

# **An Analysis of Stephen Melillo's *Wait of the World***

**by Robert McDaniel**

One has only to listen to *Wait of the World*, composed for symphonic band in 1997 by the American composer Stephen Melillo, to recognize it for what it is: a masterpiece of musical composition. However, the piece is much more than simply a feast for the ears. The sound of the piece, as impressive as it is, is merely the surface of work. While sound plays a crucial role in creating the "world" of the piece, beneath it lies many additional levels of meaning, very deliberately placed by the composer in a way that a casual listener would never recognize simply by listening to the work.

At the center of the work resides its simple, though deeply religious, theme: the Second Coming of Christ. However, this spiritual theme, and the reason behind it, can only be understood if one first understands Melillo's psychological and compositional philosophy, and the connections between all of his works.

Melillo's philosophy of life is this: though life is full of challenges and setbacks, anguish and brooding darkness, he believes that, with determination and strength, we will always ultimately triumph over life's obstacles. To express this idea, he often uses the metaphor of "the storm," constantly raging around us but from which we will eventually emerge victorious. All of the composer's works for symphonic band or, as he dubs it, "Band of the Third Millennium," are written to express, on one level or another, this idea of the "storm," and are thus called "STORMWorks." To express this idea more fully, Melillo sets nearly all of the STORMWorks in three movements, each exploring a different aspect of the "storm". The first depicts an external struggle and strife; the second conveys a sense of introspection, at times tranquil, at other times

brooding; and the third contains the final victory over the struggle. This three-movement structure, the composer says, "illustrates his regard for classicalism in form."

*Wait of the World* is a STORMWork too, and thus shares the expression of the "storm" idea. It shares the three-movement structure as well, for in each, a different aspect of the Second Coming is explored: in the first, the struggles of human history in the two thousand years since the life of Christ; in the second, the world's anguish and uncertainty in God's absence; and in the third, the final triumph and victory of the Second Coming. However, *Wait of the World* is more than just another STORMWork. It is, according to Melillo, "the **FINAL** work in the **STORMWORKS!**" And as such, in this work the expression of the "storm" reaches its ultimate culmination. For what greater storm could there be than that of human history, what greater anguish than God's absence, and what greater victory than the Second Coming? Conceptually, then, *Wait of the World* is much the same as any other STORMWork, but it is constructed on a much grander scale, and is imbued with a very specifically spiritual nature.

This religious theme, though it is nowhere explicitly stated by the composer, is reflected and manifested in the incredibly complex mathematical structure of the work, which is itself religious in many regards.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, is the number three. Melillo constantly places this number in his works as one of mathematical and religious significance, and in *Wait of the World*, perhaps most of all. Almost the entire piece is based on several sets of three notes, of which four are of special importance: C-Gb-Ab, in the first movement; A-Eb-Bb, used in the first movement to signal upcoming events in the music; C-D-G, the "Faith Theme," of great importance in the third movement; and finally, C-Bb-Eb, the Prayer theme, symbolizing the Second Coming itself. Time and time again these sets of three notes appear, in many different forms: notes comprising

chords, pitch intervals for figures in parallel motion, melodic motifs, and even ostinati. The number also appears in even more subtle forms: three movements, modulation up or down by a third, overlapping tonalities a third apart, and so on. Melillo admits that his fixation with this number "goes to an even more obsessive level... like the fact that 'W's' have THREE points on them!" Why, then, this obsession with the number three? I believe that, given the religious context of everything else in the piece, it can represent none other than the Holy Trinity. It is no coincidence then that the theme symbolizing the Second Coming would consist of three notes. And, as Melillo told me in response to a question regarding the significance of three: "Let me leave it like this... for you to ponder. 'WHO' is the WAIT of the WORLD? 'Who do we await?'" The composer has also pointed out, with reference to the "wait" vs. "weight" word play in the title, "'WHO' carried the *Weight* of the World on His shoulders?" (emphasis mine)

