[the grave is uncovered...]

15 *mp* 16 *mf* 17 *ff, joyous* 18 *loco ff sempre*

(Ped.) → (sempre) Copyright © Julian Anderson 2021



Example 5.4 (cont.)

bring out top notes

19 20 21 22

trisonando

(Ped. → sempre →)

[as if bowing the head in reverence]

23 24 25 26

8va

estatico

sub. p, tender

(Ped. →) (Ped.) (Ped. depressed till END) →

bring out top melody ("Svaty Václav")

27 28 29 30 31

pp very tender

p, clear

mf

LONG

poco rall. at fine.....

32 33 34 35 36 37 38

dolce

pp(eco)

poco espr.

bring out top notes

8va loco

bring out the E

(all notes same dynamic)

FINE

7.v.l.

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above-mentioned harmonic ebb and flow. Bars 15–18, where in my imagination the grave is finally uncovered, are clearly overtones from the F♯ fundamental, which cedes to the G gradually around bars 22–3; C♯ (a low harmonic of F♯) also stakes a claim as tonic around bars 23–4, especially with the split octaves at bar 24. The sudden *piano* at bar 25 onwards returns to overtones of G in rocking figures referring to the bowing of the head as a mark of reverence for the deceased (a gesture observed many times in the film which prompted this music). Of course, it would be possible to analyse the pitch content of this work quite differently. I am merely articulating thought processes and techniques employed whilst composing, inasmuch as I am conscious of them.

Mention should be made of the melodic figures from bar 30 to the end, which are derived from the earliest surviving Czech melody *Savtý Vaclav* ('Saint Wenceslas'). This early medieval chant, which I have personally known since I was a child, has long held great ceremonial importance in Czech culture and is thus appropriate to conclude the music. These beautiful melodic figures were much on my mind as they were also key ideas in my *Symphony No.2 'Prague Panoramas'* (2022) which was in progress throughout this period. *Unknown Ground*, although a short work, thus relates distantly to preoccupations in one of my major works of this time. Like many composers, I often find that pieces written contiguously feed off related ideas. Though it must be added that, just as frequently, the next piece is as different as possible from its predecessor. As in any composition – of mine, at any rate – there are also associations with other music or areas of culture. The opening musical idea was somewhat reminiscent, to my ears, of Leoš Janáček; specifically, the Janáček of his piano piece *On an Overgrown Path* (1900–12). It is not a quote, nor an allusion; merely a point of reference for the type of figuration employed. Some of the bell textures might recall an innovative piano piece by George Enescu entitled *Carillon Nocturne* – the final movement of his Third Piano Suite, Op. 18 (1916) – simulating with astonishing, almost sonographic realism the tolling of monastery bells at twilight.

## Listening List

<https://soundcloud.com/schott-london/anderson-uncovered-grave/s-Ix8lrvvdpGq>

## Notes

1. The assassination of Gauleiter Heydrich, the psychotically brutal Nazi Governor General of Czechoslovakia (also one of the main instigators of the notorious 'final solution'), was carried out by Czech agents trained in the UK and flown back to their homeland by British pilots in 1942. In revenge the Nazis destroyed two entire Czech villages, Lezaky and, most notoriously, Lidice. Altogether it is estimated more than 5,000 people lost their lives in the Nazi reprisals for the murder of Heydrich.
2. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 81.
3. A resonance is said acoustically to be 'harmonic' if its intervals closely reflect simple-ratio intervals low in the harmonic series; resonances which are 'inharmonic' do not follow these simple-ratio patterns.

