

A white dove is shown in profile, flying towards the right. Its wings are spread, and its tail feathers are visible. The background is dark, with wisps of purple smoke or light rising from behind the bird. The overall mood is ethereal and peaceful.

# Taking Flight

chamber music by

**Sadie Harrison**

**METIER**

## Traceries - the music of Sadie Harrison

A year ago, I sat in on a panel discussion in the Bavarian Radio studios in Munich. The evening was chaired by the irrepressible Hans Jurgen van Böse who was probing a group of young composers from a number of countries as to their musical motivations. He succeeded in provoking a marked rise in the temperature of the discussion when he accused one of the young composers on the panel of 'Klangfarbe-fetischismus'. This was done to vex the young artist, implying that the surface gilt of his music was perhaps a sign that it lacked content. He succeeded in two things. Naturally he irritated the composer in question and provoked an argument which might have degenerated into a fist fight in less civilised circles. But his comment was also revealing for another reason. It revealed a complementary anxiety: the fear of some composers that their music might be thought intellectually shallow if colour, or even the sound of their music, were perceived to be too important.

This issue, of compositional integrity versus aural result, seems to mark out a 'fault line' which Sadie Harrison's music effortlessly bestrides. Her music is some of the most instantly recognisable of any composer of her generation. A potent sense of instrumental colour and a very personal rhythmic vigour pervades all of her output, which is also characterised by an uncompromising intellectual and constructional integrity. There are very few living composers with such a strong aural signature, which can hit the listener between the eyes with the same impact as Messiaen's 'purple' chords or the 'Byzantine' ferocity of late Tippett. Sadie often plays dangerous games with this architectural-colouristic interdependence; manipulating it, (much in the same way that Bach removes anticipated resolutions and consonances) in order to heighten the narrative tension of the structure.

Perhaps the easiest way of understanding Sadie Harrison's solution to the above problem is to say that colour and texture seem to be structural-expressive building blocks for her. One odd result of this is that the 'look' of her scores on the page is of very little help in understanding what the music is actually doing. When she sets two violins flying in counterpoint, playing with suggestions of hockets and fugues, the expressive result is often a colour-filled building block rather than a development or a narrative thread. Herein lies a paradox, which makes the performance of her music a terror-filled excitement. As a rule, the more complex and fecund the material appears on the page, the simpler the result, and *vice versa*. This might also have something to do with the revivification of a baroque decorative aesthetic. Performers are often put off these scores, not because of the obvious fact that they are filled with difficult notes, but because they are jammed with truly 'decor'-ative activity, as opposed to the normal 'millennial' buzzing and whirring. As with the ornamentation of baroque and early classical music, the densely articulated and decorated

lines are the moments of flight, relaxation and contemplation, and the moments of apparent stillness and simplicity in the music are more often than not moments of loaded tension and development. In performance, it is these apparently empty spaces, planes and curves which come under the greatest structural and expressive pressure.

This is given one more decisive spin by Harrison's espousal of multiple layers of metaphor and symbolism, not only in the overt subject matter, but in the interplay of musicians, the titles of the pieces, and the other composers to whom this music makes reference. *Traceries* is an interesting case in point. Buried in the work are overt references to Stravinsky, most noticeably the 'spring' of the 'Dances Concertantes'. In resurrecting the ghost of this particular piece of Stravinsky, all the rest of his output for the violin and piano are called into play, and the performers find themselves in a curious dialogue with any number of elements from his output, from 'L'Histoire du Soldat', to 'Duo Concertant'. The intricacy of this process is heightened further by references and overwriting to Harrison's own compositions that fill this work.

