

Programme notes by the composer

Soliloquy for solo flute

The *Soliloquy* for solo flute is the first in a series of works for solo instruments with this title, one I drew from the plays of Shakespeare. A soliloquy is that moment in Hamlet where the protagonist, thinking himself to be alone, ponders the meaning of life and utters aloud his thoughts: “To be, or not to be, that is the question . . .” In essence then, this kind of speech is an inner monologue directed not at other characters on stage, but – if at anyone at all – the audience. In this short piece, the opening pitch ‘spoken’ by the flute might be understood as a full stop that rounds off the words spoken to King Claudius by Lord Polonius, who senses Hamlet approach: “I hear him coming, let’s withdraw, my lord.”

This first note in *Soliloquy* is immediately ‘bent’ in pitch, first upwards and then downwards, rather like a blue note in jazz. This is done by covering and uncovering with the lips the hole in the flute’s mouthpiece, changing the shape of the mouth cavity to resonate lower or higher pitched vowels, changing the shape and size of the ‘embouchure’ (the position and pursing of the lips), and lastly, by rolling the flute towards or away from the mouth. This single gesture collects other neighbour notes as it goes, gradually becoming a fully fledged motif that admits wider intervals and increased chromaticism.

Roughly in the middle of the work, an oddly gapped ‘octatonic’ scale is introduced that proceeds upwards by tone, tone, semitone, semitone, tone, tone, semitone steps. The opening idea is easily perceptible towards the work’s close, as the flute line dies away – here the player simultaneously plays and sings the same low pitch – and this short ‘speech’ is rounded off by the opening gesture, which this time is held for as long and is bent as low as technically possible.

“Charm”, from Six Preludes for Piano

The complex world that is particle physics is so recondite that it would, as a mere composer, be naive at best and arrogant at worst to claim any deep understanding of its machinations. Nonetheless, it was the quark – an elementary particle and a fundamental constituent of matter – that provided me a point of departure for the Six Preludes. The term quark is a nonsense word coined by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*: “Three quarks for Muster Mark!” And it was the physicists Murray Gell-Mann and George Zweig who, in the 1960s, lighted on the term, taking obvious delight in such a conceit.

There are, apparently, six types of quarks, named according to their ‘flavours’: up, down, strange, charm, bottom and top – the last two originally called beauty and truth. This elegant mathematical model is governed by cabalistic principles that seek to explain how the particles behave, subject as they are to

mass, gravitation and other forces. Some quarks live in 'beauty factories', but all inhabit the 'particle zoo'. No wonder, then, that this most peculiar universe elicited in me such a mettlesome response as I sought to realise these ideas in music.

In formal terms, these six short pieces are closer to the *étude* than the *prelude* proper: a single musical idea, present from the first bar to the last, is subject to a continuous process of change. Subsidiary motifs are generated from this one line and may collide with, pass through or avoid it altogether, emerging either unscathed and unchanged, or partially – and occasionally – completely transformed.

This is a game of ideas. It is closer perhaps to the *Glass Bead Game* of Herman Hesse – in which the arts and sciences are united – than to any stream of consciousness produced by Joyce. During the compositional process, my workplace had become a kind of musical particle accelerator.

As for the cute names, the 'strange' quark is called after the 'strangely' long lifetime of composite particles found to contain this quark. Strange quarks, then, decay slowly. The 'charm' quark was named on a whim, the nomenclature reflecting how refined mathematics function as a trinket or a rune and seem to live a charmed life. Regarding 'beauty' and 'truth', these particles reflect exactly philosophical constructs. The 'up' and 'down' quarks complete, apparently, an Hermetic mathematical model.

“Ts'ai Chi'h” and “Yoshiwara Lament” from Five Images for High Voice and Piano

Imagism was a poetic movement born in England and America in the early twentieth century. A reactionary movement against romanticism and Victorian poetry, imagism emphasized simplicity, clarity of expression, and precision through the use of exacting visual images.

I first 'discovered' this poetry whilst a student at King's College London, and it spoke to me immediately. Much like the Japanese Haiku (although an imagist poem does not share metre and structure with this form), an Image seeks to encapsulate in but a few words and using direct thought the inner life of a thing. It is perhaps not unrelated to the 'inscape' propounded by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Although Ezra Pound is noted as the founder of imagism, the movement was rooted in ideas first developed by English philosopher and poet T. E. Hulme, who, as early as 1908, spoke of poetry based on an absolutely accurate presentation of its subject, with no excess verbiage. In his essay "Romanticism and Classicism", Hulme wrote that the language of poetry is a "visual concrete one....Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence."

