v a g a n t e s

(2024)

elegiæ for piano

for James Iman & Kate Sullivan

I

water, drawn from a quiet sea

—[Cato]... uses it in his recipe for Coan wine, which begins by drawing water from a quiet sea on a day when there shall be no wind
Helen Waddell, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, 296.

II

wandering on long roads, companionless

—[of Dido] the pitiful sorrowful dreaming in Virgil's loveliest lines of herself always alone, always abandoned, wandering on long roads companionless
Helen Waddell, *the Wandering Scholars*, xxvii.

III

a familiar ghost, at home among the olive trees

—Helen Waddell on Sidonius Apollinaris spying Petronius Arbiter in Marseilles, three centuries after his death
Mediaeval Latin Lyrics, 299.

Ordo noster prohibet / matutinas plane
sunt quedam phantasmata / que vagantur mane,
per que nobis veniunt / visiones vane;
sed qui tunc surrexerit / non est mentis sane...
—*Carmina Burana* #193

A *Vagus*, or Wandering Scholar, "shall never be
up in time for matins, for there are *phantasmata*
abroad in the early morning, which is the reason
why early risers are never quite sane".
—*The Wandering Scholars*, 197

These works may be performed separately (but see below)

duration: ~12 + 12 + 12 minutes

Program note:

A *Vagus*, or Wandering Scholar, "shall never be up in time for matins, for there are *phantasmata* abroad in the early morning, which is the reason why early risers are never quite sane". —Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars*, 197

I had wanted, for decades, to write pieces based on Helen Waddell's two books *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics* (1929) and *the Wandering Scholars* (1927). The former is one of the first books I ever properly read – I wrote a piece using an Abelard text I found in it (which I now know to be rather famous) when I was in my teens – and the latter is, simply, one of my primary comfort reads. Strictly speaking, the three brief excerpts that I have chosen to illuminate are not about the *clerici vagantes*, the Wandering Scholars or Goliards, but they do fit the theme of 'wanderings'/*vagantes*. The first piece derives from Cato the Elder (*de Agri Cultura*) who was writing in the second century BCE, and the second piece from an episode in Vergil's *Aeneid*. The third piece refers to the ghost of the pagan Petronius Arbiter, who lived under Nero, haunting Sidonius Apollinaris, a Gallo-Roman fifth century bishop, in a Marseille garden, as mentioned in one of Sidonius' letters.

Despite my often designating the three **vagantes** sections as *pieces*, in their writing I treated them as *Chapters* from one integrated arc – however discontinuous – and although these *Chapters* may be performed alone, they work best heard contiguously.

As is appropriate for a piece about "a quiet sea", **vagantes I** does not have a strong sense of direction. The many cells that make up its architecture do not cohere very tightly, and the gentle tidal in-and-out that provides what there is of structure is intendedly meant to erode any real sense of location in the music. It is, quite deliberately, timeless, and eventually quietly forgets itself.

Vagantes II is also intentionally short on any sense of global structure, but achieved in a quite different fashion. Where **vagantes I** has a very tight, but impalpable, architecture, **II** eschews any kind of large-scale formal map or logic whatsoever, by allowing the player to choose the route they take through the 26 *Paragraphs*; all but the first and last are unordered. The intended effect of this structural potentiality (~6.2 x 10^{23} alternative routes!) is to offer a meandering comparable to the "wandering on long roads companionless" of Dido (yes, the *Dido* of Purcell). And of course the pianist is themself companionless, carrying a more than usual share of the musical proceedings.

How does one depict a ghost in sound? In **vagantes III** I have attempted to make Petronius spectral through erasure. The material that constitutes Petronius' presence in the music is slowly eroded to the point where it no longer has any definition, as if the ghost dissolves before our ears.

These three-pieces-in-one are essentially bucolic, that is, they have to do with things pastoral and archaic. They are also, by mood as much as genre, elegies. In keeping with the lines from the *Carmina Burana* above, the entire arch was written mainly overnight.

