

DO YOU BELIEVE IN ANGELS? by David Avshalomov

[Note by the composer]

This lyrical work, first bright, then dark, finally ecstatically luminous, explores our various conceptions of angels and angelic encounters without reference to the angel names, traditions, or stories of any specific religion. It leaves open the question of belief, but tries to capture the awe. (Disclosure: Members of my immediate family have experienced a few genuine rescues by purely helpful people who appeared out of nowhere at a time of need, seemed like angels, and left no trace.)

Making the piece started with an idea of a sound of fluttering clustered trills in very high muted violins, elusive like a moth or firefly, barely heard in the corner of your ear, representing angel wings. I gradually evolved from this little glimpse an original poem outlining various aspects of angels, thinking this would simply be a basis to inspire a work for string orchestra. When I found no interest among my various conductor champions, I set it aside, resuming polish work on the poem from time to time. One day it hit me that the poem, largely a string of spiritual rhetorical questions, was decent enough not to waste and that I should set it for *voices*—high voices (either youngsters or women). And accompany it with my imagined strings—high strings (violins and violas). Angels we shall hear on high. And from that the piece grew.

These are the main sections:

- The introduction of high fluttering angel wings, settling on a pure high chord over a sweet slow unison vocal melody laying out the main question, “Do you believe?” and the first description of angels.
- Over a pizzicato rhythm, the next rhythmic question, “are you an Angel?” and the second description in separate echoing vocal parts on “is he? Is she?”.
- A brave outburst in full vocal harmony on “Is praise enough?” leading to “O Sing” (an homage to “O Holy Night”).
- A relaxation into distant mysterious harmony on “let me lose all time and all loss,” with a sweet fading cadence.
- Tremolo transition to darker color: starting under a sustained high violin note (e); the violas slowly and repeatedly pluck a minor-mode version of the opening melody, and feathery violins trace a jiggling falling motive over it. The voices pick up the minor viola melody (echoing them all along) to ask about Dark angels.
- Snap! And a quick canonic section in the voices about Angels who turn, spoil, fall, with a disjointed bouncy rhythm, mocking the previous Dark angel melodic shape.
- Transition to a slow, grim, low, plodding march beat in the strings, the voices taking up the earlier falling motive to describe the Angel of Death, ending dissonantly on “Do you see him? Do you believe?”
- Slowdown to build a faint, fantastic, Impressionist harmonic-lattice texture in the many string parts, over which the singers float in pure octaves describing flights of angels overhead, the background harmonies wavering back and forth, the accompaniment then filtering to high held chords over high harmonic arpeggios and then to just a pure sustained unison high e harmonic.
- Under this, starting in pure octaves and filling inward to sweet harmony, a simple, elegant, slow vocal close on “perfect, empty, endless light,” with an unresolved cadence.
- One solo voice starts the original question in minor mode, but the chorus finishes it in major mode and holds their last chord long under two high wing flutters and then a celestial cadence in the strings.

Do you believe?