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Fabular Arcana (2021), concerto for retuned piano and orchestra

- I. Hexefriri's Grand Parallaxtic Clockwork
- II. The Coal-Bog Giantesses
- III. Concerning the Great Bøyg's Various Reconstructions of Solveig's Song from the Degraded Memories of Malevolent Woodland Spirits
- IV. Insecta ex Machina

In late 2018, my friend Paul Sánchez asked me if I would consider writing a piano concerto for him and the SDSO in honor of the latter's centennial season. The answer was a no-brainer, but when the time came for me to begin composing, I faced some difficult questions. First and foremost was whether I really wanted to contribute a new piece to an already overcrowded repertory. Indeed, so many great piano concerti have already been written that it would seem only the most intrepid performers and listeners are likely to seek out new ones. Yet it was unclear to me what other option(s) I had, considering that I was specifically asked to write a work for a solo pianist accompanied by orchestra.

A solution ultimately presented itself through my longstanding interest in tuning theory. Unbeknownst to many, the way in which music is presently tuned throughout much of the world—with 12 equidistant pitches per octave (so-called "equal temperament")—is a fairly recent innovation. Prior to the nineteenth century, Western classical musicians employed numerous other tuning systems, some of which sound quite exotic to modern ears. And even now, countless forms of world music use tunings radically different from equal temperament.

As it turns out, it is the piano that is primarily responsible for the spread and virtual standardization of equal temperament. The modern piano is specifically designed for that tuning, and since pianos are now found the world over, equal temperament is as well. But what if one tuned the piano in a drastically different way? Would it fundamentally alter the nature of the instrument? In one sense, the answer is no, since the piano would retain its physical structure, appearance, means of operation, and so forth. But in another sense, the answer is yes, since the piano's color, resonance, and relationship to other instruments would all change in significant ways. It was this realization that allowed me to move forward with the concerto. Though the piece features a soloist playing a standard grand piano, the unconventional tuning of that instrument transforms it into a very different kind of musical animal.

The tuning I chose is an unusual one containing abundant purely-tuned fifths and sevenths, but very few conventional thirds. Even more striking is the fact that its "half-steps" come in four radically different sizes, with some so large they sound like whole-steps, and others so small that the two pitches they separate seem like variants of each other. In this peculiar intonation, certain scales and chords sound astonishingly clean and sonorous, while others are shockingly abrasive. Consonances are more consonant, and dissonances are more dissonant.

The "arcane fables" indicated by the title are four interconnected musical narratives depicting purely fanciful scenes and events. The specifics of these "fables," however, are mostly left for listeners to determine. In this sense, *Fabular Arcana* is a bit like a film score with no film. Though the work's emotional trajectory is reasonably clear, the underlying causes of its various emotional states are not.

The first movement begins with the resonant chiming of bells and delicate ticking of differently-paced timekeeping mechanisms. These two motives pervade the entire movement, accompanying various statements of two larger themes, one of which is reminiscent of slow-moving Medieval organum, and the other of which is more rhythmically active and folk-like. The musical ambiance is at turns mysterious, reverent, and strangely majestic, with the solo piano moving gradually from more conventionally-tuned sonorities to less familiar ones and then back.

“The Coal-Bog Giantesses” begins deep in the abyss and slowly rises upward through a haze of ghostly moans. A torpid piano melody unfolds over an ethereal drone, then gives way to grotesquely low woodwind lines. While the music laboriously rises in pitch, it also builds in intensity, eventually erupting into thunderous crashes and anguished shrieks. A brief respite is provided by the onset of quietly rumbling machinery, though the sense of menace remains. Three more explosive screams mark the commencement of a frenzied build-up leading to a militant bacchanalia. After a time, the revelry collapses, followed by a lumbering return to the depths. As the movement draws to a close, a brittle string fanfare signals the arrival of the Great Bøyg.

Movement 3’s lengthy title references Edvard Grieg’s famous *Peer Gynt*, an assortment of short pieces that he composed as incidental music for Henrik Ibsen’s play of the same name. Act 3 of the play contains “Solveig’s Song,” an aria inspired by Norwegian folk music. In the song, a farmer’s young daughter sits at a spinning wheel and sings of her faithful love for the wayward Peer Gynt after he has abandoned her. The aria is comprised of three sections: a recitative-like string introduction; a slow, minor-key lament; and a faster, major-key vocalise in triple meter. These three musical ideas appear in assorted guises throughout movement 3, with each variation representing an attempt by the Great Bøyg to recreate the original music. The Bøyg is one of the most bizarre characters in *Peer Gynt*. Originating in Scandinavian folklore, it is generally described as a kind of troll, though in *Peer Gynt* it appears as a disembodied voice, “not dead, not living; all slimy; misty. Not so much as a shape!” Why the Bøyg would desire to recreate Solveig’s Song is an enigma, but its reconstructions come in several different forms. Near the end of the movement, the pianist veers into a virtuosic cadenza modeled on the one from Grieg’s celebrated Piano Concerto in A Minor, yet still employing themes from “Solveig’s Song.”

“Insecta ex Machina” opens similarly to movement 1. In this case, however, the delicate workings of Hexefriri’s Clockwork are quickly torn asunder in a violent rupture. This sets off a chain reaction of alarms and popping fissures, followed by the rhythmic skittering of mechanical insects. As the wildly active texture evolves and branches, material from the previous three movements returns in oddly altered forms, as though time itself has been contorted. After a powerful build-up, the texture shatters into fragments, leaving behind only the work’s opening chant, though now in an altered tuning and accompanied by a forlorn motive from movement 3. Whether this represents a triumph or a catastrophe is for you to decide.

Fabular Arcana is dedicated—with gratitude and admiration—to Paul Sánchez, Delta David Gier, and the SDSO. The references to Grieg and the folk music of Norway are a deliberate homage to both Sioux Falls’ Norwegian community, which played a pivotal role in the SDSO’s growth and longevity, and my maternal great-grandparents, among whom were a musical devotee of Grieg and two immigrants from Bergen, Grieg’s hometown.