



"ATLANTIS VARIATIONS" FOR SOLO PIANO by Derek Strahan

Derek Strahan, virtual piano

Revolve RDS009

COMPOSER'S NOTES: In his work " *Australian Piano Music of the Twentieth Century*" (published Praeger 2005) (page 144) Professor Larry Sitsky of the Australian National University School of Music, has kindly intimated that, in his opinion, any book on Australian piano music, to be considered complete, should include a mention of Derek Strahan and his *Atlantis Variations* (1992) for solo piano. Professor Sitsky observes in this work some "connection to the world of Messiaen". He also refers to my "eclectic" style of writing, and, quite rightly, questions my reliance on a very prescriptive program in writing a piece intended for concert performance. In "reserving judgement" he also kindly adds that he "would love to hear the work as a whole from some enterprising pianist" As would I! I have endeavoured to engage some of the issues Sitsky raises in the text that immediately follows. I do thank him most sincerely for including consideration of this work in his extensive survey of Australian piano music.

THE PROGRAM: It is intended that this piece can stand alone as a concert piece independently of its programmatic connection, since it was written to explore, by purely musical means, what possibilities are inherent in the elemental motifs and themes I have created and have chosen to work with. Thus all themes are subjected to variational development. The “Sun” theme is explored in 3 variations; “Earth” theme in 5, and the Maya I, Maya II & Calypso themes (which are contrapuntally compatible) are explored in 6 variations. Music of the 19th century is vibrant with programmatic works, of which the Symphonic Poems (or Tone Poems) of Ferencz Liszt were early examples, followed later by those of Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Edward Elgar, Frederick Delius and Richard Strauss, to name but five ardent practitioners. These greatly influenced the work of composers in the 20th century writing for film and theatre, and perhaps especially for ballet. For those interested in the relationship between this music and the “history” of Atlantis, I offer the following summary prefaced, however, by this thought: the earth changes wrought by the geological upheavals that brought to an end the Quaternary Age are a prime example of climate change. One cannot read any account of the planetary convulsions that accompanied this global event without experiencing feelings of awe and terror. Such feelings are at the core of this composition, in whatever musical form it may be deemed to have been written. And, by the way, given adequate time and funding, I do plan to orchestrate this piece.

NOTE ON PERFORMANCE: The increased technological sophistication of digital sound banks available to create virtual performance can be used in conjunction with music software programs to simulate live performance, though it should not be taken to assume that I regard virtual performance as an adequate substitute for the artistry of an actual performance! In preparing a score on music software for virtual performance it becomes clear that the mathematical aspects of music must be observed to an even greater degree than in previous eras of music composition when descriptions of intent in words were often deemed sufficient to give performers adequate indication of a composer’s intention. Computers influence the way we undertake tasks, and can also give rise to new possibilities, including in music. Consequently, in notating music, attention must be given and total accuracy must be applied to every kind of nuance in order to convey something approaching the effect of live performance, to wit: frequent dynamic contrast, frequent changes of tempi and time signature, and, particular to this score, frequent use of mathematically enabled cross rhythms. The most chaotic-sounding passages in this work are the most metrically accurate!

I offer this work on CD and for digital download in this virtual mode of performance in the hope that listeners and prospective pianists may find in it some value. I fully appreciate that radio presenters will have reservations in presenting it on air, since, naturally, the public wishes to admire the work of human virtuosi in recordings! But - may I suggest? - there may be passages which listeners might enjoy hearing in the context of reference to how performance was achieved. The general public, in fact, hears a great deal of “computerised” music in film and on TV/Cable without being aware of how it has been generated. Digital sampling, aleatoric notation to include “uncertainty”, synthesized sounds, and other novel and random elements have already intruded in concert works. The mechanised one man

band has come a long way since the organ grinder with attendant monkey was paid “for his silence not his sounds”, and since Beethoven’s friend Johann Malzel invented the Panharmonicon in 1800 (in essence a monstrous mechanical organ) for which Beethoven wrote the first version of his notorious program work “Wellington’s Victory” (Op. 91); but mechanised performance in one form or another is part of our industrial society as is reproduction of live performance. Computers have arrived and, with their bag of conjuror’s tricks, are here to stay!

HISTORICAL BASIS FOR THE PROGRAM: Most Mayan literature was destroyed in a series of gigantic auto da fe in Mexico lit by jealous Spanish priests following in the footsteps of the Conquistadores. (Most Aztec literature suffered a similar fate). Fortunately a key to deciphering part of Mayan sign language survived in the work of the second archbishop of Yucatan, Diego de Landa, who, despite encouraging the book burning, was thoughtful enough to leave a record of the symbols which the Mayans used to denote their numbers, days and months. This sign language was found in the countless reliefs that cover every temple, stair column and frieze in the great Mayan monuments of Yucatan (only a fraction of which have as yet been excavated). Thanks to de Landa's key it was discovered that the Mayan aesthetic had a mathematical basis; that every piece of Mayan construction was part of a great calendar in stone, which contains observations of the movement of heavenly bodies over a vast period of time: eleven millennia!

