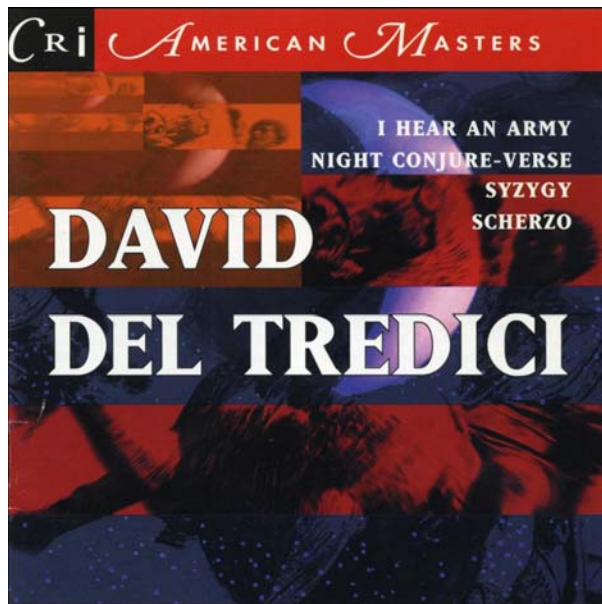


NWCR689

David Del Tredici

I Hear an Army / Night Conjure-Verse / Syzygy / Scherzo



1. *I Hear an Army* (1964) (12:28)
Phyllis Bryn-Julson, soprano; Composers Quartet (Matthew Raimondi, Anahid Ajemian, Jean Dupouy, Michael Rudiakov)
- Night Conjure-Verse* (1965) (17:04)
2. *Simples* (8:20)
3. *A Memory of the Players in a Mirror at Midnight* (8:44)
Benita Valente, soprano; Mary Burgess, mezzo-soprano; Players from the Morlboro Festival conducted by David Del Tredici
- Syzygy* (1966) (24:27)
4. *Ecce Puer* (5:50)
5. *Nightpiece* (18:37)
Phyllis Bryn-Julson, soprano; Festival Chamber Orchestra, Richard Dufallo, conductor
6. *Scherzo for piano four-hands* (1960) (6:27)
Robert Helps and David Del Tredici, pianists

Total playing time: 61:04

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Notes

The compositional trajectory of **David Del Tredici** (*b* Cloverdale, CA, 16 March 1937) is one of the oddest of any in the last thirty years or so. He began—a child of his generation—with hard-line academic modernism (American version). In his twenties, he produced a handful of instrumental works and five inspired by James Joyce—two sets of songs with piano, then the three on this disc, whose accompaniment expands from string quartet to large chamber ensemble. He also wrote *The Last Gospel* (1967) that, uniquely, quarries the New Testament. Thereafter, with only a few exceptions, he has devoted his enormous talents to settings (spoken, sung, and symphonic) of texts drawn from Lewis Carroll’s two Alice books, sometimes with elaborate surrounding paraphernalia (e.g., the originals of Carroll’s parodies); the series runs all the way from *Pop-Pourri* of 1968 (which also throws in a Catholic Marian litany and a German Protestant chorale) to *Dum Dee Tweedle*, an opera, still in progress at the time of writing. The style over this quarter-century of Alice obsession has moved steadily away from the initial atonal constructivism towards an ever-more ardent embrace of tonality in its high romantic tumescence and fin-de-siècle decline and fall. The change of idiom has been matched by a change of scale. The first wholly Carroll piece, *The Lobster Quadrille* of 1969, clocks in at thirteen minutes. *Final Alice* (1974–75) proved to be the decisive stylistic turning point (and never was an adjective more inappropriate!); it lasts over an hour and gives D-major the most protracted workout it has ever received. *Child Alice* (1977–81), at some two and one-quarter hours, requires a whole concert to itself.

This later development is unforeseeable, however, from the vantage point of the present disc, which collects most of Del

Tredici’s music from the first phase—modernist and Joyce inspired works from 1960–66. His use of Joyce is paradoxical. It is true that the writer’s principal fame rests upon his monumental contribution to pioneering modernism, and that *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* are (among much else) textbook instances of pattern making and schematization. But Joyce’s earlier prose (*Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist*) is not at all so inclined; his verse, earlier still, is completely traditional. *Chamber Music* (published 1907) collects 36 delicate love lyrics in the spirit of the English Elizabethans and Jacobean, and in the idiom of the Anglo-Irish 1890s. The only experimental feature about the 13 items gathered in *Poems Penyeach* (published 1927, but written mainly 1912–18) is the title’s spelling; the idiom is analogous to the imagism of the early Ezra Pound. “*Ecce Puer*” is separate and so pure in its language as to belong to no style at all. These four tiny quatrains were written on the very day in 1932 that the poet’s grandson was born, and less than two months after the death of his father, who Joyce had guiltily abandoned in Ireland. All of Joyce’s poems, this (his last) most clearly, are born from direct emotion expressed in a simple if highly crafted form. It’s rather touching that the European avant-garde of the 1950s and ’60s so often set these poems under the deluded impression that, having been written by Joyce, they must belong at the forefront of experimental audacity.

