BRIAN FERNEYHOUGH

Opus Contra Naturam

A Shadow Play for Speaking Pianist

Solo Piano

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Commissioned by the Flanders Festival Flemish-Brabant (Leuven, Belgium), Ian Pace and Henrietta Brougham

First performed by Ian Pace 14 October 2000 Festival van Vlaanderen Vlaams-Brabant

Duration c.13 minutes

Performance Note

Due to constant changing of clefs and registers, the distribution of materials between the staves of the score is *not* intended as a guide to their assignment to left or right hands in performance. Each pianist will determine this aspect of the interpretation individually.

The texts (in frames, usually above the staves to which they apply) are to be spoken approximately where their placement suggests. At several points, individual words are so located as to suggest exact coordination with individual attacks in the piano part. This coordination is intentional, but not specifically indicated as such, so that performers should consider themselves at liberty to adopt slightly different conventions.

The texts should be spoken as if the pianist is engaged in a private, if somewhat conflictual conversation with the piano. In particular, careful consideration must be given to musical context when selecting a tone of voice for each vocal insert, since many are intended to appear to be reactions on the part of the performer to wayward tendencies on the part of the piano itself, i.e., its frequent veering into the realm of distorted late-Romantic tonal harmony.

Piano pedalling has nowhere been indicated in the score. Because of the complex and constantly changing apportionment of material between staves and hands, the composer has chosen to leave the performer to select pedalting aimed at realising the indicated conjunction of lines as closely as possible.

Composer's Note

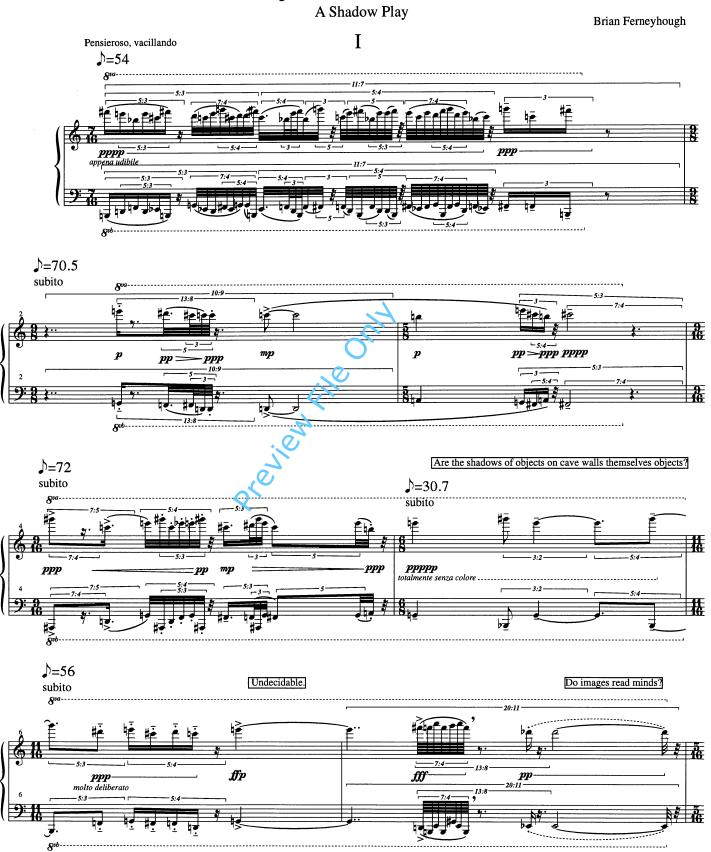
This piece forms part of my opera project *Shadowtime*, built around the death of the influential German-Jewish cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin on the Spanish border in 1940.

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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