Brian Ferneyhough

Opus Contra Naturam (2000)

Solo Piano
Duration: 13 minutes
First performance: October 2000, Flanders Festival, Ian Pace
Commissioned by the Flanders Festival Flemish-Brabant (Leuven, Belgium), Ian Pace and Henrietta Brougham

This piece forms part of my opera project *Shadowtime*, built around the death of the influential German-Jewish cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin on the Spanish border in 1940. It plays a key role in that work in that it represents the orphic descent of Benjamin’s avatar into the Underworld, through whose portals he is welcomed – to the strains of a series of sclerotically repetitive fanfares – by a Dante-esque gathering of demons and the feral shades of historical figures (some of whom were, at that point, still living).

‘Opus contra naturam’ is a term taken from renaissance alchemy and signifies one of the essential moments of transition/transformation which typify that arcane discipline. The piece itself is to be played by a Liberace-like figure or Joker and is to be accompanied by a silent film projection encompassing the chaotic intersection of scenes from fin-de-siècle Berlin cabaret, medieval labyrinths and images from the hyper-dissimulatory environment of present-day Las Vegas. Formally, the work is composed of a large central body of disordered and clamorous fragments framed by a lyrical Introit and a concluding Processional, both of which latter, in the opera, are accompanied by distorted and superposed plainchant quotations.

In keeping with its hallucinatory imagery, the central segment is a piano transcription, commentary and prolongation of an entirely disorderly and prolix body of materials assembled over the space of several months as a form of musical diary or monstrously autonomous memory trace. Apart from rendering it for piano, little has been done to suggest spurious criteria of coherence: given his fascination with the Surrealistically orderly disorder manifest by Parisian passages, I imagine that Benjamin himself would not have been entirely unappreciative of this aesthetic strategy.

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