It might seem that, as a performer of works that do not use text, one can place too much emphasis on the relationship between title and work. However, there can be no denying that the eventual sound of a piece, even the technique that is used in playing it, will be intimately tied up with the title that it has been given, just as much as with any performance instruction contained in the score. A performer must come up with a colour, an articulation, a dynamic, a bowing for every note, not to mention the myriad choices of texture and focus before even venturing towards the question of meaning. Any clue to making these choices will be seized upon in the building of an interpretation. So the meanings and ramifications of the names of works are integral to this process; even if, as in the case of *Impresa Amorosa*, the various titles are in themselves puzzles. Satie and Magritte knew this as well as any Renaissance poet. Even if a work has a 'distractive' title, such as 'Chorale Hypocrite' (Satie: 'Choses Vues a droit et a Gauche' 1913), this will play an important role in the resultant performance, if even by way of denial. This is very much the case with a title such as *Arcosolia*, and it is not for nothing that various composers from Saariaho to Messiaen, have enjoyed the mixed message that is sent by giving such a title, in various languages, to string players.

Harrison's music also explores a modern notion and meaning for virtuosity. In many ways, *Taking Flight* provides a wry side look to the late classical conceit of the 'Quartette Concertante'. The writing of a quasi-concerto for four players has many more implications than the democratic apportioning of parts that one finds in the last three quartets of Mozart. The most interesting technical result, which is writ large in a work such as *Taking Flight*, is the frenetic activity that the

players have to engage in whilst not playing solo material in order to preserve the argument of the work. It is this athletic hyper-physicality that has always seemed to be a powerful attraction of such a technique. This is not the case where the music is created through purely contrapuntal virtuosity, such as one sometimes finds in the Tippett quartets, but very much so in pulse- and colour-driven works such as this. It is not something that is immediately apparent on a recording; you might say that this effect needs to be seen to be believed, much in the same way that a large part of the effect of the 'Grosse Fugue'<sup>1</sup> depends on experiencing or playing it live. The whizzing, spitting 'Catherine Wheel' that is set up on the last page of this quartet by the two violins is given zest by their carrying material across three octaves, playing material on multiple levels, whilst racing from end to end of the instruments. This provides impetus for the music that goes far beyond its racing demi-semiquavers and rhythmic displacements. The effect can also be observed in extreme slow motion in the 'paysage marine' section of this quartet, as players slowly morph from solo lines, to ornamental figuration, to underpinning, and back again.

Despite the thorny virtuosity and colouristic brilliance of much of Sadie Harrison's music, the overwhelming impact on the performer is that it is overtly emotional. I recently asked a young composer whether his music was about anything to do with any emotional state. He looked alarmed and puzzled for a while, and then said, 'My music is about structure'. It is surely of note that many young artists feel that they should not claim any more questing subject matter than its construction. One wonders whether such nervousness lies at the heart of much of the canting disagreements over musical language today.

Of course, Sadie Harrison's music constantly announces its subjects, or at least appears to. Even the subtexts and riddles behind her choice of titles, be they cryptograms or merely allusory, speak of a composer who plays with layers of meaning and emotion as numerous and ambiguity-filled as the technical and constructional subtleties that fill her music.

©2000, Peter Sheppard Skaerved

**Taking Flight** (1999) was written especially for the Kreutzer Quartet and was inspired most directly by the virtuosity, exuberance and sensitivity of the individual players. The score is prefaced by a line of poetry by Wislawa Szymborska - "The tapestry of circumstance is intricate and dense". This line conveys something of the soundworld of the quartet, where 'tiny threads' of material weave around each other to create multi-layered textures - often tangled and dense, at times delicate and intricate. The text also reflects the structure of the work. *Taking Flight* is formed from a series of transformed musical 'reminiscences' - fragments taken from my earlier works and single chords from works by Birtwistle, Debussy, Gerhard and Bartók. The central idea of the

quartet, that of opening doors on the past, echoes the psychological journey undertaken in Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. A further link with the Bartók is created through the tonality of the quartet which polarises around the C - F sharp tritone, a celebration of C Major providing the climax and the only moment of sustained rest in the entire work. (For the Kreutzers)