The above context is given to show just how strangely Del Tredici treats his texts. “*Ecce Puer*,” as with the other poems to a lesser degree, is set in a manner that apparently controverts its direct affectingness. Yet, the way in which the music takes off from the hints and suggestions in the poems’ imagery gives the

music its own eccentric logic and integrity, which finds a wholly concordant partner in the verbal, visual, and conceptual play of Alice's author. A couple of precedents that were recent at the time come to mind: Stravinsky's refusal to indulge in expressive underlining of his texts, and Webern's quasi-medieval use of verse, however highly charged its emotion, around which were formed a basically instrumental crystal of constructivism.

Del Tredici's twenties coincided with the Age of Webern. Of that universal plague of pointillist texture from three- and four-note cells—the hopeless endeavor to adapt for general purposes what was in fact a style of extreme mannerism—very little now survives. The strange seed has only flourished when it fell on soil already halfway or more prepared to receive it: Dallapiccola, Boulez, Ligeti, Kúrtag, and, supremely, the late Stravinsky. Some of these early pieces of Del Tredici belong, I believe, in this same rare territory of composers who made a genuine continuity out from Webern's influence.

The earliest of these pieces is the Scherzo for piano duet (1960), which sounds by now like a graduation piece (first-class honors) in the going idiom of the period. The examiners would have remarked on the energy, the ferocity, the surprising lyricism of the barcarole-like middle section, the economy of means, the total accuracy, and the acuity of the ear. These are qualities that the composer will retain and enhance, but they are not yet particularly individual. Only one passage—the first climax where close motivic pressure rises to a dissonant clangor—presages in its radiant ferocity what is to come.

Del Tredici's catalogue reveals that the next three years were devoted to an unfinished, unpublished string quartet. Whether or not these efforts were salvaged in his next completed work, *I Hear an Army* (1964), this piece embeds the vocal part within an almost symphonic structure for string quartet alone. Its techniques and the sounds they make are already authentically individual and could not be mistaken for the work of any other composer. This poem is the last in Joyce's *Chamber Music*, standing out in its sustained, surreal violence from that otherwise fragile context. The composer's own note is helpful:

"The poem itself is a description of a nightmare, growing steadily more terrifying as it progresses. The sleeper is finally frightened into wakefulness but instead of relief feels only the despair and loneliness of a love lost."

"My conception of this dramatic episode suggested to me the three-part, though continuous, form of the piece:

1. A long introduction for strings alone, *sempre agitato*, with the motives, which are to be important later, presented in a half-formed, fleeting manner—an image of troubled sleep, not yet crystallized into the terrifying clarity of a nightmare.
2. The nightmare itself—a setting of the poem for soprano and strings.
3. A postlude for strings alone, in which the nightmarish activity grows dimmer and dimmer, as the imagined terrors recede during wakefulness. But ever present in this fading way, is one single, insistent note B—a symbol of the sleeper's poignant, unrelenting loneliness, which remains undimmed to the end."

Everything implicit in the Scherzo comes to life. The virtuoso mastery of post-Webern facture now achieves its opposite, long-breathed musical paragraphs, turbulent and tumultuous in movement. Del Tredici's compositional mainstays—augmentation, diminution, and every kind of canon—provide new varieties of tension and angst: a needle sharp ear is composing needles and knives. Especially notable is the large-scale harmonic control, difficult to manage in a style of such instability. The climax on the unison B, picking up the voice's

last work, is massive in context, and it is reached by genuine harmonic means. The subsequent slowing down of tempo and harmonic rate, with the ensuing liquidation of material, is masterly in more than academic terms. Also, born here is the unmistakable "cruelty to sopranos" vocal writing with its insatiable demands upon tessitura, diction, nimbleness, and stamina.

