

Arcadia (1996)

for 19 solo strings

9 violins, 4 violas, 4 cellos and 2 double basses

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The Arcadian myth stretches back for thousands of years. Virgil was the first poet to write extensively of Arcadia in the 4th century BC. Since that time many artists, poets, writers and composers have put forward notions of this imagined place of tranquillity. In Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, the garden makes an ideal metaphor for the Arcadian dream, perhaps symbolising a realistic quest for a tangible, personal Arcadia. In the play two possible garden Arcadias are presented, one classical and one in picturesque style.

Arcadia, for 19 solo strings, is a complex web of literary and musical references, cross references, allusions, metaphors and analogies and its elaborate programme has many sources. In addition to Stoppard's play, each of the four movements is based on its own, separate, literary source. In addition to this, each movement relates to specific episodes in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. These three separate strata of narrative are linked by common themes.

First Voice

This opening section is a romantic portrayal of night, dreams and fantasy, based on two main sources: the first speech from Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness as she lies in bed, half-awake, in the final chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*. The sound begins in silent night, distant but uneasy. Gradually, various night noises become audible. As the movement progresses and the listener is drawn closer, these external noises transform into the internal sounds of dreams and nightmares. The neuroses of the subconscious, sleeping mind distort these sounds and many become corrupted with music from the next movement. Eventually, this viral music takes hold like an infestation and the music is propelled segue into the icy, claustrophobic world of *Insect*.

Insect

The music evokes the half-awake state when nightmares are confused with reality. The piece, based on Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, charts Gregor Samsa's gradual realisation that overnight, he has been transformed into a gigantic insect. The piece reaches its climax when he becomes fully awake (*bar 58*): a harsh realisation of irreversible transformation. The *Ulysses* analogy is Stephen Dedalus's return to Ireland in chapter 1 in a state of disillusionment having failed to achieve his dreams in Paris, the promised land. The Arcadia suggested here is the Arcadia of the past, before transformation.

Song of Ithaca

This piece represents the growing and dying of forbidden love by referring to many archetypal examples - Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Lolita and Humbert Humbert, Siegmund and Sieglinde, Blazes Boylan and Molly Bloom, Rosie Probert and Captain Cat and Septimus and Thomasina - and resonating in many other stories that are suggested by the choice of the borrowed musical material. *Song of Ithaca* also symbolises Odysseus's journey from idyllic Arcadian tranquillity and grace of Ithaca, through the turmoil of troubled travels to an intense climax before returning home, once more, to calm. Wagner's *Tristan Prelude* functions as a structural archetype. Kavafis's poem *Ithaca* acts as a parallel subtext and strengthens the link between the Arcadian myth and *Ulysses*.

Dances from a Green Bay

These are dances of death and decay: Thomasina's death in the fire after her final dance with Septimus, (*Waltz and Tango*) the decay and death of Dorian Gray when he tries to destroy his transformed picture (*Latin and Groove*), Dylan Thomas's *Do not go gentle into that good night* about the imminent death of his father (*Baroque dance movements*) and Death itself in the Poussin painting "*Et in Arcadia Ego*" [*I, Death, even exist here, in Arcadia*] (*Moto Perptuo*). Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are in mourning and spend the whole of Bloomsday dressed in black. The *Hades* chapter of *Ulysses* is alluded to, when Bloom attends Dignam's funeral and thinks of death and the women he has known. The dances of the title are numerous, they are heard in snatches and always appear filtered, transformed, distorted or mutilated. This imitates the literary style of the *Wandering Rocks* chapter and the contorted, metamorphosed image of *Dorian Gray*.

Despite this elaborate programme, the underlying conflict in the piece is created by an attempt to reconcile the opposite world-views of Classicism and Romanticism. In musical terms this alludes to balancing process and intuition in composition.

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