

# Ex Tenebris Lux

(From the darkness comes light)



## From darkness comes light: music as a reflection of the lived experience of young musicians following the Christchurch earthquakes

Address to the conference of the Composers Association of New Zealand, April 2017

### Dr Patrick Shepherd

Senior Lecturer  
School of Teacher Education, University of Canterbury  
Musical Director, CSMFA

*It makes me feel like we have hope and that Christchurch will get rebuilt into an amazing place*  
CSMFA Symphony Orchestra member (2012)



# Context of the project

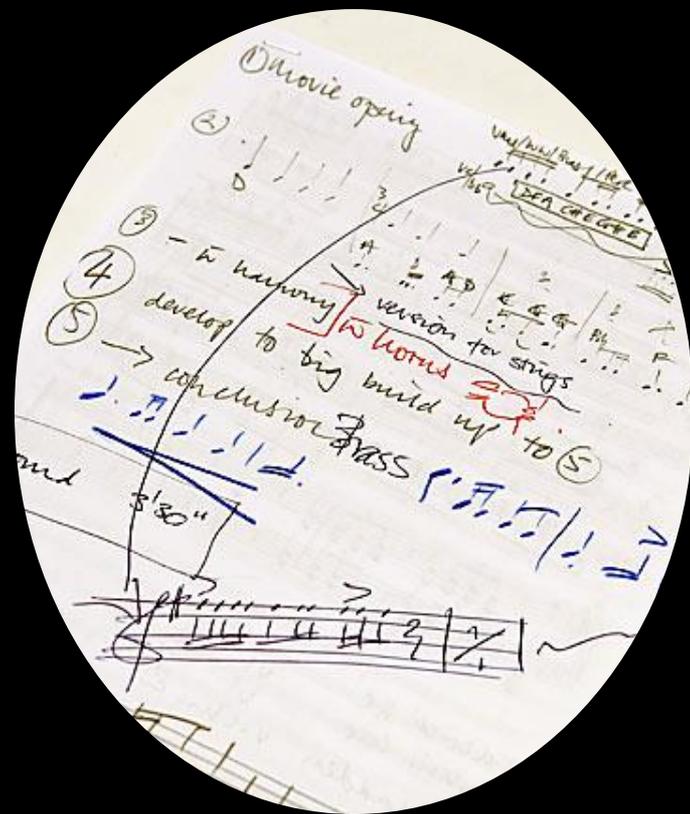
On 4 September 2010, 22 February 2011, 13 June 2011 and 23 December 2011 Christchurch suffered major earthquakes and aftershocks (well over 10,000) that have left the central city in ruins and many of the eastern suburbs barely habitable even now. The earthquakes on 22 February caused catastrophic loss of life with 185 people killed.

The toll this has taken on the residents of Christchurch has been considerable, not least of all for the significant psychological impact and disruption it has had on the children.

As the process of rebuilding the city commenced, it became clear that the arts would play a key role in maintaining our quality of life during difficult times. For me, this started with the children and the most expressive of all the art forms – music.

# This presentation looks at

- the genesis of the musical composition
- the accompanying research project
- how I initially co-constructed the work with the performers
- how I developed the musical ideas over an extended period of time (4 years)
- the key compositional tools I used to write engaging, relevant and playable music for this age and skill level of performers



# Genesis – the journey begins

The Christchurch Schools' Music Festival, now in its 78<sup>th</sup> year, is a showcase concert delivered over three nights, involving thousands of year 5-8 children from primary schools across the Canterbury region. It is a remarkable event achieving an unparalleled standard in singing and instrumental music performance for primary age school children.

