

Tsunami

In Memoriam to the victims of the Japanese Tohoku earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011

Composed by Kirsten Johnson

c. 19 minutes

Tsunami opens with a calm, still sea on a beautiful cloudless day. Pentatonic patterns are used, with repetitive, minimalistic rhythmic groupings, to convey the untroubled and serene seascape.

The earthquake erupts at sea, announced by the timpani. This is a muffled sound, conveying the explosion deep under the sea floor, sending pulses which head towards land.

After about 45 seconds, these structural waves reach Japan. Crashing chords announce the earthquake hitting towns and cities along the coast. Buildings shake and crumble in Tohoku for around six minutes. The earthquake melody, based on the date the earthquake struck (11.03.2011), is introduced by the trumpets. Derivations of this melody come in various instrument groups as the earthquake continues its devastating work.

The earthquake stops, but the panic continues with sirens and sounds of people fleeing. In the chaos, the waters draw back. The pentatonic motive is heard in the midst of the mayhem, as it is still a sunny day. The juxtaposition of beauty and terror is harrowing.

After about three minutes, the tsunami hits. The tsunami melody comes rolling in, in separate instruments, building, until the full force comes in unison brass and strings orchestra. As the tsunami works its devastation, a whirlpool forms, played by the woodwinds, taking boats and detritus into the depths.

The tsunami continues to flood in, wreaking havoc and swallowing everything in its path. The sound becomes more sustained as waters overcome the earth. Sirens are silenced, people who have not escaped drown. Rhythmic augmentation of the tsunami melody conveys the overwhelming and sustained effect the tsunami has had.

The last section of this piece shows the quiet of devastation: it is still a sunny day, but bleak with death and destruction everywhere. The pentatonic patterns represent the normality of the day, but the melodic material is augmented and now dissonant. A haiku is spoken by the brass players as a poem of remembrance:

Earthquake, wind, wave, fire.
The cycle of life goes on.
Destruction, death, life.