Night Conjure-Verse, from the next year (1965), confidently takes the same textures and procedures much further. The texts of its two movements, *Simples* and *A Memory of the Players in a Mirror at Midnight*, come from *Poems Penyeach*. Del Tredici's own notes say that he began with the second. He was fascinated by its mirror-imagery, an aspect that was so central to his technique already. The poem suggested a setting for two voices, a principal soprano and her reflection (countertenor or mezzo-soprano), and the layout of instrumental forces in two faux choirs—string quartet and wind septet. Words are endlessly reiterated in kaleidoscopic splinterings—see for example the treatment of the line, "love's breath in you is stale, worded or sung." The instrumental fabric, sometimes coming to the fore in voiceless interludes, is rife with learned devices. The second stanza begins as a cadenza for the soprano, while her "echo" remains fixated upon phrases from the first. Another interlude leads to a renewed assault upon the first stanza's first line (dislocating the same music) before resuming with the second stanza, concentrating for some time on hissing repetition of its first word, "this," in ever-madder bouts of fragmentation, with "pluck" set "like crazy laughter." The half-expected unison climax comes sure enough—on the second syllable of "devour"—first with two voices, then joined by horn and strings (one by one), and terminating in an outburst of mirrors that augment and liquidate in order to wind down into the glacial opening bars in exact reverse. Articulation is exaggerated throughout. The horn must often be "brassy," the oboe and clarinet must often raise their bells, the strings are frequently required to snap their pizzicati, hit hard with the wood of the bow, and play "*molta sul ponticello*," the piccolo nearly splits the ceiling, and most of the copious notes have an emphatic aggressive accent (sometimes several at once).

The overall affect, though violent and frightening, is also one of extreme control. The players' harsh actions, and these actions' multifold reflections, are held in the tight bond of a jack-in-the-box coiled to spring. It is surely part of his attraction to this poem that what was soon to become Del Tredici's musical logo (the number 13 that spells his name as obviously as the BACH motif spells Bach's) occurs in Joyce's second line. The word ("thirteen") is not emphasized; the voices sing it only once in its proper place, and it recurs only *en passant* during the cadenza as the "echo" voice recycles phrases from stanza one. We are still as yet a long way from the obsessive signing-off to be heard in *Final Alice*, et al!

The first movement, *Simples*, is suitably more gentle and lyrical. The shadow voice has the first verse to herself: the soprano joins "as if from afar" for the second, in rhythmically and intervallicly proportional canon, whose purpose is revealed when the mezzo sings the Italian original of the child's air (given by Joyce as motto at the head of the poem), and is answered by the soprano singing the English. The third verse is set to busier texture that bristles with devices now familiar. After the inevitable unison (on "her"), the last, prophetic line, sung by mezzo only, is shadowed by a *molto espressivo* horn solo that persists, amidst the gradually disintegrating tissue of bristling processes, to the end even after the voice has ceased.

I use the descriptor "prophetic" because the very layout of Del Tredici's next work, *Syzygy* (1966), places the (single) soprano with a solo horn and an extended set of tubular bells in contradistinction to the ensemble of eight woodwinds, two

trumpets, and six solo strings. Here, fearful symmetry reigns supreme, and the title conveys it from the start. “Syzygy,” the word, which is a juicy mouthful simply to pronounce, means something equally succulent to the mind. The term is mainly used in astronomy to signify the conjunction of opposite points in a planetary orbit. Further connotations run to any kind of yoking together (including compositional), and comparable devices in metrical structure—a gift to the composer so conspicuously represented by David Del Tredici. *Syzygy*, the piece, is wholly and brilliantly about itself and its own processes. Whether it is equally well paired with the Joyce poems may seem a matter of doubt—but doubt quickly disappears under the astonishing impact of the piece’s structure and sounds.