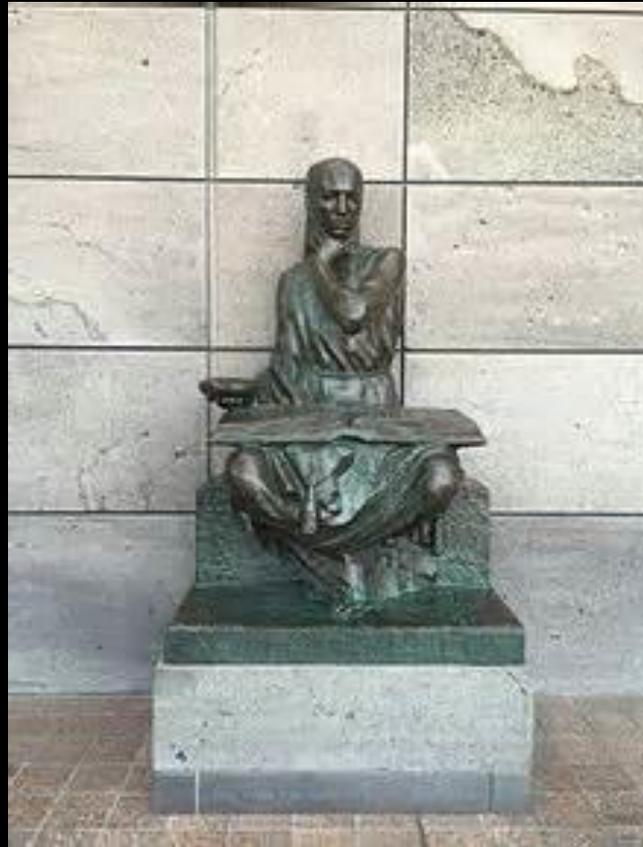
In my role as the conductor of the festival's symphony orchestra (and, since 2013, its musical director) I decided to use the orchestra to trace the rebirth of the city by composing a symphony, one movement to be performed each year as part of the festival. On its completion, all the performers were invited back to perform the entire symphony. This performance took place in October 2015.

I wanted the children to see how far they've come and to be involved in a positive musical experience that took them "from the darkness to the light". With a chance off-the-cuff remark, "What can I do – write a symphony?", the seeds of my third symphony were sown.

The journey from darkness to light had begun.

# The overarching concept and different stages

The title of the symphony, “Ex Tenebris Lux”, translates as “from the darkness into the light”. It is the title of Ernest George Gillick’s bronze statue of a reading woman housed in the Robert MacDougall Art Gallery. The title fitted perfectly with what I had in mind.



# The Fallen Cathedrals (2012)

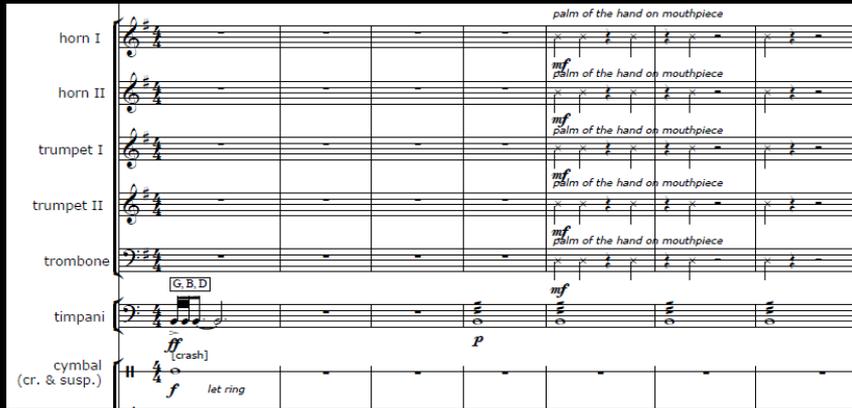
The first movement to be composed was the slow movement – *The Fallen Cathedrals* – which was premiered at the 2012 festival. Many of the performer comments about this movement shaped the rest of the symphony.

Christ Church Cathedral (Anglican) and the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament (Roman Catholic) following the earthquake at 12.51pm on 22 February 2011.



