

About Leaves for Chamber Orchestra

A Musical Analysis by Gwyneth Walker

About Leaves is a tone poem inspired by the poetry of Robert Frost. Each of the three symphonic movements is intended to provide a musical expression of a specific poem. [The poetry may be read aloud before each movement.]

Due to the descriptive nature of this work, the analytical discussion will focus upon the orchestration. This will be a study of the use of timbre, articulation and other idiomatic techniques to create a musical “reading” of the poetry.

The first movement, “Treading on Leaves,” is inspired by the image of trodding, or stomping, on leaves. “I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.” The opening four measures of the music endeavor to capture the stomping gesture. Articulation is the primary means. The *tenuti* markings in the strings might lead to a trodding image. And, the accents, in both strings and woodwinds, are the vigorous stomps. The use of the Violins in the low range add weight to the action.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the first movement, "Treading on Leaves," for Chamber Orchestra. The score is written in 3/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 126. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The instruments listed on the left are Flute, Clarinets in Bb (two staves), Bassoon, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello, and Bass. The score consists of nine staves. The Flute, Clarinets, and Bassoon parts feature triplet patterns with accents and dynamic markings of *p* and *f*. The Violin 1 and 2 parts play a steady eighth-note accompaniment with dynamic markings of *p* and *f*. The Viola and Violoncello parts play a steady eighth-note accompaniment with dynamic markings of *p* and *f*. The Bass part starts with a *pizz.* (pizzicato) marking and then plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment with dynamic markings of *p* and *f*. The score includes various articulation marks such as accents and slurs, and dynamic markings of *p* (piano) and *f* (forte). A tempo marking of quarter note = 126 is present. A performance instruction reads: "As if treading on leaves — with a mixture of joy and determination".

Very insistent stomping comes in the Violins, Flute and Clarinet in mm. 11-12.

Two staves of music, likely Flute and Clarinet. The first staff has a treble clef and the second has a bass clef. Both staves show a sequence of notes with accents and slurs, including triplet markings. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes.

Two staves of music, likely Violin and Bass. The first staff has a treble clef and the second has a bass clef. Both staves show a sequence of notes with accents and slurs, including triplet markings. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes.

String articulations and bowings are essential to an aural as well as visual portrayal of the poem. One might notice the active string motions at letter I.

A large musical score for multiple instruments. The top section includes Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Clar.), and Bassoon (Bsn.) staves. The bottom section includes Violins (Vlns.), Violas (Vla.), and Bass (Bass) staves. The score is marked with a box containing the letter 'I' at the beginning of the first measure of each section. The tempo is marked 'rit.' (ritardando). The dynamics range from *f* (forte) to *p* (piano). The score shows complex articulations and bowings, particularly in the string parts, and triplet markings in the woodwind parts.

With the accents, the multiple stops and the alteration between upbows and downbows, the string players will be generating energy to be seen as well as heard.

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The second movement, “Light as Balloons,” is an expression of lightness and floating away. “Spades take up leaves no better than spoons, and bags full of leaves are light as balloons.” The feathery quality of the poem seems idiomatically suited to the Clarinets, with their ability to play very softly and gently. Selecting the key of E flat (Concert pitch) as a comfortable tonality for the Clarinets, this movement is centered around the two of them. They chase each other up through arpeggio patterns, as a semblance of balloons floating away.

II. Light as Balloons

♩ = 132

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system includes parts for Flute, Clarinets in Bb, and Bassoon. The Flute part has a tempo marking of ♩ = 132 and a performance instruction "(as balloons rising in the air)". The Clarinets in Bb part is marked *p* "light and feathery". The Bassoon part is also marked *p*. The second system includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Clar.), and Bassoon (Bsn.). The Flute part is marked *rit.* and has a measure number of 5. The Clarinet and Bassoon parts continue the melodic lines from the first system.

In the opening section, they play alone, as if to create a sense of open space. However, by the return of the theme at letter C, they are joined by the other instruments. Of primary interest here are the glissandi in the strings, which emphasize the upward quality of the Clarinet theme. [The Flute and Bassoon merely double and support the strings here.]

Musical score for measures 27-44. The score is divided into two systems, each starting with a rehearsal mark 'C'. The instruments are Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Clar.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Violins (Vlns.), Violas (Vla.), Cellos (Vlc.), and Bass. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *mf*. Performance instructions include *gliss.*, *div.*, and *unis.*. The notation shows complex rhythmic patterns and articulation for all instruments.

With the image of leaves “light as balloons” in mind, one notices the string writing in mm. 43-44.