**Traceries** was composed for Peter Sheppard Skærved's thirtieth birthday and was first performed by Peter and the pianist, Aaron Shorr in May 1997 at the Purcell Room. The work celebrates the extraordinary colouristic range of the dedicatee's playing and juxtaposes long, lyrical lines against highly virtuosic counterpoint, framed by passages of fragile, airborne gestures characterised by harmonics and trills. The title refers most overtly to the tracery windows of gothic architecture - in particular, to one of the windows in Whitby Abbey. The window is situated in the east bay of the northern nave wall and on a dark, stormy day provides a spectacular silhouette against the sea and sky. The contrast between the solidity of the surrounding walls and the intricacy of the trefoils against the backdrop of an almost fantastical light gave rise directly to the kaleidoscopic colours in the work. Further, *Traceries* takes its design from the idea of *Ubergreifende Form* (all-embracing form). In architectural terms this relates to artefacts such as the Gothic tracery window, where shapes are repeated in different proportions to create an overall design which is a reflection of its smallest parts. The title also refers to the 'traces' of other composers, particularly Bach and Stravinsky whose ghosts inhabit the intricate counterpoint of the central section. Finally, some three years after its composition, ideas from the work have been taken up as seeds for a concerto for violin and orchestra - initial tracings for the concerto perhaps. (For PSS)

**Impresa Amorosa** (1996) takes its name from the 15th-century practice in which jousting knights and their ladies exchanged love tokens (*impresa amorosa*), the identity and significance of which were known only to each other. The 16th-century *impresa* consisted of an image and accompanying motto, each complementing the other so that neither alone could convey the full meaning. The picture was known as the *corpo* (body) and the words as the *an/ma* (spirit) without which the body has no life. Whilst retaining its more superficial function of the riddle, the *impresa* was also adopted by the neo-platonists as one of the symbols of the inadequacy of language to communicate effectively, and as such, for them, it represented an escape from the limitations of discursive speech. It is at this point that the relationship between the aesthetic of the *impresa* and the musical *Impresa Amorosa* begins.

The pieces are short, some less than a minute long, each characterised differently in response to the chosen *impresa*. Occasionally, the music attempts to paint a tone picture of the image, as in the flickering light of the *Candle*, but more often it seeks to illuminate the motto - the endless,

unresolved cycle of the *Falcon*; the false-starts, dead-ends and repeated changes of direction in the *Labyrinth*; the schizophrenic movements of a speeding *Tortoise*, and the anguish expressed through the motto of the *Cross*. On a technical level, the pieces are unified by a 12-note row, and on an expressive level, by the motto "Sufficit lumen in tenebris" which, accompanied by the image of a single burning candle, formed the *impresa* of Isabella d'Este from 1525 - 1530. (For AJP)

- I **Falcon** 'Semper' (Always) (Piero de' Medici, 1414 -1469)
- II **Tortoise** 'Festina lente' (Make haste slowly) (Cosimo de' Medici, 1389 -1464)
- III **Saltire Cross** 'In virido teneras exurit medulas' (In youth love burns to the marrow) (Piero de' Medici, 1471 - 1503)
- IV **Porcupine** 'Cominus et eminus' (Hand to hand, but out of hand's reach) (Louis XII, 1462 - 1515)
- V **Lizard** 'Quod huic deest me tourquet' (That in which she is most wanting torments me ) (Frederick II of Gonzaga, 1500 -1540)
- VI **Labyrinth** 'Forse che sì, forse che no' (Maybe yes, maybe no!) (Gonzagas, early 1500s)
- VII **Candle** 'Sufficit lumen in tenebris' (One light suffices in the dark) (Isabella d'Este, 1525 -1530)

**Arcosolia** was written in July of 1999 and is dedicated to my grandmother who died during the same month. The title of the piece is important not just because of its meaning (an arcosolia is a medieval burial chamber placed within a church), but also because of the musical cipher that it contains - A C G (sol) A. This fragment forms the melodic and harmonic basis of the whole piece, and recurs, often slightly transformed, as a simple chant-like motif in the violin part. The concluding lullaby is the final transformation of this chant, bringing the work to a peaceful but luminous conclusion.

The piece has five main sections (just as arcosolia has five syllables) which reflect the implied semantics of the title, following the 'arc' from earth to sun ('sol'). Each section becomes progressively brighter in colour as the music moves into the upper registers of the instruments, culminating in the gentle lullaby which mirrors the solace ('solia') of the title. (For MT)

**Aster** (1995) takes its six texts from the Greek Anthology<sup>1</sup>, a collection of over four thousand poems collected by Byzantine scholars approximately one thousand years ago. The set of poems date from 7th century BC to 6th Century AD.

