

NWCR688

David Del Tredici

An Alice Symphony



An Alice Symphony for Amplified Soprano,
Folk Group and Orchestra. (1969, Rev. 1976) (38:18)

1. I Speak Roughly/Speak Gently (7:27)
2. II The Lobster Quadrille (11:35)
3. III 'Tis the Voice of the Sluggard (8:51)
4. IV Who Stole the Tarts?/Dream -
Conclusion (10:25)

Phyllis Bryn-Julson, soprano;
Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra,
Oliver Knussen, Conductor

Total playing time: 38:18

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Notes

David Del Tredici was born in Cloverdale, California, in 1937 and lives in Sag Harbor, New York. He originally intended to become a concert pianist, but when his first serious compositional effort, *Soliloquy*, came to the attention of Darius Milhaud at Aspen in the summer of 1958, he was encouraged to think about composition. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley, he went to Princeton, where he continued his compositional studies with Earl Kim and Roger Sessions, earning his M.F.A. in 1964. Up until 1967 virtually all of Del Tredici's compositions were settings of the poetry of James Joyce, in an atonal style that attracted considerable attention and won him numerous commissions and grants.

In 1968 he seriously encountered the work of Lewis Carroll, and between that year and 1985 virtually all of his compositions were based in one way or another on the two books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* or on other related Carroll material or ideas developed from them. The history of music scarcely shows another example of near-obsession with a single body of source material to compare with Del Tredici's *Alice* works, unless we except Wagner's quarter-century obsession with the Nordic myths that form the basis for the *Ring*. But Del Tredici was not simply dramatizing the two books, so often (and so incorrectly) categorized—dismissively as "children's stories." And he was not turning his fascination into a single gigantic work (as did Wagner in his tetralogy). Rather he kept coming back to *Alice* in fresh and different ways, sometimes approaching the material quite obliquely. Each time he returned, he was a different composer than before.

Throughout the course of what might be called the "Alice cycle," Del Tredici took characteristic elements of Lewis Carroll's tales, which involve both nostalgia and extraordinary uses of mathematical logic, often brilliantly twisted for comic effect. After all, in real life, Carroll was Charles L. Dodgson (1832-1898), who lectured in mathematics at Oxford from 1855 to 1881. In 1879 he published a book entitled *Euclid and his Modern Rivals*, but its renown has been far exceeded by his two *Alice* hooks and "The Hunting of the Snark" perhaps the greatest nonsense poem in the English language.

Del Tredici's earlier works were often inspired by James Joyce, and were composed in the most approved techniques of serialism and total chromaticism of the 1960s. The first *Alice* compositions—up to 1976 were versions of the tales from the two *Alice* books for soprano and orchestra: *Pop-Pourri* (1968), *An Alice Symphony* (1969, rev. 1976), *Adventures Underground* (1971, rev. 1977), *Vintage Alice* (1972), and *Final Alice* (1976). For these works, Del Tredici found it necessary to reconsider his musical style. "I couldn't imagine setting a Carroll text to dissonant music. Dissonant music can't possibly project the mood that surrounds Carroll's writing. In order to create that mood I had to rethink everything I had done up to that time. I had to think about tonality again not because I was trying to bring back the music of an older period, but because my musical imagination had seized upon that language."

After composing *Final Alice*, Del Tredici continued his near-obsession with Lewis Carroll but broadened his approach and his palette far beyond the desire to recreate the published stories. It is known that the Reverend Charles L. Dodgson

(whose pen name was Lewis Carroll) created Alice in a series of improvised stories for the amusement of three charming little girls (Lorina Charlotte, Edith and Alice Pleasance Liddell) as they rowed up the Thames on summer Sunday afternoons. Carroll only wrote down some of the stories at Alice's insistence. What is remarkable about Del Tredici's more recent work, the evening-length *Child Alice* (1977–1981) (consisting of *In Memory of a Summer Day* (Pulitzer Prize, 1980), *Quaint Events*, *Happy Voices*, and *All in a Golden Afternoon*), is his imaginative treatment of "stories that did *not* get written down." Since completing *Child Alice*, Del Tredici has returned two more times to Alice-related material: with the 1985 composition *Haddocks' Eyes*, and the opera-in-progress *Dum Dee Tweedle*.

