

BRIAN FERNEYHOUGH

Opus Contra Naturam

A Shadow Play for  
Speaking Pianist

Solo Piano

EIGENTUM DES VERLEGERS · ALLE RECHTE VORBEHALTEN

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EDITION PETERS

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Preview File Only

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

First performed by Ian Pace  
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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 pedalling 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.

# Opus Contra Naturam

## A Shadow Play

Brian Ferneyhough

Pensieroso, vacillando

I

♩=54

*pppp appena udibile* *ppp*

♩=70.5

subito

*p pp ppp mp p pp ppp pppp*

♩=72

subito

*ppp pp mp ppp ppppp*

Are the shadows of objects on cave walls themselves objects?

♩=30.7

subito

*ppppp totalmente senza colore pp*

♩=56

subito

*ppp molto deliberato ffp fff pp*

Undecidable.

Do images read minds?

♩=73 Semantic insufficiency rall → (♩=54)

8 *pp* *ffff* *subito* *mp* *mf* *ffff* *p* *ppp* *pp* *sfz* *secco poss*

♩=43 *subito* *più agitato* accel →

10 *sfz* *secco poss* *pp* *f* *ff* *subito* *p* *mp* *ffff* *ff* *mf* *pppp* *mp* *p* *p*

Then as when, rall now as some what or other, Corrupted data, (♩=37)

♩=94

12 *pp* *ppp* *p* *mp* *p* *pppp* *trasmarente*

♩=57.2 *subito* What's the cube root of a counterfactual?

14 *pppp* *pp* *p* *mf* *pp* *ben artic* *p* *f* *p*

♩=53

An almond.

8<sup>va</sup> subito

16 *mp* piacevole *pp* *p* *ppp* *sfz* *esplosivo-secco* *p* senza movimento *sfz* *mf* *pppp*

16

8<sup>vb</sup>

Detailed description: This section of the score covers measures 16 to 18. It features a complex rhythmic structure with various time signatures (16/8, 11/9, 5/4, 13/8, 6/5, 10/6, 5/3). The music is characterized by rapid sixteenth-note passages and dynamic contrasts. Performance instructions include 'subito', 'esplosivo-secco', and 'senza movimento'. Dynamics range from *pppp* to *sfz*.

Palimpsestic forms.

Cracked spines.

rall

♩=43

8<sup>va</sup>

19 *fff* *duro* *mp* *f* *mp* *p* *ff* *pp* *pppp*

19

8<sup>vb</sup> *fff* *ff* *sfz* *violentiss* *sfz* *violentiss*

Detailed description: This section covers measures 19 to 21. The tempo is marked as *rall* with a metronome marking of ♩=43. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes with dynamic shifts from *fff* to *pppp*. Performance instructions include 'duro' and 'violentiss'.

Archives of anteriority.

Vampiric codes.

Bell, book and candle.

(♩=70.5)

8<sup>va</sup> accel

22 *mf* *p* *mf* *pp* *mf* *f* *sfz* *mp*

22

8<sup>vb</sup>

Detailed description: This section covers measures 22 to 24. The tempo is marked as *accel* with a metronome marking of ♩=70.5. The music consists of eighth-note patterns with dynamic changes from *mf* to *pp*. Performance instructions include 'accel'.

♩=70.5

rall

♩=43

Henceforth unavailable.

8<sup>va</sup> *pesante* *fff* *molto violentamente* *fff* *dimin* *p* *pp* *secco poss* *ppp*

25 *fff* *fff* *fff* *dimin* *p*

25

8<sup>vb</sup>

Detailed description: This section covers measures 25 to 27. The tempo is marked as *rall* with a metronome marking of ♩=43. The music features a 'pesante' feel with dynamic shifts from *fff* to *ppp*. Performance instructions include 'molto violentamente', 'secco poss', and 'ppp'.

begin Part II after a general pause of not less than 5" but not more than 12"