The Mayan calendar reveals a record of 21 "long counts" of the Mayan "eon", known as "baktan", beginning on a day which has been identified in the Gregorian calendar as June 5th, 8498 B.C. On this day there was a conjunction of the Earth, the Moon and Venus. This date also approximates to the time set for a major world geological event - the transition from the Quaternary to the (present) Quaternary Age. It also corresponds to the approximate time given by Plato for the destruction of Atlantis. Human cultures tend to begin their calendars on the date of a seminal event. For the Romans, Day One was the foundation of their capital city. For Christians, the birth of Christ. For Moslems, Mohamed’s flight from Mecca to Medina. Is it possible that the beginning of the Mayan calendar dates from the destruction of their parent civilisation? A day of global trauma, whose memory is preserved in Mayan records, in stone, and in three books which alone have survived the zealous vandalism of Spanish missionaries.

Physicist, engineer, inventor, Otto Heinrich Muck offers the thesis that the triple conjunction of June 5th 8498 B.C. caused an asteroid of the Adonis Group to be diverted from its orbit shortly after reaching its perihelion (closest point to the sun). The asteroid, estimated at 10 km in diameter, was deflected from its accustomed orbit by the combined gravitational fields of Venus, the Moon and Earth. It approached the mid-Atlantic area from the West. Blazing more brightly than the sun as it entered Earth's atmosphere, it broke in two as it passed over North America. Its brittle crust shattered into lethal fragments gouging a trench of destruction over what is now Carolina. The two portions of its core plunged into what is now the Gulf of Mexico, and pierced the earth's crust. Two abyssal holes in the gulf are the scars of this cataclysmic event. Mountainous tidal waves surged from the place of impact in all directions, causing widespread inundation in coastal areas. The fracture zone known as the

Atlantic Rift was severed and torn apart. Red-hot magma was released into the ocean along the rift to each end of the Atlantic. Both the east coast of America and the west coast of Africa sank, as did the platform on which stood Atlantis, leaving only mountainous peaks visible above the sea (now the Azores).

Volcanic debris from worldwide eruptions obscured the sun for centuries creating a "shadow of death". Eventually the ice caps retreated, and sea levels worldwide rose, causing further inundations, There was vast loss of life on a global scale, and many species became extinct, including, spectacularly, the great mammoths, whose carcasses, still snap frozen, have been emerging intact from the Siberian tundra for centuries. (Their meat, still edible, is fed to huskies and, on one memorable occasion was served to scientists at a banquet in Moscow!) As a result of these planetary upheavals (which might also include a shifting of the North Pole from Hudson Bay in Canada to its present position), the earth moved from the Quaternary to the Quaternary Age, in which we now live. We are survivors of survivors.

"ATLANTIS VARIATIONS" adopts this chronology as the basis for a musical narrative in which themes are presented and developed which are intended for use in a proposed cycle of operas based on the topic of Atlantis. The work has 13 movements, a reference to the preference of Mayan astronomers for the prime number 13. (A "baktun" is 13 counts of 144,000 days.) The 13 movements are spread over 3 parts.

PART ONE: 1st movement: "THE SUN" (**Track 1**) The furnace of the sun is embodied in a chain of polytonal chords, which are the basis for a set of 3 variations which seek to portray various solar activities: continuous nuclear fission; the corona; solar flares.

2nd Movement: "THE ASTEROID" (**Track 2**) The asteroid is a rogue child of unpredictable character, of changeable habits, easily swayed from its usual path. A double invertible theme is introduced, in the form of a fugue.

3rd Movement: "ORBITS" (**Track 3**) Asteroids of the Adonis Group follow individual, extremely eccentric, elongated, elliptical orbits, whose aphelion positions are beyond the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn, and whose perihelion positions bring them very close to the sun, inside the orbits of Mars, Earth and Venus. Using musical intervals as a metaphor for celestial distance the shape of an elliptical orbit is traced by a pattern notes of unequal intervals encompassing the entire range of the keyboard. This orbit of the rogue asteroid is heard in counterpoint to the circular orbit of planets (depicted by patterns of notes of equal intervals).

4th Movement: "VENUS" (**Track 4**) The turbulent and overheated nature of Venus is reflected in a motif of like character.

5th Movement: "MOON" (**Track 5**) Now within the realm (or orbital attraction) of Earth, the Moon is perceived anthropomorphically, as a Goddess. Whatever she was called, in Atlantean times, she was probably the original archetype of Artemis of the Greeks, who was also the Roman Diana, the Huntress, Queen of the Wood. The musical cipher is a primal hunting call, in two-part harmony, based on the notes of the natural horn.