Musical score for measures 43-44. The score is divided into two systems, each starting with a rehearsal mark 'D'. The instruments are Violins (Vlns.), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vlc.), and Bass. The tempo is marked *Slower, more freely* with a metronome marking of $\text{♩} = c. 120$. Performance instructions include *slow, leisurely tremolo* and *lightly, as leaves flying off*. The notation shows slow tremolandi and rising tone-clusters for the strings.

The slow tremolandi are intended to bring a moment of pause to the previous activity. Perhaps a less vigorous aspect of the leaf-imagery is forthcoming. The rising tone-clusters are clumps of leaves floating upwards. And the series of upbows in the Violins intend to create a visual depiction of the upward nature of this music.

These clusters and bowings are reinforced in m. 53, when the Flute and Clarinets join the Violins in their patterns, and the Violas and Celli add glissandi at the end.

53 *lightly, as leaves flying off*

Fl. *p* *poco*

Clar. *p* *poco*

Bsn.

Vlns. *div. arco* *poco*

Vla. *poco*

Vlc. *poco*

Bass *poco*

The culmination of the balloon imagery comes in the final seven measures, where upbows and glissandi are played by all of the strings. And, the Flute and Clarinets end in one last run up the scale.

126

Fl.

Clar.

Bsn.

rit.

a tempo ♩ = 144

f

p

short, high gliss.

rit.

longer, higher gliss.

hold bows up

a tempo ♩ = 144

Vlns.

Vla.

Vlc.

Bass

f

One might notice that the meter has been changed in the last measure. Rather than remaining in 6/8, consistent with this section, the 9/8 is introduced specifically to ensure that the final conducting gesture will be an upward motion (of the third beat). How effective it is when the conductor ends with baton up at the end of this movement!

* * * * *

“The Last Color,” inspired by the poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” is the last, and most substantial movement of the set. This poem speaks of color. Rather than the active previous poems, relating to stomping on leaves, or watching them float off into the air, this poem speaks of the color of the leaves, and of feelings. Grief. Perhaps there is a universal human response in experiencing sorrow along with growth. “Then leaf subsides to leaf. So Eden sank to grief, so dawn goes down to day. Nothing gold can stay.”

The musical expression in this movement is parallel to the poetry. This will be a mixture of impressionistic elements (depicting the colors of the leaves, and the loss of the gold) and expressionistic content (capturing the feelings of ecstasy and sorrow associated with passing beauty).

Once again, orchestral colors are essential to the attempt to link the poetry and music. The strings open this movement.

Flute

Clarinets in Bb

Bassoon

$\text{♩} = 88$ gently, as falling leaves and colors unfolding

Violin 1 con sord. *p*

Violin 2 con sord. *p*

Viola con sord. *p*

Violoncello con sord. *p*

Bass

They are muted for a soft, thick timbre. The lines blur and cross. Sonorities unfold rather than assert themselves. The clusters and blurring (starting in unison, then one part holds, another moves) are intended to depict leaves as seen from a distance. No single leaf, no single color can be discerned. There are simply many leaves, and many colors, all blurred together.

Five notes (five distinct pitches) are presented in mm. 1-2, and again in mm. 3-4. These notes are associated with the title of the poem, which has five syllables “No-thing Gold Can Stay.” This motive later becomes the primary theme of this movement. We shall call this the “gold theme.”

At letter B, perhaps one leaf is seen as a separate speck of color.

..... [B] $\text{♩} = 112$

lights as a speck of gold color *mp*

..... [B] $\text{♩} = 112$

(div. in 3) *div.*

Notice the staccato articulation for the solo Flute, to help distinguish this line from the slurred strings.

At letter D, a theme is introduced in the Clarinet.



A characteristic of this theme is the stepwise motion rising up a minor third, and then back down as the line continues. This theme returns many times in this movement. It is a theme of “tugging at the heartstrings.” This is a theme of sorrow.

At letter E, the main theme (“gold” theme) returns. In keeping with its original blurred nature, there is still a mixing of identities. For, each phrase of Violin 1 is echoed by Violin 2 a measure later.

The strings are no longer muted. And, Violin bowings are sustained, for maximum cantabile effect.

After developmental material, and a reappearance of the “sorrow” theme, the tonality has shifted down a step to C Major. The “gold” theme returns, but in a different, more blurred and complex presentation than before. The theme itself is played by the Flute and Clarinet 1, in imitation, while the Violins touch upon thematic notes within arpeggiated patterns. Thus, the melody has added fullness and motion. Violin bowings are frequent, generating more activity than in previous thematic statements.