Pound adapted Hulme's ideas on poetry for his imagist movement, which

began in earnest in 1912, when he first introduced the term into the literary lexicon during a meeting with Hilda Doolittle. After reading her poem *Hermes of the Ways*, Pound suggested some revisions and signed the poem “H. D., Imagiste” before sending it to *Poetry* magazine in October of that year. That November, Pound himself used the term “Imagiste” in print for the first time when he published Hulme’s *Complete Poetical Works*.

A strand of modernism, imagism aimed to replace abstractions with concrete details that could be further expounded upon through the use of figuration. These typically short, free verse poems – which had clear precursors in the concise, image-focused poems of ancient Greek lyricists – moved away from fixed metres and moral reflections, subordinating everything to what Hulme once called the “hard, dry image.”

In March 1913, *Poetry* published “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste.” In this article, imagist poet F. S. Flint, quoting Pound, defined the tenets of imagist poetry:

- I. Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective.
- II. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- III. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

In musical terms, I ‘simply’ tried to capture in sound that which the poet had caught in words. My aim was clear: to use a single compositional idea that would render in music the object treated in the poem. It should serve the audience well, if I were simply to quote the two texts “Ts’ai Chi’h” and “Yoshiwara Lament” in their entirety here.

“Ts’ai Chi’h”

The petals fall in the fountain,
the orange-coloured rose-leaves,
Their ochre clings to the stone.

Ezra Pound

“Yoshiwara Lament”

Golden peacocks
Under blossoming cherry-trees,
But on all the wide sea
There is no boat.

Amy Lowell

I trust that a keen ear, well, any ear remotely attuned to the music, will, in “Ts'ai Chi'h”, have latched on to the significance of the opening four descending chords over a low pedal bass in the piano. They are but a precursor of the immediate entry of the voice at “the petals fall”, where four descending notes that were the highest pitches of these chords are sung an octave lower. The real conceit however is found in the last few bars, where the right hand in the piano reprises the four downward notes, this time one octave higher than at the beginning and quite overly attenuated.

If in the first song there is a single unifying motif, then in “Yoshiwara Lament” there is a number of discrete musical gestures which are obvious examples of word painting: at ‘golden’, ‘under’, ‘blossoming’, ‘wide’ and ‘there . . . boat’ the vocal line deliberately mirrors the poetic image with intervals that are by turn burnished (descending perfect fourth), repressed (ascending major second), burgeoned (descending root position and second inversion triads), expansive (ascending semitone representing the distant horizon), and nihilistic (ascending and alternating minor, major and minor thirds), this final utterance a Zen moment if ever there were one.

Quartettsatz

The *Quartettsatz* (German for ‘Quartet Movement’) pays homage to the one by Franz Schubert, D 703 in the numbered list of all his compositions compiled by Otto Erich Deutsch. This is late Schubert and, just like his Symphony No. 8 ‘The Unfinished’, he never completed the work. But there the Schubertian association ends, suffice to say that I intended to produce a fragment.

The work is based on a ‘cell’ which, just as in the human body, is able to replicate itself, to grow, and – by extended analogy – to undergo transformation. Consisting of but four notes, this quite candid idea, exploits the harmonic implications where a descending minor second is followed by a rising major third and then another falling minor second. As the cell expands and develops, it manages to admit larger intervals, inversions as it turns out of the original ones – the ‘opposite’ of a major third is a minor sixth, in that the two intervals combine when overlapped to produce an octave.

Each instrument enters in turn with the very same melodic material, shifted away by one beat, or by two, from the previous voice. The compositional technique used here is so-called ‘heterophony’, which has the semblance of a simple canon or round, but disallows starting again from the beginning. Gradually, complex cross-rhythms parse the core motif, with crotchet triplet or quaver triplet patterns displaced in the score one beat or even one-and-a-half beats to the right. This is chaos made audible. With hindsight, the composerly intention was surely to produce Brownian motion with but four string instruments.

Grace notes in the form of *acciaccature* (short crushed notes with no ostensible time value and played on the beat) now adorn the fleeting figuration, before the autonomous lines unhurriedly descend to whence they came.

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