6th Movement: "EARTH" (**Track 6**) Our home planet is depicted by a yearning melody, in parallel thirds forming harmonies of the major 7th and 9th against the tonic, moving in sequence through various related keys. The melody is developed in five contrasting variations

7th Movement: "ATLANTIS" (**Track 7**) This section employs leitmotifs and passages already introduced in an earlier work *"Atlantis" for Flute/Alto Flute & Piano, (1990)*. A portrait of the Atlantean landmass and empire is woven from leitmotifs for "Poseidon", the founder (or coloniser?), "Cleito", his consort; "Atlas", first of their ten pairs of twin sons; and also from shorter motifs denoting seismic instability: "Trident", "Rift". A disjunctive passage denoting a "Fracture in Space-Time" (**Track 8**) leads to an extended theme evoking "The Golden Age", a summation of Atlantis at its height.

PART TWO: 8th Movement: "FEMALE MAGIC: (**Track 9. Maya Variations/Track 10. Maya Compound Variations/Track 11. Calypso's Dance**) Two new leitmotifs are introduced embodying the feminine principal: "Maya", a universal deity common to Greek ("Maia"), Indian and Amerindian myth (a double invertible theme Maya I and Maya II); and "Calypso", in mythology a sea nymph, here a rebel figure, symbolising female revolt against patriarchy, and the founding of an independent island realm. The existence of many more islands in the Atlantic in ancient times is indicated on the so-called portolan maps which circulated secretly amongst mariners for centuries, and which were condemned as heretical by the Church. Surviving portolan maps dating from the 14th century are thought to have been copies of much older maps. (Columbus is thought to have had one.) Tradition ascribes the origin of magical practises to Atlantis. They are associated with female power. Several dances are heard, evocative of magical rites. Musical ideas emerged from the following pathology: *"Alluring, unnerving: that which understands logic and implies one premise but acts on another; that which seduces by promises of the expected, but retains power by delivering the unexpected; that which appears familiar, but remains elusive..."*

9th Movement: "PATRIARCHY". (**Track 12. Male Angst/Track 13. Male Fervour**)

The Atlantis described by Plato is patrilineal, and ceremonies conducted at the magnificent temple of Poseidon were dominated by male priests and the successive kings of Atlantis. The patriarchal system that developed must have displaced the kind of earlier matriarchal society which, according to Robert Graves, prevailed in antiquity. One is left with the impression that, in its later stages, Atlantis, under male influence, became an aggressive, colonising power. According to Plato, at the time of its destruction it was waging war against a coalition of European nations lead by pre-Hellenic Greeks. This short section embodies various musical themes, processional, forceful, intense, which arose from the following pathology: *"Law-maker, law-breaker, moral angst, phallic imperative, existential rage, scientific curiosity, religious fervour."* Two extended melodies are heard: the first is strenuous, the second is aggressive and leads to an energetic climax. Antique themes representing Poseidon and Atlas also figure prominently in the opening and at the close.

PART THREE: 10th Movement: "TRIPLE CONJUNCTION" (**Track 14**) The motifs of Venus, Moon and Earth are reprised, and then combine in triple counterpoint, a musical metaphor denoting the three bodies moving into triple conjunction. This section closes with a variant reprise of music for "The Golden Age" (which is about to end).

11th Movement: "FIRE-IMPACT-DELUGE" (**Track 15**) In the short space of two minutes actual-time, the asteroid is drawn into Earth's atmosphere, blazes more brightly than the sun, shatters in a terrifying concussion which reverberates across continents. Its debris scourges the earth with fire. It explodes into two monstrous boulders, kilometres wide. The boulders plunge into the ocean, creating huge tidal waves that deluge the surrounded landmasses. The earth is split asunder

12th Movement: "PROCLAMATION" (**Track 16**)
A declamatory theme announces the end of an age.

13th Movement: "THE END OF AN AGE" (**Track 17**) Red-hot magma pours from the severed rift in the ocean bed. The earth tilts on its axis. The poles move. The earth's crust is in upheaval. The global cataclysm causes the great parent civilisation, Atlantis, to sink into the sea. The planet experiences worldwide changes, which engulf the human race in two thousand years of chaos and darkness. We are survivors of survivors. Atlantis is submerged. Seagulls wheel, as some say they do to this day, crying over the turbulent surface of the sea where the island was once located. We then hear Cleito's Lament leading to an Epilogue.

TOWARD THE OPERAS

The project: A cycle of 4 operas about high civilisation before the Flood – according to Plato, emanating from an island empire called "Atlantis".

Progress report, June 2004:

"Eden In Atlantis": 25-minute
Scena for soprano, flute & piano
(1996); complete opera libretto
(2002); spoken word version on CD
"Past Life recall" (2003).