At letter J, the “sorrow” theme is heard in Violin 1, at the dynamic of “p” The lower strings are tremolo. Perhaps a suggestion of sobbing is created here.

The image shows a musical score for section J. It begins with a tempo marking of 100. The score is arranged in five staves: Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. Violin 1 plays a melodic line marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The lower strings (Viola, Cello, and Double Bass) play a tremolo pattern marked with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The Flute and Clarinet 1 parts are also visible, playing arpeggiated patterns. The score is marked with a box containing the letter 'J' and a tempo marking of 100.

At letter K, the “gold” theme is now played in unison by the Violins. The Flute offers the arpeggio doubling that was the role of the Violins previously. However, of greatest importance is the presence of the “sorrow” theme as the answer to each phrase of the “gold” theme. In other words, the two themes have merged into one. The beautiful color of the leaves is now associated with sorrow.

Thus, the function of this entire section of the music (mm. 1-99) has been to present two themes – the impressionistic (color) “gold” theme, and the expressionistic (feeling) “sorrow” theme. The themes are presented separately. But, by the end of the section, they have merged.

A contrasting section arrives at letter M.

Harmonies are quartal, in contrast to the tertian (tonal) sonorities prevalent in the previous music. We hear only the woodwinds (perhaps the trees in the forest). When the strings enter at letter N, they present the thin, shaking timbre of sul ponticello, tremoli.

N

Musical score for strings, measures 1-4. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four staves. The first staff has a quarter note G4 followed by a quarter rest. The second staff has a quarter rest, followed by a half note G4 with a slur over it, then a quarter rest. The third staff has a quarter rest, followed by a half note G4 with a slur over it, then a quarter rest. The fourth staff has a quarter rest, followed by a half note G4 with a slur over it, then a quarter rest. Dynamics include *p* (piano) in the second and third staves.

N

Musical score for strings, measures 5-8. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four staves. The first staff has a quarter note G4 with a slur over it, then a quarter rest. The second staff has a quarter note G4 with a slur over it, then a quarter rest. The third staff has a quarter note G4 with a slur over it, then a quarter rest. The fourth staff has a quarter rest. Dynamics include *p* (piano) in the first three staves. The instruction "sul pont." is written above the first three staves.

Then, with the growth of arpeggios and rapid changes of bow, this agitated section leads to a full, “f” statement of the “gold” theme in Violins and Flute, answered by a full “f” statement of the “sorrow” theme in the lower winds and lower strings.

38 P (♩ = 126)

114

Fl.
Clar.
Bsn.
Vlns.
Vla.
Vlc.
Bass

117

Fl.
Clar.
Bsn.
Vlns.
Vla.
Vlc.
Bass

The material here has been expanded through changing the “answer” measures each time from the original 4/4 to a 6/4. This allows for an extra repetition of the “sorrow” motive in each 6/4 measure.

Notice the use of Violin sextuplet arpeggios in mm. 116 and 118. All attempts are made to use the fullness of the string sonorities with idiomatic writing such as this.

There is a tearing apart effect at letter Q, as the lower instruments descend violently (marcato accents on each note) and the upper instruments rise and crescendo, all against “f” tremoli in the upper strings. **(See example on next page.)** The climax of this section is reached in m. 130, with the dissonant superimposition of the C Minor-7 chord and the D /A sustained tones in the upper strings. Perhaps this is the moment of greatest sorrow, accepting the loss of the beauty. The last five measures portray a fading out, or a dying of the color. With this in mind, the strings become divisi. Only a few players remain at the end, playing almost inaudibly, sul tasto. Their fingered tremoli might resemble a few fluttering leaves remaining on the trees.

(See next page for examples.)

Q ♩ = 112 *gradual rit.*

Q ♩ = 112 *gradual rit.*

128 *slower* ♩ = 88

fingered tremolo *slower* ♩ = 88

132

Fl.

Clar.

Bsn.

2 players

Vln. I

others

2 players

Vln. II

others

2 players

Vla.

others

Solo

Vcl.

others

non div.

Bass

Duration: 5'

The instrumentation for **About Leaves** is quite small: 1 Flute, 2 Clarinets, 1 Bassoon and strings. [This orchestration was requested by the Vermont Symphony, which commissioned **About Leaves** for a Fall Tour concert series. This instrumentation met the practical demands of the tour.] And yet, despite the relatively few choices of timbre, it was possible, through articulation, bowings and special effects, to delve into the various poems and attempt to render evocative portraits.

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examples from published score of *About Leaves*
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