

COMMENTARY ON THE CYCLE

THROW YOUR FEAR INTO THE AIR –7 FANTASIA SPARKS FOR GUITAR AND PIANO (2021/22) BY BARBARA MAYER

Composition commissioned by guitarist Stefan Barcsay, sponsored by the Culture Office of the town of Augsburg

Who would have thought in the autumn of 2021 – when I received this commission – that the important message communicated by Rose Ausländer in her poem, would turn out to be doubly topical at the time of its first performance due to the dramatic turn of events in Ukraine?

That's the reason why my work is prefaced by the special line "Throw your fear into the air" as its motto and title. In order to give the best possible compositional form to the profundity of the original poem so full of meaning, my cycle consists of 7 fantasia sparks, short sound patterns that musically characterise powerful themes or excerpts from the poem in a creative, multi-layered fashion.

The number 7 was deliberately chosen here as it symbolises wholeness and perfection in the mysticism of Christian and Jewish traditions which also played a certain part in Ausländer's life.² The systematic inclusion of number symbolism is intended to lend an overarching meaning to round off and encapsulate the work.

There are therefore three "symbolic pieces" to be found in this cycle – inspired by *Macrocosmos* by the recently deceased composer George Crumb – No. 3 *For seconds in star dreams*, No. 6 *Heavenly crowns* and No. 7 *Lux Aeterna*. These movements written in the form of a star, crown or candle reveal their relevance to the title of each piece both in terms of the pattern of the notes and the sound.

The cycle is opened by the **1st movement, *In nowhere, for guitar and piano***, which sets to music the cycle of human life based on the verse in the poem "(...) your dreams fall into nowhere", and thus the seamless transition between origin and ending. The tonal language is correspondingly celestial: majestic tremoli, trills, delicate interludes and a very open, triumphal conclusion emphasise the infinite character of the piece.

By contrast, **the 2nd movement, *The coy premonition of the thrush, for solo guitar***, based on the 12th line of the poem ("The thrush still sings), appears to be shot through with uneasy feelings. Fearful premonitions of death and danger determine the musical action – in spite of rays of hope continually breaking through.

Thrush song transposed to the guitar's technical capabilities and largely adopted in its natural form initially expresses the pure joy of life in its original warbling tone. In the course of the movement, however, the birdsong becomes alienated in nervous distortions, hectic accelerandi and considerable interval leaps to reflect the bird's rising tension.

In a particularly tense contrast, its lively song is frequently confronted – unexpectedly and collage-like – with quotes from the dark Funeral March motif from Frederic Chopin's 2nd piano sonata in B flat minor op. 35 which not infrequently intervenes with its rhythmical relentlessness and rigidity like the inescapable hand of fate between the thrush's productions – the proximity to Ausländer's own biography is clear for all to see. Quasi-militaristic sound effects such as the metallic snare drum and tambora techniques on the guitar reinforce this fateful mood in which the thrush ultimately gives up.

Based on the 8th line of the poem ("soon your dreams will fall"), the **3rd movement, *For seconds in star dreams – intermezzo miniature for guitar and piano*** represents a symbolic piece written in the shape of a star. The respective rhythms form the spikes of the star, and their sequence is determined by the musicians' ad libbing. This interpretational freedom is intended to give a glimpse of the infinite possibilities in the world of dreams in which the boundaries between what is possible and the other side, the world behind the comprehensible and tangible to which Rose Ausländer refers here, become blurred.

To this end, two numbers shape this piece both in terms of the sound and the symbolism:

- the number 3 which in a figurative sense is seen as a symbol of completeness or the divine trinity³ and points to the position of the piece as the 3rd movement in the cycle;

- the number 2 which stands for the cosmic duality (heaven and earth)⁴, i.e. the relationship between two complementary variables.

This context is intended to underpin the connection just outlined between dreams and reality in the movement on a higher level of significance. From a compositional point of view, this context is expressed in the exclusive use of motifs and intervals by the second on the basis of which a resonant backdrop of sound is created with occasional, piercing effects in the dialogue between guitar and piano.

The **4th movement, *Time and Life, for solo guitar***, occupies a central position as the centrepiece of the cycle in which the focus is on the principal idea of the poem, a reflection on the meaning of life. In the outer sections of the movement, rhythmically mechanical figurations with a throbbing pulse call to mind the inexorable course of life in an external world dominated by stress and routine while a very introverted, thoughtful middle section sensitively designed with harmonics as a meditational counterpoint to this “perpetuum mobile” shines a light on an individual’s internal world.

Continuing this basic contemplative thought, the **5th fantasia spark, *Gifted words – faces of a conversation, for solo piano*** which takes as its theme the 14th line of the poem (“Giving away words”), stirs up a potpourri of different expressions of moods in a conversation from merry, funny, despairing to urging and pleading.

Taking a new turn to the supernatural, the **6th piece, *Heavenly crowns – intermezzo miniature, for solo guitar*** represents the 2nd symbolic piece of the cycle, similar to the 6th line of the poem (“the sky grows”). Although the number 6 denotes the human⁵ in traditional Christian and Jewish thought on the one hand, on the other, according to the biblical view of the world, it promises the hope of deliverance by the Messiah, the “King of Kings” to which Rose Ausländer alludes in the verse in question. The crown-shaped note pattern of the movement, in combination with its whirring, quavering glissandi, illustrates this extensive set of associations.

A figurative view of eternal light and life can also be deduced from the final verse in the poem, which is picked up and musically retraced in the **final movement of the cycle, *Lux Aeterna, for guitar and piano***:

For example, the seven re-emerges as a number of perfection and abundance on several levels if you look at its position as the 7th piece that also consists of exactly 7 musical units. On the final 8th bar of the movement, the performers recite the last line of the poem in a mere whisper. The additional inclusion of the number eight in this context is intended to emphasise infinity in the sense of a resurrection or new beginning as the essential message of the poem.

In view of such connections, the final movement was composed in the form of two candles in terms of the notation. From a sound perspective, a dynamically reserved, almost static bass foundation consisting of repetitions every second suggests infinity over which fleeting interjections flare up in the interchange between guitar and piano, reminiscent of a light or the licking flame of a candle underscored by corresponding directions such as “flickering”, “flaring”, etc.

A whispered reminiscence of the last verse of the poem “Be what you are. Give what you have” ultimately shifts the focus onto the quintessential nature of the poem “Use your time” and in its openly culminating character at the same time comes full circle to the beginning of the work from a dramatic perspective.

¹ cf. Ausländer, Rose: “Still you are there” (1977), in: Portal *Haus der Poesie*, <https://www.lyrikline.org/de/gedichte/noch-bist-du-da-555>, dated 05. 03. 2022

² cf. Schäfer, Elke: “Zahlensymbolik” (The Symbolism of Numbers), <https://www.sbg.ac.at/pth/texte/30-jahre/zahlensymbolik.htm>, published by Univ. of Salzburg, no year given

³cf. Kuhl, Sebastian: “Zahlensymbolik in Bachs Werken” (The Symbolism of Numbers in Bach’s Works), FA Musik, Bayreuth 2009, p.5

and cf. Gratzner, Wolfgang: “Zahlensymbolik” (The Symbolism of Numbers), in: Österr. Musiklexikon Online, https://www.musiklexikon.ac.at/ml/musik_Z/Zahlensymbolik.xml, 2008, dated 20. 03. 2022

⁴ cf. Kuhl, p. 5

⁵ cf. Kuhl, p. 5