Del Tredici's fascination with *Alice* has been much discussed, not always in a fully-informed way. It is easy, for example, to get the impression that all of the *Alice* works are pretty much alike—that, if you've heard one, you've heard them all. This is not at all the case. Despite the composer's own statement that he couldn't imagine setting a Carroll text to dissonant music, and that he had to start thinking about tonality again, the earlier parts of the *Alice* cycle—and certainly much of *An Alice Symphony*—are still complex and dissonant in approach. It is as the series progresses that tonal style becomes more evident (though complexities of other kinds appear). Thus, the entire cycle can be seen (to borrow the title of one of Del Tredici's own *non-Alice* works) as a "march to tonality."

One of the elements that recurs in *An Alice Symphony* is the composer's inventive and complex rhythmic play, the layers of activity that can shift suddenly from one apparent meter to another (or present several meters to the ear at once). These are "projected in layers of orchestration that employ the standard orchestral choirs (woodwinds, brass, strings, and percussion) with the addition of a "folk" ensemble containing two saxophones, mandolin, tenor banjo, and accordion.

The work is cast in four movements:

- I. Speak Roughly / Speak Gently
- II. The Lobster Quadrille
- III. 'Tis The Voice of the Sluggard
- IV. Who Stole the Tarts?; Dream—Conclusion

For practical reasons—to satisfy two commissions for normal-sized pieces—Del Tredici divided the full work into two parts and authorized their separate performance. One unintended result is that the work as a whole was never performed until the 1991 Tanglewood premiere from which this recording is taken. Moreover, it easily leads to some confusion on the part of audiences as to which *Alice* piece they are going to hear. The two partial works are *Illustrated Alice: Two Scenes from Alice Adventures in Wonderland* made up of the first and last movement (dedicated to Tison Street) and *In Wonderland: A Scene with Lobsters*, made up of the middle movements (dedicated to Aaron Copland). In both versions the amplified soprano is required. But Del Tredici also authorized performances of *The Lobster Quadrille* as an independent instrumental work, without soprano.

An Alice Symphony begins with the normal ritual of orchestral tuning to the standard concert A. In this case, the ritual, actually written into the score, is the opening of a "frame" that takes the listener out of the world of reality into Carroll's (and Del Tredici's) extraordinary fantasy world. Each segment of the symphony begins with the oboe's solo A again (though without the full tuning-up of the ensemble) and a spoken introduction (drawn directly from *Alice's Adventures in*

Wonderland) to set the scene and provide a context for the songs that follow.

In the first movement, Del Tredici sets to music in violently contrasting styles the Duchess song "Speak roughly to your little boy"—an exhortation to the abuse of children—and the original, fusty Victorian poem that Carroll parodied, "Speak gently to your little boy." The former consists of many large leaps (often displayed-octave seconds) with an aggressive accompaniment, largely in the woodwinds, brass and percussion. The latter is a contrasting, gentle song, as purposely mild mannered as the first is violent. The vocal line consists entirely of fifths, and the accompaniment is gently legato. Having set up the two opposing premises, the composer develops them in rapid alternation.

The Lobster Quadrille alternates the dance-like passages of the quadrille with the three Stanzas of the Mock Turtle's song, which becomes more elaborate and full of surprises with each stanza a notable Del Tredici device. There are three dance episodes preceding each stanza of the song; the first of these is for brass and strings, the second for woodwinds and percussion. The third is Quodlibet that piles the first two on top of one another.

'*Tis the voice of the sluggard* sets another delicious parody of a moralistic Victorian poem, intended as a paean to hard work, though in Carroll's version about the lobster, it becomes charmingly ridiculous. The orchestral instruments color the song with a constant quiet "flutter" effect moving from one to another, a hint of the "tremulous" voice mentioned in the text. The lobster, of course, has no voice, and Del Tredici employs the Theremin as a poignant evocation of this lack. A quiet epilogue is the "first juicy tonal bit in the *Alice* series;" according to the composer; it seems to foreshadow *Final Alice* in its lush texture and its key. Once again the oboe's tuning A marks a new beginning.

The text of *Who stole the tarts?* is an absurd legal deposition read out by the White Rabbit in which mixed up pronouns make it impossible to tell who is saying or doing what to whom. As the soprano sings the verses, each odd-numbered line moves in steady note-values faster than the previous one (quarters, three-sixteenths, eighths, and sixteenths) while each even-numbered line moves slower than the preceding one. Thus, the text is set forth with increasing extremes of speed until the centrifugal force causes it virtually to self-destruct. The orchestra, too, reaches a peak of rhythmic complexity, as each component sounds its line in a different apparent tempo. Gradually the texture simplifies, resolving itself back to the tuning A, as Alice's sister awakens her. As she slowly returns to "dull reality," the preceding events race through her nearly-conscious brain in rapid succession. Finally, the full tuning process heard at the beginning runs backward, suggesting the reverse of the process by which we arrived in Wonderland. Now the "untuning" takes us back to reality, where we find ourselves left at the starting point, the solo oboe's A.