Another important way that the religious theme is reinforced is through the formal structure of the first movement. Although they are not marked that way in the score, Melillo considers the measure numbers in *Wait of the World* to begin counting at measure number zero, so that measure one is really measure zero, measure two is really measure one, and so on. Looking at the measures this way, each measure corresponds to a decade, reflecting the passage of history mentioned above. At the passage between measures 200 and 201, a solo trumpet sounds and the music modulates, representing the transition into the third millennium. There are several levels of significance to this. First, it reflects ancient predictions that the Second Coming would occur in the third millennium. Second, the music, at this transition into the third millennium, changes distinctly in nature, from dissonant and chaotic to heroic and tonal. Also noteworthy is the fact that the modulation at this point is down a minor *third*, from F major to D

major, reflecting not only the third millennium but also the significance of the number three described above.

One extremely important mathematical device used to reinforce the religious theme is a parallelism to the Psalms. Beginning at measure two of the first movement, which is really measure one, as noted above, and continuing through the entire piece, each measure can be taken to represent one verse of a Psalm. For example, Psalm 1 has six verses, so Psalm 2 begins at measure (two plus six equals) eight. Psalm 2 has twelve verses, so Psalm 3 begins at measure (eight plus twelve equals) twenty, and so on. Considering the entire piece this way, a remarkable number of important musical events align with the beginnings of Psalms. For example, Psalm 9 occurs at measure 84 of the first movement, beginning the section marked "Mysterious," Psalm 11 occurs at measure 121 of the first movement, beginning the section marked "Devilish," Psalm 19 begins the second movement, and so on.

This parallelism assumes even greater importance in a few cases, appearing throughout the piece, in which the music loosely reflects, programmatically, the Psalm verses to which they correspond. One of the most important examples is Psalm 18, represented by the last 50 measures of the first movement. It contains highly contrasting sections alternatively praising God and describing strife and struggle, and the music corresponds to this in that it contains different sections of heroism and of struggle. The Psalm ends with an ecstatic praise of God, and the movement ends in appropriate triumph. Also, the final triumph at measure 147 of the third movement corresponds to Psalm 37, Verse 37: "Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace." And the very last measure of the piece corresponds to Psalm 39, Verse 7: "But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you." This, of course, summarizes the theme of the entire work.

Another mathematical device used to reinforce the work's spiritual theme is the transition from 33 to 34. The significance of this transition is best explained by Melillo himself: "Jesus was 33 when he 'died'... and 34, a Fibonacci series number by the way, represents His resurrection." In many of Melillo's pieces, the transition from measures 33 to 34 is an important one, and in *Wait of the World* this transition appears in two places. The first is in measures 33 to 34, assuming the measures begin at zero, of the second movement. The other, of much greater significance and occurring on a much more global scale, connects back to the parallelism to the Psalms. The transition from Psalms 33 to 34, measures 27 to 49 of the third movement, contains the very first statements of the "Prayer theme" C-Bb-Eb, and is also the transition from the darkest point of the entire piece before its climb into the light.

The spiritual theme is also reinforced by the fact that the work mathematically reflects the architecture of the Great Pyramid of Giza. The average length of the pyramid's sides at the base is about 230 meters, and this is the same as the first movement's length in measures. Also, the original height of the pyramid was about 147 meters, and it is at measure 147 of the third movement that the final triumph - the "height" of the piece is to be found. The composer subtly alludes to this in the score notes: he refers to measure 147 as "the *point* to which all must *build!*" (emphasis mine) Of course, this is fascinating from a strictly mathematical standpoint, but at first I was confused as to how the Great Pyramid, as an obviously pagan structure, could reflect a religious theme dealing with something as Christian as the Second Coming. I inquired about this to the composer, and he gave me an answer that opened up a whole new level of meaning. "Aah!" he said. "But therein lies the answer! **IS** it pagan? [...] You need to research [...] the **GREAT SEAL** which appears on the back-side of a dollar bill." The Great Seal of the United States consists of an unfinished pyramid with an eye in a halo of light suspended over it, with the

words *Annuit Cæptis* above it and the words *Novus Ordo Seclorum* below it. The composer had all these symbols in mind as well when he composed the piece. I discovered that the unfinished pyramid represents human strength and endurance, the eye represents Providence watching over and approving the temporal works of mankind, and *Annuit Cæptis* translates to "He favors our undertaking;" all this relates to the struggle of human history in the first movement. *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, meanwhile, translates to "New Order of the Ages," and this refers to the Second Coming and the Millennial age of Jesus - the third millennium. Also, Melillo pointed out that the Star of David, the symbol of Judaism, is merely two superimposed pyramids, one rightside-up and the other upside-down!

