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Star Burning Blue by Kelly-Marie Murphy

Minerva Teichert Award Winner 2021

DR. KELLY-MARIE MURPHY IS AN AWARD-WINNING Canadian composer. Born in Italy in 1964 to Canadian parents, she spent her childhood on military bases in Canada. She holds composition degrees from the University of Calgary (BM, MM) and the University of Leeds (PhD), and has been praised for her beautiful orchestrations and captivating virtuosic writing.¹ A quick visit to her website gives some insight into her sense of humour and confidence: a section, titled “They Hate Me . . . They Really Hate Me,” is dedicated to featuring some notable negative reviews she’s received throughout her career.²

Besides our shared Canadian heritage, I feel a deep connection to Murphy’s musical language. It is bold, innovative, and unapologetic. She is one of many female composers who I have admired for a long time, and it has been inspiring to really get to know her style through performing her work *Star Burning Blue*. I got to exchange a few emails with her when I was trying to find a copy of the piece; she was friendly and helpful, sending me a link to her favourite recording and a score with her personal markings.

Star Burning Blue follows the growth and destruction of a supergiant main sequence star. After bursting into existence, the music gradually becomes more fragmented and jagged as the star gathers more matter. Finally, the star explodes, after which a haunting middle section depicts the cold emptiness of outer space. Inevitably, small pieces begin to coalesce and form a new star.

¹ Evan Ware, “Kelly-Marie Murphy,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last modified December 12, 2013, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/kelly-marie-murphy-emc>.

² Kelly-Marie Murphy, “They Hate Me . . . They Really Hate Me,” Kelly-Marie Murphy Composer, last modified 2020, <https://kellymariemurphy.com/they-hate-me/>.

Murphy takes advantage of the piano's complete range of notes and dynamics to help depict the incomprehensible immensity of space. A variety of rhythmic and musical devices portray the star's life cycle. Precise tempo markings, strategically placed accents and syncopations, frequent meter changes, and dazzling runs all contribute to the work's building momentum and boundless energy. While a first listen might give an impatient, improvisatory impression, every note, articulation, and tempo has been written with careful detail in the score.

Many technical and musical challenges await performers. Memorization is difficult from the first pages. Finding pulse and momentum despite the frequently changing meters is essential to understanding the work as a whole. Unorthodox scales, arpeggios, sudden leaps, and demanding chords test the pianist's technique. Balance, colour, sentiment, and timing must also be carefully considered.

Murphy's style is certainly unique, but remains approachable in a way that many might not be able to explain. Most people have surely imagined at one point or another what it would be like to fly up into outer space, or have gasped in amazement at the sight of a sky full of distant stars. With her mastery of the textures and effects the piano can create, Murphy allows us to feel a little closer to understanding the infinite growth of the universe.



Madeleine Montgomery

Watch the Performance:

<https://youtu.be/Sd9wFM2cW84>