The selected texts are unified by two common themes: the cycle of life, expressed through the interplay between light and dark, and the passing from morning to evening, in combination with a characteristically fatalistic approach to the nature of love (this fatalism is seen most vividly in *Love the Conqueror* and *Love the Gambler* with their allusions to Venus and Cupid). The texts also share the topos of Aster, the star, which takes on various guises throughout the settings. The two

Aster texts, thought by Keats to be the most perfect of all the Greek Epigrams, concisely focus this conceptual unity and the sentiment of the selected texts. Though the musical settings vary considerably in mood and texture, there is a three-note motif (rising 7th, falling minor 3rd) which symbolizes the star of the text, providing a recurrent leitmotiv throughout the piece, heard in its basic form at the very opening of the work and again at the end, where it articulates the increasingly melancholic sighs of the lover. This motif is transformed into a triple-time dance in *Echo*, a multi-layered counterpoint in *Love the Conqueror*, and, harmonised with 4ths and 5ths it becomes the simple colouristic background in *Secret* and sections of *Love the Gambler*.

The piece is prefaced by a quotation from Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*- "When love speaks, the Gods in their heavens are made drowsy with the harmony" (Act IV Scene III), which, whilst written some thousand years after the last Epigrams, draws together all of the emotional, circumstantial and thematic elements of the piece. (For AJP)

**Aster 1<sup>2</sup>** (Plato, C. 429-347 BC)

My star, star-gazing?- If only I could be The sky, with all those eyes to stare at you!

**Secret** (Meleager, c. 140-70 BC)

Farewell Morning Star, herald of Dawn, and come quickly as the Evening Star bringing again in secret, he whom thou takes! away.

**Love the Gambler** (Meleager)

Still in his mother's starry lap, a child playing with his dice In the Morning, Love played my life away.

**Echo** (Satyrus c.911 - 959 AD)

Dear Pan, abide here, drawing the pipes over thy lips, for though wilt find Echo on these sunny greens... Tongueless Echo, along these pastoral slopes Makes answering music to the stars with repeating voice.

**Love the Conqueror** (Meleager)

I am downtread with thy foot upon my neck cruel divinity.

I know thee by the stars, as I know thee too by thy fiery arrows.

But hurling thy brands at my soul will no longer kindle it, for it is all ashes.

**Aster II** (Plato)

You were the Morning star among the living: But now in death your evening lights the dead.

1. Translated by J.W MacKail, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1928.

2. Aster, meaning 'star', was the boy lover of Plato

**Sadie Harrison** was born in Adelaide, Australia in 1965. After graduating from the University of Surrey, she continued her studies with Nicola Lefanu and gained her doctorate from King's College, London in 1994. She has been awarded several prizes for her music including the Joyce Dixey Award for Composition, the Hilda Margaret Watts and Convocation Sesquicentennial Prizes for Music, the Bernard Shorr ROSL Prize, and the UK & Eire Composition Platform 2000. Performances of her works have been given by Lontano, London Chamber Symphony, Music Projects, Ixion, Bournemouth Sinfonietta, Gemini, the Kreutzer Quartet, Double Image, Endymion Ensemble, Capricorn and the Composers Ensemble. Harrison's music has also been recorded by Clarinet Classics, Sargasso and BML, as well as other recordings on Metier.

Sadie Harrison has been lecturing in composition and contemporary music at Goldsmiths College, London since 1993. Her music is published by University of York Music Press ([uympeyork.ac.uk](http://uympeyork.ac.uk)). She has a daughter, Freya.

Heralded as one of the most versatile soloists of today, soprano **Lesley-Jane Rogers** is renowned for her charismatic and evocative performances. She has worked with many leading conductors and orchestras, and is also a keen exponent of contemporary music, having given several world premieres, most notably Ivan Fedele's *La chute de la Maison Usher* with the Ensemble InterContemporain.