And, of course, vagantes is my *Gaspard* – intentionally so; it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise.

Performance notes:

- Although this piece subdivides into three distinct Chapters, they are not to be considered as separate works, and although they may be performed individually, it should be made clear that such performances are excerpts. In a complete performance players should pause between the Chapters, but not allow the momentum to cease.

- In **II**, the material is modular; each lettered cell is a separate Paragraph consisting of one or more pages. When moving from Paragraph to Paragraph, do not pause; treat it as a normal page-turn. Begin always with **A**, and end always with **Z**—in between, the cells may be played in any order selected by the performer. Each cell *must* be played, and once only. It is suggested that the pianist choose several specific routes through the material and alternate between them for different performances, but making a new choice every time, or a single unchanging choice is just as valid. There are, after all, 24! (~6.2 x 10^{23}) routes through Paragraphs **B** to **X**.

- In **II** each new Paragraph should be performed with an abrupt change of tempo, irrespective of the modifications in the previous Paragraph. Unless, of course, the two Paragraphs chosen to be contiguous have the same tempo.

- Accidentals only apply to the notes they immediately precede, except in strings of repeated notes where they continue until a new pitch is introduced.

- In this score:

  Accel(erando), with an upward arrow, means *gradually get faster*
  Rall(entando), with an upward arrow, means *gradually get slower*
  Rit(enuto), with a horizontal arrow, or none, means *a sudden holding back of tempo*

  All only persist as long as the extension line indicates.

- **Dynamic profile**: there are **eleven** dynamic steps in this work:

$$ppppp-pppp-ppp-pp-p-mf-f-ff-fff-ffff-fffff$$

These are rendered in the score as

$$p5-p4-p3-p2-p-mf-f-f2-f3-f4-f5$$

(Note that in **vagantes I** these are sometimes given with the number first, as **2***p*, **2***f*, etc.)

There is no *mp* dynamic; *mf* is considered to be midway between *p* and *f*. Occasionally a dynamic will have a **+** after it; this just indicates that the level should be subtly louder than the previous appearance of the same dynamic.

Dynamics should be not be treated as a simple linear *soft→loud*: they function as variations in the *local* context. A dash — after a dynamic means that it continues unchanged until contradicted.

- **Emphases** ‒ are used to indicate either slight stresses or a hint of detaché, or both; context will be the guide. Hard attacks **>** are used to indicate pitches that need to be brought out—context will govern the extent to which these pitches need to be martellato. Parentheses around either glyph indicate that the dynamic level is low.

- **All pedal notations are bare minima**—they show primarily where the harmony, and therefore continuity, changes. I imagine the player will pedal more frequently and subtly than I have indicated. Full pedal releases are indicated by gaps in the pedal line; all other releases are partial semi-clearances, where the resonance does not entirely stop. A bracketed pedal spike at the beginning of a line is simply a reminder that the pedal was semi-cleared at the end of the previous system. A ½ indication below a pedal spike means that the semi-clear should be shallow, that more resonance should be retained: half-release. The use of the middle pedal is flagged by circled **MP**; it is used independently of the *Ped.*, so left foot is preferable. *Una corda* is indicated by ⬚UC⬚ and a broken line indicating extension.

- A bass clef with an *8* beneath indicates that all the pitches in that stave are to be played an octave lower. This is cancelled by a normal bass clef with the word LOCO. Similarly a treble clef with an *8* above indicates that all the pitches in that stave are to be played an octave higher, until the LOCO clef.

- Chords should not be broken unless absolutely unavoidable. All arpeggiations are fully notated. Except in **III** where upward rolls are indicated by a vertical arrow ↑ above the beam, or upper notehead, depending on layout. They should always be as fast as possible, rolls rather than arpeggii. A dotted line after a ↑ indicates that the whole string of chords beneath should be rolled. If the hands are in rhythmic unison the roll should extend across both hands' pitches, but the ↑ only appears above the RH. There are no downward rolls.