The work comes in two parts. The first, a relatively brief setting of “*Ecce Puer*,” lays out its own procedure so clearly that it can be apprehended in part even at first go by the ear alone. It begins with a space wider than most grand pianos, between the piccolo’s uppermost note and the double-bassoon’s nethermost. The gap is gradually closed by further mirroring pairs of instruments. The voices and bells enter together on the same note (though soon getting slightly out of rhythmic step); the horn takes over from the voice after the poem’s first line, then is replaced by the voice again for the second line. The third line begins and ends with trills on “with” and “grief.” Between these words come two bars of high arching melodization of the two possible whole-tone scales. “Joy,” the quatrain’s fourth line, is again set to one note shared between voice, horn, and bells. Then follows an instrumental intermezzo whose texture is a tissue of self-echoes that accompanies tritone motifs on the solo horn. Quatrain two begins with the voice very low and slow, surrounded by heterophony (viola and cello), simultaneous mirror shapes (two violins), and overlapping tritones (clarinet, bassoon). Note values diminish rapidly, as the horn takes over the voice part after the first pair of lines and then hands it back for the second pair. Piccolo (later flute also) mirror the soloists about a mile above. By the quatrain’s last word, “eyes,” the soprano has reached her top note. The first trumpet, entering for the first time, takes her final note up a notch and holds tightly to it, helped out by the second trumpeter as the entire structure turns in its orbit (for score followers, the moment is marked by the title word in caps). Thence the process so far is run in reverse. The trumpets yield the held high note back to the voice’s descending setting of the third quatrain (“young life is breathed...” etc.). Then comes the instrumental intermezzo with horn solo, backwards, and with woodwinds and strings interchanged. For the last quatrain the composer has to adjust a little. Voice and horn are swapped round for the two repeated-note sections, and the resultant four-note rhythm necessitates spoiling the five syllables of Joyce’s original: “a child is sleeping.” In the penultimate line, she trills on “O” and the second syllable of “forsaken.” Between them, “father” is set to the two whole-tone hexachords, and two intonations of solo horn enclose the setting of the poem’s desolating final line. The postlude reverses the prelude exactly, except, again, for the exchange of woodwinds and strings. As a result, the vast closing, empty space is encompassed by violin harmonics at the top and by specifically down tuned doublebass (no doubt to achieve a more reliable pianissimo than the initial piccolo/double bassoon).

Such description, though it corresponds to what the listener can genuinely hear, merely scratches the surface of what’s going on in the organization of *Ecce Puer*. It would be totally self-

defeating in *Syzygy*’s second part, *Nightpiece*. The three brief stanzas of Joyce’s original (from *Pomes*) form the basis of a structure lasting over eighteen minutes. Its processes again consist of myriad smaller symmetries within larger ones, which are now greatly more complex as well as more prolonged. To them can be added the more thoroughgoing use of a game already used in all these works: progressive diminution and augmentation of repeated material. The effect has been well described in John Adams’s original notes for this work: “one feels caught in some sort of inexorable vice only to be let out bit by bit as the point of maximum compression gradually yields back to the original.”

The idea of splitting the soprano into two voices, low and high, in dialogue, is here explicit for the first time, though it’s latent in all the vocal writing so far. It comes first with the treatment of “faint illum,” and is applied later to “waste of souls” and other phrases. The horn is similarly “split,” and so are the bells, which require two players. The actual moment of syzygy occurs on the word “tolls” (though of course every note in the entire eighteen minutes is part of some symmetrical process). The expected massive unison follows soon after. Here, it is staggered against itself in heterophony before the voice completes the setting of the poem with its last three lines. Then comes the cadenza, a compositional idea picked up from *Night Conjure-Verse*. Now that the entire poem has been heard, with each phrase eliciting a new handling, the cadenza goes back to combine the first three lines of each of the three stanzas (excepting in every case their final word) over a four-note horn ostinato whose rhythm expands and contracts. After a long silence, the missing last words are related, very fast and soft, and in reverse order—“tolls,” “till,” “wave.” The soprano reiterates them in various patterns as the *tutti* resumes, ending on “tolls.” It is clearly the bells in the poem that have inspired the bell-halo that surrounds the voice almost without respite, and that persists to the very end of the piece after the voice and the solo horn have fallen silent (perhaps dead of exhaustion), and after the symmetries complete themselves in the ensemble.

The sonority is also remarkable in every other respect. Mr. Adams’ note is good here too: “Del Tredici has chosen a timbral combination that highlights the gaunt, skeletal imagery of the poem. Only the soloists—soprano and horn—have any softness to their sound. The rest of the ensemble, from the piercing highs of the piccolo and solo violins to the reptilian slitherings of the double reeds, emphasizes a stark but brilliant sound quality.”

The result, when combined with the extreme virtuosity of the voice part and the extreme discipline of the structural organization, is without precedent, except perhaps in Webern’s songs with clarinets, and in such skintight passages of Copland as the scherzo in his *Organ Symphony* and the gunfight in *Billy the Kid*. Del Tredici’s piece is without parallel except in certain English music from the same years—the squeaky sound of early Birtwistle and Maxwell Davies, for instance, who Del Tredici surpasses in single-minded extremeness, tightness of discipline, and aural accuracy. This music is so superbly heard as to make everyone else in the same field seem approximate and halfcocked by comparison. What happens when this ear and technique hit the sitting duck of tonal cliché is already a matter of history. What will happen afterwards remains to be heard!

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Production Notes

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