

Druckman: Chiaroscuro - Schwantner: Aftertones of Infinity - Albert: Into Eclipse (1992)



1. Chiaroscuro 2. Aftertones Of Infinity 3. Into Eclipse : 1. Prologue And Riddle Song 4. Into Eclipse : 2. Oedipus 1 5. Into Eclipse : 3. A Quiet Fate 6. Into Eclipse : 4. Ghosts 7. Into Eclipse : 5. Oedipus 2 Juilliard Orchestra Gary Lakes - tenor Gerard Schwarz (3-7), Leonard Slatkin (2), Lukas Foss (1) – conductor

Joseph Schwantner completed *Aftertones of Infinity*, the winner of the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for music, in November 1978. The work was commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra, which also gave its premiere under the direction of Lukas Foss on January 29, 1979, at Alice Tully Hall, New York. One of Schwantner's guides in composing the work was a self-penned poem that provided, as he put it, "a wellspring of extramusical images and ideas to which I would attempt to find appropriate musical analogues." The poem, which talks of "celestial voices," of "empyrean visions" traveling through eternity to "afterworlds beyond the edge of forever," conjures up images of vast spaces. In order to give musical form to this sense of space, Schwantner combines passages having little or no rhythmic or harmonic movement with more assertive sections involving faster-paced chords and orchestral outbursts. The composer also employs a very large orchestra, including unusual tone colors coming from, for example, tuned crystal glasses and gentle wordless vocalizing by the members of the orchestra.

The work opens with delicate shimmering sounds that create a spacious atmosphere but also harbor an almost subliminal sense of imminent threat. Quiet ostinato patterns emerge occasionally from the harp and tuned percussion. One ostinato turns particularly menacing around the halfway point of this 15-minute work, but the sense that the music is about to collapse upon itself then recedes as a shimmering texture like the one that opened the work returns. The quiet vocalizing from the orchestra becomes more prominent in the work's delicate coda. --- Chris Morrison, Rovi

Jacob Druckman's Chiaroscuro was commissioned by Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra, with help from the National Endowment for the Arts, for the United States Bicentennial celebrations. The composition was not completed, however, until 1977, and the work was first performed on April 14 of that year. Druckman has often employed visual metaphors in both titling and structuring his musical works -- some of his other compositions carry titles like Windows, Mirage, Aureole, and Prism. The Italian term "chiaroscuro" ("chiaro" meaning clear or light, "oscuro" meaning obscure or dark) refers to the painting technique, made famous in the Renaissance, in which light and dark elements are contrasted in a stark and dramatic fashion. In his work Druckman, employing a large orchestra including an extensive percussion section and unusual instruments like electric piano, tries to convey the idea of "chiaroscuro" by combining and juxtaposing quick-paced, abrupt gestures and a more static ground which seems to permeate the composition. There are some louder moments, particularly at the middle and end of this 15-minute work, as aggressive brass fanfares erupt. The work is for the most part, however, relatively quiet, with subtle tone colors which are constantly evolving. --- Chris Morrison, Rovi

Entitled "Into Eclipse," the half-hour song cycle is by Stephen Albert, a New York-born composer who in his early 40's.

Mr. Albert is apparently able to generate viable musical ideas with ease, or was, at least, in 1981 when he wrote this music. Furthermore, his ear for arresting instrumental sonorities is remarkable and, in fact, has given "Into Eclipse" its most striking aspect.

The poetry of the five-song cycle is drawn from an adaptation by Ted Hughes of Seneca's "Oedipus." Unfortunately, the composer indulges in rather more word repetition than is usually thought desirable nowadays, and his prosody could be better, but the creation of an atmosphere of terror may have been his major aim, and in that he succeeded. ---Allen Hughes, nytimes.com

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