# The Fallen Cathedrals (2012)

The work used sound effects, particularly the brass gently striking the mouthpiece to produce a subtle percussive noise. The notation exposes the performers to alternative notation and different ways of playing their instruments (the educative side of the festival)



musical score for brass instruments and timpani. The score includes parts for Horn I, Horn II, Trumpet I, Trumpet II, Trombone, and Timpani. The timpani part includes a [G, B, D] chord and a cymbal part with a crash and let ring instruction. The brass parts include the instruction "palm of the hand on mouthpiece" and a dynamic marking of *mf*.



The closing bars use quotations from Debussy's *La Cathedrale Engloutie*. While Christchurch was not "submerged", as such, it did suffer from severe liquefaction



musical score for piano. The score includes the instruction "clois une brève doucement sonore" and a dynamic marking of *pp*.



musical score for woodwinds and strings. The score includes parts for Clarinet I and II, Bassoon, Horn I and II, Trumpet I and II, Trombone, Timpani, Cymbal, Saxophone, Vibraphone, Harp, Violin I and II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The score includes dynamic markings of *pp* and *mf*, and instructions like "let ring".

**During rehearsals for *The Fallen Cathedrals* the performers were asked to provide a short written response to the following questions:**

- How does *The Fallen Cathedrals* make you feel? What does it make you think of?
- What part(s) of *The Fallen Cathedrals* do you like best? Why?
- What part(s) of *The Fallen Cathedrals* do you think is/are the most effective? Why?
- The symphony is not finished yet. What do you think should be included in the other movements?

# How does *The Fallen Cathedrals* make you feel? What does it make you think of?

Themes emerging from the responses:

- hope for the future
- disbelief
- overwhelming
- sad (for themselves/families etc, for the city, for those that died)
- sad but then happy/optimistic
- tired
- the importance of the cathedral(s)
- people and the city rising up after the earthquake
- rebuilding
- thrill, excitement
- scared, tense
- calm
- thoughtful
- emotional
- mournful

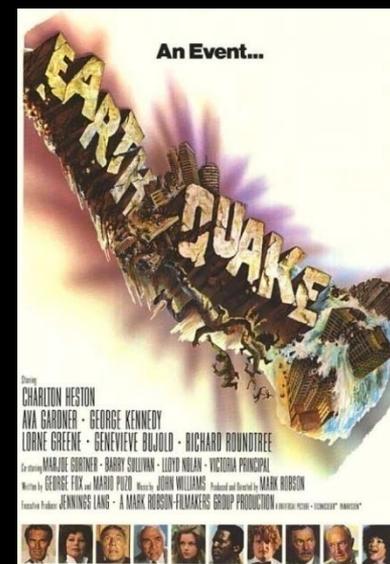
**Regarding how the symphony developed, we asked the performers what they felt should be included in the other movements (what actually resulted is in **yellow** in brackets):**

- partisan responses around “good/interesting” parts for their particular instrument e.g. “More parts for flutes, because it sounds really good/they sound beautiful”; “Lots of timpani 😊”; “A tune for the tubular bells (endless rests)”; “more trombone solos” **[did most of these]**
- easy notes **[probably not – nice try!]**
- more quick movements/faster beat **[yes, all 3 were quicker]**
- less long notes **[an accomplished player wanting harder stuff?]**
- a reminder of life before the earthquakes **[no – tricky one that]**
- a happy/joyful/peaceful/upbeat/fun ending **[I thought I had but they didn't]**
- city of light **[I toyed with that but didn't get anywhere with it ]**
- funeral march **[this became the Student Volunteer Army movement]**
- “Dramatic stuff” **[yes – the first movement]**
- “More intense stuff” **[yes – the first movement]**
- “The last movement should symbolise the rebuild” **[an option I didn't take]**
- “Lots of parts in minor keys!” **[yes, slower tunes are minor or modal]**
- “Something that reflects people helping each other, and people rescuing people who were trapped under the rubble. Or something that reflects the rebuild of Christchurch.” **[ again, tempting but I didn't do it]**

