

Porphyria's Lover

Peter Fribbins

The title comes from the Robert Browning poem of the same name (1836). For me, this is a remarkable poem, full of passion, vivid imagery and imbued with touches of madness and distortion (here literally in the form of the disease porphyria) which seems typical of much Romantic art.

I have often in my mind paired the aesthetics of different poets and composers, and whenever I think of Robert Browning, I always think of Robert Schumann. There seem to be a number of parallels, not merely their chronology, but also their expressive worlds. A delicate, almost seductive madness and a slightly twisted reality seem so much a part of Schumann's aesthetic and of this poem.

Thus, this piece forms my musical response to the Browning through a kind of Schumannesque filter. I have attempted in some way to capture the delicacy of Schumann, his elegiac side, the passion, and also that sense of early Romantic tender warmth (that on occasions can seem almost smothering and suffocating). The gentle madness takes the form of dissonant clusters, which return in different forms throughout the work (I was thinking in particular of the strange dissonances in 'Einen Blumen' from the piano pieces *Waldscenen*, Op.82). Also there is a recurring Brahms-like melodic idea (marked 'tenderamente' in the score) which also returns in different Schumannesque guises, sometimes as a transparent shadow of before, sometimes darker and twisted, sometimes slower or quicker.

There are three movements: the quick middle movement is followed by the last movement without a break.

Clarinet Quintet

- I Andante
- II Scherzo on Seven Notes: Allegro con Slancio – Andante – Tempo Primo
- III Interlude: Tranquillo – magical
- IV Lento – Piu Mosso – Andante

Clarinet quintets are traditionally significant and weighty pieces. I am only too aware (and in awe) of the masterful but wonderfully generous and warm works written by Mozart and Brahms. With such an inspired inheritance, I have attempted to make my somewhat smaller offering to the medium/genre (which one James?) as thoughtful and considered as I am able.

My Clarinet Quintet consists of four contrasting movements most of which are in arch form and which they themselves then form an extended arch across the whole work.

The opening quasi-recitative material for string quartet alone becomes an important motto throughout the work. This idea attempts fruitlessly to establish itself in different tonal centres, gradually extending itself, but not becoming fixed until the clarinet makes an impassioned and lyrical entry. Tension then builds into a dramatic dialogue between the clarinet and violins accompanied by rapid arpeggiated figures in the viola and 'cello.

The first movement ebbs away and a scherzo begins without a break. This whole movement is based upon only seven notes: a symmetrical pair of three notes fixed around a central axis of B (G - A - A# - **B** - C -Db - Eb). Hopefully this is not as dry as it looks! The economy of pitches is intended to give the excitement and driving energy of the music a clear focus, creating an unrelenting, even claustrophobic environment. A gentler trio section creates some superficial relief from the tension, but is still hewn from the oppressive seven-note world.

A short break precedes the third movement, which is a strange and magical interlude. A view of a purer spiritual even visionary world away from the endless journeying and yearning of the first movement and away from the claustrophobic tension and fruitless, wearying energy of the second. A simple held-chord provides the still backdrop to what was intended to be a rather other-worldly melody in high first violin (played in harmonics) coupled with Eb clarinet. The motto theme from the opening makes an appearance in the music, but viewed rather elliptically from this new perspective.

An eerie but somehow rather pure sound: the high Eb clarinet now replaces the Bb clarinet of movements one and two until the end of the piece.

The third movement moves into the fourth without a break, and we review and reprise much of the past material from earlier in the work, beginning with the trio from the second movement. Not only is the music much altered (the result of the magical transformation that occurred in the *Interlude*), but the new sonority of the Eb clarinet also sheds a completely new light on the material. But nothing is ever quite resolved, as the 'cello proves right at the very end.

Concertino for Seven

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Concertino for Seven is scored for flute (doubling piccolo), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), alto saxophone, violin, viola, 'cello and piano and consists of an original theme and ten variations. The theme is very simple, consisting only of four two-note pairs in thirds.

The piano opens with the theme already somewhat disguised and distorted through fantastical, magical figuration, interspersed with a version for much stiller woodwind. Like Rachmaninov's famous *Paganini Variations*, the theme is not obvious at the outset, and in variation one (allegro), begins to coalesce note by note against a driving single-note ostinato. Only in variation two is the theme eventually explicit, heard forte in the violin and woodwind, somewhat sinister in context perhaps, undercut as it is with the driving semi-quavers of variation one (a speeded-up diminution and development of the same theme).

Concertino for Seven is the first 'theme and variation' form I have composed – I have struggled before with the form's potential (in inept hands) for structural dislocation. Here I have attempted to make the music sound integrated and 'through composed' so hopefully the listener is not aware of its eleven sections, but of a fluent continuity and one whole unified dramatic structure.

String Quartet: *I Have the Serpent Brought*

The title comes from the first stanza of the remarkable poem by metaphysical poet John Donne entitled *Twickenham Garden*, which was probably written between 1610 and 1620:

Blasted by sighs, and surrounded with tears,
Hither I come to seek the spring,
And at mine eyes, and at mine ears,
Receive such balms, as else cure everything;
But O, self traitor, I do bring
The spider love, which transubstantiates all,
And can convert manna to gall,
And that this place may thoroughly be thought
True paradise, I have the serpent brought.

The poem provided the initial inspiration and stimulus for my string quartet, but the music is not intended to be programmatic in the nineteenth century sense. I suppose the dark opening chords may well sound like *manna turning to gall*, and the elegiac passion of the violin melody that weaves above is certainly connected

to the first lines, but there are no further literal (or *literary*) parallels intended beyond perhaps subliminal associations.

I have found that a poem often gives me an initial expressive and poetic focus for a piece, but after some measures the music seems to take off in its own terms. For me the piece must work coherently, structurally and abstractly as music: if it can only be understood in terms of the images, metaphors and structure of the poem linked to the music, I would feel something of a failure, and perhaps even a charlatan. Although I enjoy nineteenth century music very much, some of the music I find unsatisfying because it does precisely that (perhaps that makes me more of a 'Classical' composer).

The dark, claustrophobic mood of the *adagio* opening continues into the following main *Allegro*, but now with energy and perhaps even menace. The *adagio* and *allegro* are motivically linked.

A short *Adagio* follows, much more diatonically tonal than the first movement, simpler, almost naïve, and conceived with luminous chords and transparent textures to form a striking contrast to the dark complexity of the first movement.

A brief *Recitative* movement draws upon the melodies of the very opening of the work and leads directly to an *Allegro* which gives a different and somewhat truncated perspective on the energetic, motivic material of the first movement. It comes to a climax on held tremolo chords over which the violins recall the passionate melody of the opening. A brief moment of repose follows before the *allegro* bursts through and ends the music with violent finality.