Another way that the spiritual theme of the piece is reinforced is by the numerous connections in motifs between *Wait of the World* and other STORMWorks. Firstly, all of the STORMWorks are religious in nature to one extent or another. As Melillo once told me: "Wait of the WORLD is about Jesus... and so is all the other Music." I did not quite understand this at the time, but I now realize that the connections in motifs only reflect an implied larger, spiritual connection between the works' messages. For example, an important theme in the first movement of *Wait of the World* is also the theme of a suite of pieces for young band collectively called *STORMQuest*. It is important to note that *STORMQuest* is the first of the STORMWorks, and *Wait of the World*, as noted above, is the last. Secondly, this connection in theme also implies a connection in title: *STORMQuest* is for young band, and the title of *Wait of the World's* first movement is "And Now the Children Lead." The first movement, I surmise, bears this title because, all throughout history, which the movement depicts, humanity has been led by the "children," the young generation. Another connection to another STORMWork is the "Faith Theme," prominent in both the first and third movements, of F-G-C. This connects *Wait of the*

*World* to the piece *David*, which also uses the "Faith Theme." *David* is a description of the story of David and Goliath, with obvious religious implications. A final connection is through the "Prayer theme," to the piece *In the Beginning...*, specifically to the third movement, "Passing the Paradigm." In addition to the clearly religious allusion of the piece's title, Melillo says of the movement's title: "The title **Passing the PARADIGM** may have two meanings. It either means that the **PARADIGM** is passed on... or it means that the **PARADIGM** is **SURpassed** and that a *breaking out* has been achieved. That I leave to you." It seems to me that it must be the latter that is implied, for in the Second Coming, a breakthrough truly has been achieved and a new paradigm created.

Finally, the spiritual theme is reflected by the important role of the Golden Mean in the construction of the third movement. A number's Golden Mean is that number divided by the Golden Ratio, 1.618. Beginning at measure 126, the final statement of the Prayer theme, one can work backward using the Golden Mean through almost the entire movement. The Golden Mean of measure 126 is measure 78, which is the first statement of new melodic material shared with a movement of *STORMQuest*, providing another connection. Measure 78's Golden Mean is measure 48, which is, as noted above, the transition from Psalms 33 to 34 and the beginning of the transition from darkness to light. And, the Golden Mean of measure 48 is measure 30, which is the very first statement of the "Prayer theme." Also of interest is the fact that the Golden Mean of the third movement is measure 111, which represents the date 1-1-01, January 1, 2001, the beginning of the third millennium. It is especially interesting to note a connection between the Golden Mean-based structure of the piece and the parallelism to the Psalms. The Golden Mean of each movement - measure 142 of the first; measure 106 of the second; and measure 111 of the third - falls on or one measure away from the beginning of a Psalm - Psalm 14 in the first

movement, Psalm 26 in the second movement, and Psalm 37 in the third movement; and furthermore, Psalm 14 is itself the Golden Mean of Psalm 26! The religious aspect of the Golden Mean can be explained by the fact that it is an integral part of much of nature, such as to be found in conch shells, ferns, clouds, and many other things. Melillo's intent in basing much of the piece on the Golden Mean, then, was to reflect what he interprets as "God's mathematical message to us."

But all this complex mathematical structure notwithstanding, it is the sound of the music itself that plays perhaps the most important role in reinforcing the spiritual theme.