**Nancy Ruffer** was born in Detroit. After graduating from The University of Michigan in 1976, she came to London on a Fulbright-Hays scholarship. Appreciating her skill in contemporary music, composers around the world have written for her. She has performed and recorded for the BBC, and in festivals and concert-halls throughout Britain and abroad.

**Peter Sheppard Skærved** has been associated with the music of Sadie Harrison for nearly a decade, having given the premieres of a four of the works on this disc. Other composers who have written for him include Julia Gomelskaya, Hans Werner Henze, David Matthews, Pavei Novak, Voiodmyr Rundchak, Dmitri Smirnov, and Joerg Widmann. He has appeared as soloist with orchestras ranging from the Zagreb Soloists to the Ukrainian National Symphony, and featured in the BBC Proms 2000 series. He is the leader of the Kreutzer Quartet and a founder member of Ensemble Triolog, Munich.

**Aaron Shorr** was a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music and the Royal Academy of Music, where he won their most prestigious awards for performance. He has appeared throughout the world in major concerts and festivals, including the Munich Biennale, Menuhin Festival and BBC Proms. In chamber music, his partnership with violinist, Peter Sheppard Skærved, has produced recordings of works by Cui and an ongoing series of the complete Beethoven Violin and Piano Sonatas for Metier Records. He currently holds a professorship in piano at the Royal Academy of Music.



# DIVINE ART RECORDINGS GROUP

INNOVATIVE | ECLECTIC | FASCINATING | INSPIRATIONAL

Over 500 titles, with full track details, reviews, artist profiles and audio samples, can be browsed on our website. All our recordings are available at any good record store or download provider or direct from our secure online shopping website:

**[www.divineartrecords.com](http://www.divineartrecords.com)**  
(CD, 24-bit HD, FLAC and MP3)

Diversions LLC (Divine Art USA) email: [sales@divineartrecords.com](mailto:sales@divineartrecords.com)

Divine Art Ltd. (UK) email: [uksales@divineartrecords.com](mailto:uksales@divineartrecords.com)

Printed catalogue sent on request

Also available in digital download through Primephonic, Qobuz, iTunes, Amazon, Spotify and many other platforms

follow us on facebook, youtube and twitter



**divine art**



**athene**



**métier**



**diversions**



**historic sound**

WARNING: Copyright subsists in all recordings issued under this label. Any unauthorised broadcasting, public performance, copying or re-recording thereof in any manner whatsoever will constitute an infringement of such copyright. In the United Kingdom, licences for the use of recordings for public performance may be obtained from Phonographic Performance Ltd, 1, Upper James Street, London W1R 3HG.



15631

# Taking Flight

chamber works by

## Sadie Harrison

### 1 Taking Flight 20:24

Kreutzer Quartet

### 2 Traceries 7:32

Peter Sheppard Skærved (violin)  
and Aaron Shorr (piano)

### 3 Impresa Amorosa

Aaron Shorr (piano)

3 I Falcon 1:33

4 II Tortoise 0:21

5 III Saltire Cross 2:30

6 IV Porcupine 0:53

7 V Lizard 3:08

8 VI Labyrinth 3:00

9 VII Candle 3:16

### 10 Arcosolia 8:52

Peter Sheppard Skærved (violin) and Aaron Shorr (piano)

### 11 Aster

Lesley-Jane Rogers (soprano), Nancy Ruffer (flute),  
Gordon MacKay (violin), Bridget Carey (viola)  
and Neil Heyde (cello)

11 Aster I 1:22

12 Secret 2:05

13 Love the Gambler 3:45

14 Echo 4:54

15 Love the Conqueror 4:32

16 Aster II 2:04

Sadie Harrison is published by UYMP

This recording was made in Christ's Hospital, Horsham on 24 & 25 April and 29 May 2000.

Producer / Balance Engineer / Digital Editing / Booklet Design and Layout: David Lefeber

Cover image: Catie Roe

Metier Sound & Vision and Sadie Harrison would like to acknowledge the generous support of Goldsmiths College, London in making this recording possible.

**METIER**

MSV CD92053

© 2000, Original recording made by David Lefeber, Metier Sound & Vision

© 2018 Divine Art Limited