

GEORGE BENJAMIN
UPON SILENCE

A setting of Yeats' 'Long-legged Fly'
for mezzo-soprano and string ensemble
(two violas, three cellos, and two double basses)

(1991)

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FABER *ff* MUSIC

The original version of *Upon Silence* was scored for mezzo-soprano and five viols and was premiered by Susan Bickley and the consort Fretwork in October 1990. This version of *Upon Silence* for mezzo-soprano and string ensemble was commissioned by the Opéra Bastille, Paris. The first performance was given by Susan Bickley with Ensemble Musique Oblique conducted by the composer in the Amphitheatre, Opéra Bastille, Paris, on 21 March 1992 as part of the opera house's festival *Carte Blanche à George Benjamin*.

Upon Silence sets *Long-legged Fly*, a late poem of Yeats which portrays three momentous figures in history absorbed in silent contemplation: Julius Caesar planning a crucial military campaign, Helen of Troy as an adolescent in Sparta and Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel.

The verses are set in a syllabic manner, while each successive chorus is set to increasingly lengthy melismas as, like the long-legged fly above water, the voice hovers above the strings' now turbulent, now still stream of sound.

G.B.

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PERFORMANCE NOTE

At all times the strings should attempt to imitate the bowing technique and sonority of viols. They must play *non vibrato* throughout except for the solo melodic line shared between the three cellos from the third verse onwards marked by brackets Γ 7.

Bracketed pizzicato notes: pluck the string once only – bracketed notes indicate a change of fingering.

Natural harmonics: the relevant string is indicated by a small notehead which, in the case of gracenotes, appears in brackets.

Mutes: in large concert halls the strings should play without mutes. In smaller halls normal mutes should be used throughout. In particularly small halls with resonant acoustics practice mutes should be employed.

Voice: almost no vibrato and a gentle sound are requested, so as to achieve a satisfactory blend with the strings. During long melismas – particularly towards the end of the piece (i.e. V to A2) – the opening consonant of words should not be repeated, despite breaks in the melodic line. Similarly, the concluding consonant should be placed only once, as indicated.

Tempi: the sudden, extreme accelerandi and ritardandi must be observed, and at all times the tempo must be somewhat flexible, particularly during the choruses.

LONG-LEGGED FLY

That civilisation may not sink,
Its great battle lost,
Quiet the dog, tether the pony
To a distant post;
Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread;
His eyes fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

That the topless towers be burnt
And men recall that face,
Move most gently if move you must
In this lonely place.
She thinks, part woman, three parts child,
That nobody looks; her feet
Practise a tinker shuffle
Picked up on a street.

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
Her mind moves upon silence.

That girls at puberty may find
The first Adam in their thought,
Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
Keep those children out.
There on that scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.
With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro.

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

W.B. Yeats
(1865-1939)

© 1939 by W.B. Yeats
Renewed 1967 by George Yeats

C

poco rit.

Mezzo
maps are spread; His eyes fixed u-pon noth - ing, A

Vle.
poco p ppp poco p

Vc.
poco p ppp p

Db.

più rit.

Mezzo
hand un - - - - - der his head.

Vle.
ppp mf pp più

Vc.
ppp p ppp pp mp pp più

Db.
pp p pp mp pp più

D Tranquillo $\text{♩} = 69$

accel.

molto accel.

sempre pp sostenuto, tranquillo

33

Mezzo *Like*

Vle. *pont.* *nat.* *pont.* *nat.* *pont.* *(pont.)*

Vc. *pont.* *nat.* *pont.* *nat.* *pont.*

Db. *I*

pp *poco* *mp* *pp* *mp* *p*

mf *pp* *pochiss.* *P* *pp*

f *f*

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al. $\text{♩} = 104$ rit.

molto rit.

E

38

Mezzo *a* *long*

Vle. *dim.* *dim.* *pppp* *pppp*

Vc. *pp legato* *mf*

Db. *nat.* *III* *pp legato* *mp* *mp*

