

The Phoenix and the Turtle

The Phoenix and the Turtle was commissioned by Musica Viva (Australia) for the 1974 tour of the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields under Neville Marriner. I had recently returned from twelve months' study in Rome with Franco Evangelisti, and felt that the time had come to take a stand with regard to my personal style of composition. For over ten years I had been working in the twelve-tone method, but had become increasingly dissatisfied as to the validity of its philosophical basis. More importantly, I had grown less than satisfied with the sound that resulted from its application. The Musica Viva commission provided me with an ideal opportunity to ask myself what I felt the stuff of music to be really about.

Inspiration for the work came from the Shakespearean poem of the same name, which "celebrates the decease of two, chaste lovers, who were perfectly united in an ideal passion". The idea of regeneration, symbolised by the phoenix, is one which I have long found attractive because of its close relationship to the idea of continuous variation: continually creating something new from the ashes of the old. For this principle I openly acknowledge my indebtedness to Schoenberg, but my application of it is in a clearly tonal context, stylistically far removed from Schoenberg's. My aim was not to seek some literal musical parallel to the poem, even if this were possible, but rather to let the poem act as a catalyst on my musical thinking. Amongst the music I admire most, various "love music" figures prominently--Tristan und Isolde, Pelleas et Melisande, Romeo and Juliet--and this was to be my essay in that genre.

I resolved to take as simple a musical idea as possible, the intervals of the second (with its inversion, the seventh) and of the third (with its inversion, the sixth). With this basic material I determined to "start again"; and hence, when the work was completed, I felt that my personal musical style had in a sense been reborn from the ashes of the old.

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