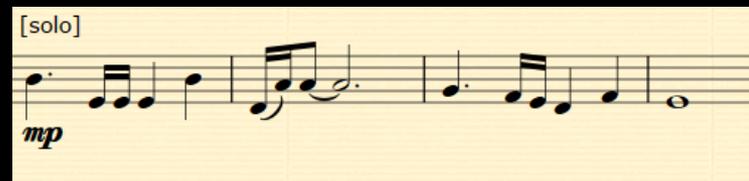
# Like a Scene from a Movie (4<sup>th</sup> movement)

Responses from performers indicated:

- a definite need for quicker music, maybe “busy” music to represent demolition and building going on
- less of a need to focus on the dramatic – some more “abstract” ideas emerging (but also plenty of responses wanting the “dramatic stuff”)
- I thought this would be one of the most popular movements with the performers but several comments thought the symphony should have finished on a cheerful note (which I thought it did)



I used my star trumpet player, Stephen, for that “Hollywood soundtrack” feel:



# Like a Scene from a Movie (4<sup>th</sup> movement) *continued*

- Use of repetition/ostinato
- Use of “sound effects” in the upper strings with tremolando glissandi
- Quick scalar passages in violin 1 and viola introduces performers to decoding the composer’s intentions in practical, achievable ways i.e. what the composer has written versus what the composer wants, as well as good practice techniques
- Woodwind, brass and strings written in blocks
- Use of the marimba adds a precision and “woodiness” to the texture

The image shows a page of a musical score for a symphony, titled "Like a Scene from a Movie" (4th movement). The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Flute I & II, Oboe I & II, Clarinet I & II, Bassoon, Horn I & II, Trumpet I & II, Trombone, Timpani, Cymbals, Glockenspiel, Marimba, Side Drum, Tuba, Violin I & II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The music is in 3/4 time and features a "rit. Like a Scene from a Movie" section. The score shows a dense texture with many notes, particularly in the woodwinds and strings, and includes dynamic markings such as "ff" and "f".



# The Student Volunteer Army (3rd movement)

Not a funeral march but a “call to arms” for the Student Volunteer Army that helped dig the city out of the liquefaction.



This extract depicts activity and business

**B**

Musical score for the first system of the extract, showing woodwinds and strings.

Musical score for the second system of the extract, showing brass and strings.

- Repetitive figures don't change. Little variations mean increased rehearsal time, often with little gain
- Works fine without drum kit but really comes alive with it