(One subtle charming touch: throughout the score the composer marks each entrance of the solo oboe's tuning A with a number, printed in Italian in bold-face capital letters: UNO, DUE, TRE... and so on. There are exactly thirteen such entrances in a full performance of *An Alice Symphony*, so the last note to be heard in the performance, the thirteenth tuning A, is signed by the composer's name: TREDICI.)

—Steven Ledbetter

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TEXT

All texts, unless otherwise noted, from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

Speak Roughly/Speak Gently

Speak roughly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes:
He only does it to annoy,
Because he knows it teases.

Chorus
Wow! Wow! Wow!

I speak severely to my boy,
And beat him when he sneezes;
For he can thoroughly enjoy
The pepper when he pleases!

Chorus
Wow! Wow! Wow!"

Speak gently! It is better far
To rule by love than fear;
Speak gently; let no harsh word mar
The good we might do here!

Speak gently! Love cloth whisper low
The vows that true hearts bind;
And gently Friendship's accents flow;
Affection's voice is kind.

Speak gently to the little child!
Its love be sure to gain;
Teach it in accents soft and mild;
It may not long remain.

Speak gently to the young, for they
Will have enough to bear;
Pass through this life as best they may,
Tis full of anxious care!

Speak gently to the aged one,
Grieve not the care-worn heart;
'Whose sands of life are nearly run,
Let such in peace depart!

Speak gently, kindly, to the poor;
Let no harsh tone be heard;
They have enough they must endure,
Without an unkind word!

Speak gently to the erring; know
They may have toiled in vain;
Perchance unkindness made them so;
Oh, win them back again!

Speak gently! He who gave his life
To bend man's stubborn will,
When elements were in fierce strife,
Said to them, 'Peace, be still'

Speak gently! 'tis a little thing
Dropped in the heart's deep well;
The good, the joy, that it may bring,
Eternity shall tell.

**Speak Gently is a poem attributed to David Bates and was written around 1849; it is the original upon which Lewis Carroll based his parody, Speak Roughly*

The Lobster Quadrille

"Will you walk a little faster?" said a whiting to a mail,
"There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on my tail.
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!
They are waiting on the shingle— will you come and join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?"

"You can really have no notion how delightful it will be
When they take us up and throw us, with the lobsters, out to sea!"
But the snail replied, "Too far, too far!" and gave a look askance—
Said he thanked the whiting kindly, but he would not join the dance.
Would not, could not, would not, could not, would not join the dance.
Would not, could not, would not, could not, would not join the dance.

"What matters it how far we go?" his scaly friend replied.
"There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.
The farther off from England the nearer is to France—
Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance.
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?"

'Tis the Voice of the Sluggard

"'Tis the voice of the Lobster: I heard him declare.
'You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair.'
As a duck with its eyelids, so he with his nose
Trims his belt and his buttons, and turns out his toes
When the sands are all dry, he is gay as a lark,
And will talk in contemptuous tones of the Shark;
But when the tide rises and sharks are around,
His voice has a timid and tremulous sound."

Who Stole the Tarts?

"They told me you had been to her,
And mentioned me to him:
She gave me a good character,
But said I could not swim.

He sent them word I had not gone
(We know it to be true):
If she should push the matter on,
What would become of you?

I gave her one, they gave him two,
You gave us three or more;
They all returned from him to you,
Though they were mine before.

If I or she should chance to be
Involved in this affair,
He trusts to you to set them free,
Exactly as we were.

My notion was that you had been
(Before she had this fit)
An obstacle that came between
Him, and ourselves, and it.

Don't let him know she liked them best,
For this must ever be
A secret, kept from all the rest,
Between yourself and me."

Production Notes

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For the Tanglewood Music Center: Leon Fleisher, Artistic Director, Richard Ortner, Administrator. For Tanglewood: Daniel R. Gustin, Manager.

For the Boston Symphony Orchestra: Seiji Ozawa, Music Director, Kenneth Haas, Managing Director.

The **Tanglewood Music Center** is the academy for advanced training in music maintained and operated by the Boston Symphony Orchestra at its summer home, Tanglewood, in Lenox, Massachusetts. The Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra is comprised of Fellows of the TMC, young professional musicians from some thirty countries worldwide. At the time of this recording, **Oliver Knussen** was director of contemporary music activities at the Tanglewood Music Center.

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Alice in Wonderland Figures: Special thanks to Robert Strong of Rescued Estates.

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