

MURAKAMI'S EMPTY CHAIR

Murakami's Empty Chair is a multiple percussion solo written to pay homage to the great Japanese author, Haruki Murakami. At the time I was composing this, I was simply mystified by how Haruki Murakami could write such challenging literature that is so accessible to the common reader but still wonderfully strong in form and content - like an absurd mix of Kafka, Vonnegut and the \$2.99 romance novels found in grocery store lines. I do consider some other authors to be better, but I have never found such an intriguing balance of the logos/pathos dynamic found in Murakami's work.

Murakami's world of characters is so bizarre and includes telepathic prostitutes, raining fish, talking animals that like listening to Dexter Gordon, the actual characters of Johnny Walker as a crazed killer and Colonel Sanders as a hard-selling pimp, callous violence reminiscent of Eli Roth, and quirky dialogue evocative of Quentin Terantino for starters. His stories are far from a PG rating, but always build to a poignant statement on man's lust for power, the objectification of women, Japan's hypercapitalism, or the like, and reveals only in hindsight that the graphic sex, violence, and subtle power plays between characters is actually a caricature of the state of media and the world as a whole - a means to an end. The novels I've read by Haruki Murakami always deliver a strong message to me, but not without burning images into my psyche like a cold fingertip on the forehead.

The title takes its name from a scene in the book, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, in which a nightmarish chase sequence is happening through a mysterious luxury hotel. The main character is an almost offensively "normal" guy trying to find his wife, only to learn that she is part of this viscerally disturbing Murakami-world. He is petrified at every turn only to find himself locked in a room with plush carpet, low lighting, and one empty chair. After earlier pages of torture, humiliation, and the most confusing of all - fear, the image of an empty chair in a room is simply terrifying. It is shocking how an otherwise simple image had been mutated into an instrument of terror, with no earthly reason why a person should be scared of it. (Other than that his writing is so unleashed that, quite literally, anything could happen in that room and the reader simply dreads what purpose that chair serves.) Ironically, this can only be done by an author who respects the dignity of life, love, and everyday occurrences without fear, shame, and their little brother, rage. Although, it might not seem like it, I have found Murakami's writing not just engaging, but particularly life affirming. I find his discipline in form and almost surgical use of the visceral to be so rewarding in the service of much higher ideals.

Murakami's Empty Chair is composed with a strong concern for form and actually employs the aesthetic principle of the golden mean and even a retrograde point of the golden mean. Additionally, the introduction is rooted entirely in fugal sentiment and the coda, for lack of a better word, is quite deliberately a recapitulation of subject material. Otherwise, *Murakami's Empty Chair* is meant to evoke this cauldron of pathos that Murakami is disturbingly good at by weaving an ever more sophisticated stream of free material through the entire framework. The audience member should almost get the impression that this is improvised and recognize only in passing that it is a very deliberately conceived piece. -Not much unlike a very good drumset solo with big band hits, although there is no improvisation in this work - in fact, quite the opposite.

The use of stones, wood plates, and membraneaphones are meant to evoke the organic quality of Murakami's visceral style coupled against the galvanizing agent of the gong that, in my mind, evokes elements of the earth shifted into something otherworldly. -Not much unlike a scene in Murakami's book *Kafka on the Shore* where piles of mackerel fall out of the sky on a warm, sunny day in the city. Douglas Adams would have been happy to leave it at that, but Murakami felt necessary to add the detail of how they flopped in the sun and that city workers were expected to rid the streets of them a few days later.

Finally, why I chose to share this sentiment with Ben Runkel's work is because I consider Ben to be a very exciting prospect of what the future of percussion might entail. As if in Murakami's world, Ben is able to weave in and out of different aesthetics with ease and beautiful precision, regardless of how much seems to be asked of him. I am humbled by what the next generation of percussionists will bring to our art form and encouraged by the fact that breaking into new sound spectrums is no longer enough, but celebrating them and using what we learn from them is, for me, the new ideal. The shock factor in concert halls has grown tired to me, and while things like rage are indeed shocking, by learning from it the good guys will always win in the end.

I would like to thank Ben Runkel for his fine work and hope you enjoy *Murakami's Empty Chair*. (2007)

*contact composer for purchasing information