Without drums    With drums

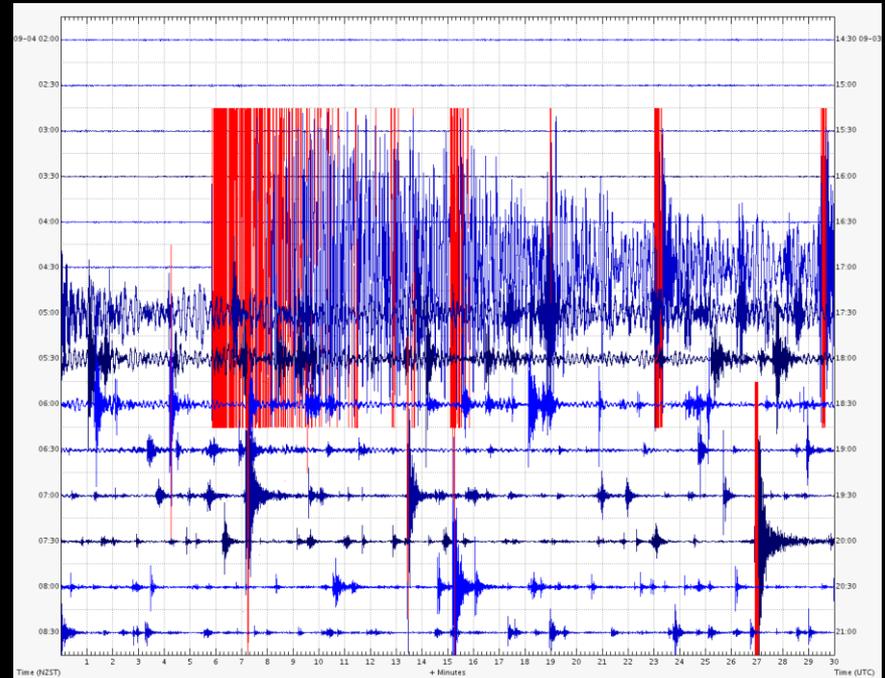


# Magnitude 7.1 (1st movement)



- The string figure is a musical depiction of the seismograph reading from the February 2011 quake
- Harp and marimba pick out the key pitches while woodwind, brass and percussion provide the sound effects

The image shows a page of a musical score for the piece "Magnitude 7.1 (1st movement)". The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Flute I and II, Oboe I and II, Clarinet I and II, Bassoon, Horn I and II, Trumpet I and II, Trombone, Timpani, Bass Drum/Triangle, Marimba, Vibraphone, Harp, Violin I and II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The tempo is marked "J. 110 exciting". The score is written in 4/4 time and features a complex, rhythmic string figure that is a musical depiction of a seismograph reading. The harp and marimba play key pitches, while the woodwind, brass, and percussion provide sound effects.



# Magnitude 7.1 (1st movement) *continued*



Alternative notation for sound effects, specific solos, motivic development (“shake” and also 12 bell chimes for 12.51pm) plus the big surprise ending (“lived experience”)

The image displays a page of a musical score for the first movement of 'Magnitude 7.1'. The score is written for a large ensemble, including woodwinds, brass, strings, and percussion. The page is numbered '6' at the top left and '7' at the top right. The tempo is marked 'J 100 dramatic (double tempo)'. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor). The score features various musical notations, including dynamics (e.g., *molto rall.*, *f*), articulation (e.g., *stacc.*, *acc.*), and specific performance instructions (e.g., 'Tuba solo', '12 bell chimes'). The notation includes standard musical symbols such as clefs, notes, rests, and bar lines, along with some unique sound effect notations. The score is presented in a multi-staff format, with each instrument part on its own line.

# The Research Phase

My methodology is phenomenological i.e. exploring the lived experience through personal narrative. These young performers experienced the earthquakes first-hand and shared their stories with me. Together we created the story that is *Ex Tenebris Lux*.

Here are some of their words:

“I think the start of the fourth movement with the strings it actually sounds quite terrifying. Comparing it to the emotions I felt on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February when it hit and I was at school, and we ran out of the door and threw ourselves on the grass, it is like the same kind of terror.”

“When my mum and dad woke me up in the first earthquake, I didn’t know what was happening and I got really, really scared and the foot stomping reminds me of that.”

“It lets people react to the music rather than telling people how to feel.”

“It is cool to see how far I have come as a musician.”

“Last year in the *Student Volunteer Army* I found some parts hard but this year I can play them more easily.”

“I remember when I was in Year 8 in *The Fallen Cathedrals* there is a trombone solo, I couldn't play it but the other trombonists could. I can remember sitting there thinking 'I want to play the solo' because it is so beautiful as the solo makes it happier and continues on to the lighter part of the movement. And now I can play the solo it makes me feel like I have grown as a musician throughout the four years.”

“I've got better at counting.”

“If I wrote it, I wouldn't have a fourth movement of the event again, all doom and gloom. I would focus on the rebuild and end a bit more happy.”

[Regarding an alternative title] “To be honest the first thing that came into my mind was 'How a city falls'.”

“Rising from the ashes.”

“I really like the title because it is pretty much how we have coped with the earthquakes, going from the darkness and despair of quakes and not knowing what to do to growing from the experience and growing as a community and making good out of it. Now when you go round there's paintings everywhere and it's like they've made good from it.”

“It's like mixed emotions. When I do music it makes my memories sharper.”

And finally....

“Good things result from bad things.”