"Poseidon In Atlantis": 19-minute work
("Atlantis") for flute & piano (1990):
plot outline, libretto for Cleito's narrative (1996).

"Calypso In Exile": plot outline, libretto for
Calypso's narrative (1996), set to music, 25-
minute Scena for soprano and wind
quintet (2003).

“The Last Days Of Atlantis”: plot outline, (1996); sketch for final cataclysm in Pt.3 of “Atlantis Variations” for solo piano (1992) Extensive development of musical themes for all proposed operas undertaken in “Atlantis Variations” for solo piano (1992), a 50-minute work in 3 parts.

DEREK STRAHAN – BA CANTAB

Derek Strahan was born in Penang, Malaysia on May 28th 1935, and spent his early childhood in colonial Malaya. He was evacuated with his mother and sister to Perth, W.A, when Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942. In 1946 the Strahans settled in Northern Ireland and Derek completed his schooling in Belfast. He obtained a scholarship to study at Cambridge University, where he graduated in 1954 with a BA Cantab (Modern Languages) (French and Spanish). At university, he maintained a commitment to music and also developed an interest in theatre and cinema, acting in a number of university productions. From 1954 to 1960 he worked in London as relief teacher, actor, singer-songwriter and assistant film director making commercials.

In 1961 he returned to Australia and settled in Sydney, where he combined composing film and concert music with work as film director, scriptwriter, actor, singer/songwriter, lecturer and, currently, script assessor for the Australian Writers’ Guild. His compositions include music for over 30 film documentaries, 3 feature films, over 30 works of concert music encompassing solo, ensemble, vocal and orchestral pieces. Much of his film and concert music has been released on CD, and, since 1982, has been consistently broadcast on national radio. Strahan’s music is melodic, making use of polyphony and polymetrics, and has attracted performance by a number of distinguished artists. Derek Strahan is a represented composer with the Australian Music Centre (AMC): He can also be contacted through the AMC where his music scores, parts and recordings are merchandised.

<http://www.amcoz.com.au>

Would you like to support the arts? Would a tax deduction help?

Derek Strahan is listed with the Australia Cultural Fund as a bona fide artist. The Australia Business Arts Foundation (AbaF) has confirmed that it is possible for Derek Strahan's supporters (in Australia) to make a tax-deductible donation to AbaF's Australia Cultural Fund, requesting that AbaF apply it to the Atlantis opera project, and other approved projects. To find out more about this program and how you could help make new Australian music go to: <http://www.abaf.org.au/giving/acf.html>

ROBERT ALLWORTH Grateful thanks to Australian producer Robert Allworth for earlier releasing this music progressively on a series of Jade CDs.

PRODUCTION CREDITS:**Producer:** Derek Strahan, for Revolve Pty. Ltd. dstrahan@revolve.com.au**Digital masters:** Tracks 1 – 17. New Music Theatre, 2007, Sibelius Music Software**Digital pre-mastering conversion:** Steve Smart, Studio 301, Sydney (02) 9698 5888**Manufactured by:** mad CDs, Phone: (02) 9572 9669**Cover Art & Typesetting:** Louis Cooke (02) 9799 7050**Producer:** Derek Strahan, for Revolve Pty. Ltd.

All Revolve & Jade CDs can be acquired online at the US online store CDBaby.

Website: <http://www.cdbaby.com>**“ATLANTIS VARIATIONS”, REVOLVE RECORDINGS RDS 009**

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ATLANTIS VARIATIONS (Duration: 50.39)

- | | | |
|---|------|--|
| 1. Sun (Variations 1 – 3) | 3.05 | (PART 1, Celestial Bodies – 22.47) |
| 2. Fugue for a Rogue Asteroid | 2.22 | |
| 3. Orbits | 1.44 | |
| 4. Venus | 1.22 | |
| 5. Moon | 1.12 | |
| 6. Earth (Variations 1 – 5) | 8.34 | |
| 7. Atlantis - main themes: Poseidon, Cleito. Atlas, Trident | 3.16 | |
| 8. The Golden Age | 1.12 | |
| 9. Maya Variations | 5.28 | (PART 2, Female Magic/Patriarchy – 15.31) |
| 10. Maya Compound Variations | 5.13 | |
| 11. Calypso's Dance | 0.56 | |
| 12. Male Angst | 0.54 | |
| 13. Male Fervour | 3.03 | |
| 14. Triple Conjunction | 2.50 | (PART 3, End of an Age – 12.02) |
| 15. Fire – Impact – Deluge | 2.50 | |
| 16. Proclamation | 0.53 | |
| 17. The End of an Age – Atlantis submerged – Cleito's Lament & Epilogue | 5.29 | |

Total duration: 50.39