One glance at the score will confirm the composer's choice of an immense instrumental canvas on which to paint *Wait of the World*. The incredible skill with which he draws on the different instrumental colors and blends them, like different paints on a palette, is very much in evidence throughout the work. Also evident is his masterful ability to transition seamlessly from one tonality to another or even to overlap tonalities. These skills, combined with, as one critic put it, "his [manifest] ability to create a mood, find precisely the right touch of drama and create the needed effect," allow the composer to write the music that most effectively reinforces his chosen theme.

The first movement, as noted above, describes the strife and struggle of human history. To accomplish this, it employs the unusual B half-whole scale, B-C-D-Eb-F-F#-G#-A-B as its tonal base, and also uses many dissonances throughout, both creating a tense, unsettled mood. Perhaps the most important musical aspect of the movement, however, is its constant sense of motion. Its fast tempo, its many rapid and sometimes uneven rhythmic figures, and especially the fact that no one idea is dwelled on for long, but rather proceeds quickly from one to the next, all contribute to this rapid sense of motion, reflecting the relentless, stormy progress of history.



Throughout the movement, however, Melillo uses the contrast between tonality and dissonance to represent the contrast between the glory of the Second Coming and the turmoil of history.

Three times the movement is interrupted by the strong, tonal theme quoted from *STORMQuest*, as mentioned above; the third time, as has also been mentioned, the music modulates and breaks into an impressive sense of apotheosis evoked by fanfare-like figures in the brass and woodwind flourishes.

The second movement, in complete contrast to the first, reflects, through a mood of quiet and lonely introspection, the incompleteness and loneliness of the world in the absence of God. At times, however, the mood is transformed into a desperate, anguished, almost violent cry. Instrumental texture plays a prominent role in evoking these moods; it can be light and delicate or warm and rich, as in the introspective sections, or strong and harsh, as in the anguished part. Melillo's skill with tonalities, too, figures in the foreground. While the anguished portion contains many harsh dissonances, the introspective sections use a masterful overlap of tonalities. The effect created by this overlap is not uncomfortably dissonant, but neither does it sit solidly in one tonality, so that a sense of restlessness, searching, and longing is created, reaching a resolution in G major only in the very last measure of the movement. It is interesting to note that the meticulous mathematical structure so prevalent in the rest of the piece *seems* to be missing here. There is a complex overarching relationship to the center of the Bible which occurs in Psalms 118, but both the Prayer theme and Faith theme are conspicuously absent. Melillo explains this by saying that "for me the [second] movement needed to follow its own voice without 'too' many manipulations...." The beauty of the music speaks for itself.

The third movement begins with a continuation of the anguish and desperation of the second, and reaches the lowest point of darkness and depression before building up gradually

into a glorious triumph representing the Second Coming itself. Again an intimate familiarity with instrumental color is very much in evidence, and it is in this movement that the composer's mastery at creating highly contrasting moods is shown to its fullest extent. After the storm and fire of the beginning, and the eerie landscape at measure 27, the movement slowly progresses into light with the first statements of the Prayer theme. This theme disappears, however, after measure 56, except for a brief appearance at measure 90. Actually marked "in Prayer;" the extended section that follows uses two simple, but expressive melodies and, for the first time in the entire piece, extended periods of true tonality. Again the idea of dissonance vs. tonality, representing the absence and presence of God respectively, is employed. However, it is important to note that, from measure 57 on, the key of C major is avoided. In fact, *every* other tonality is explored in this section, and, due to the constant weaving through tonalities, the music seems almost to be searching for C major, but it does not appear until measure 126, the final statement of the Prayer theme. Could C major, then, perhaps be taken to stand for "Christ," who has been sought for so long but is not found until this moment, the Second Coming?

As I said at the beginning of this paper, none of the meticulously worked-out structure of the piece, or even the spiritual theme itself, would be at all apparent to someone simply listening to the work. However, once the structure has been discovered, and the theme realized, one cannot hear this work without at the same time hearing the mathematics, the religion, and the form, and standing in awe at the harmonious beauty of it all. Form, mathematics, religion, and music: all come together in perfect unison to create *Wait of the World* in its entirety, and to make a profound and lasting impact on all who hear it.