

HILARY TANN

ARACHNE

Duration: approximately 12 minutes

Program Note

Arachne is a dramatic song cycle for solo soprano. The backdrop for *Arachne* is the myth as developed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI, lines 0–145. Arachne, a mortal, boasts that her skill as a weaver is greater than that of Athene, the divine patron of her craft. Athene challenges Arachne to prove her claim in a weaving contest. Following this confrontation, Athene transforms Arachne into a spider.

Arachne is in four sections, sung without break. Ritualistic bell sounds signal the character changes. The text was especially commissioned from Guggenheim Award-winning poet Jordan Smith.

- I. *A Primer for Those Who Have Dealings with the Gods* (the Oracle's warning)
- II. *Arachne's Boast* (Arachne as a young girl)
- III. *Athene's Song* (the fury of the goddess)
- IV. *The Spider's Valediction* (Arachne transformed).

Arachne was commissioned in 1987 by Concerted Effort for singer and actress Julie Kabat with funds provided in part by the New York State Council on the Arts. It was first staged in Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York, 22 January 1988. The piece was significantly revised for concert performance in March 2000, and this version received its premiere by soprano Anne Turner at Skidmore College, 12 November 2000. The composer is grateful to Anne Turner for her encouragement and for the expertise she brought to the revision process.

Performance Notes

The soloist will need a crotale tuned to D, although any suitable percussion instrument may be substituted—a prayer bowl, for example, or a suspended finger cymbal. The percussion instrument is struck once at the beginning of the piece and then two, three, and four times as the drama unfolds. It should be struck ritualistically and allowed to vibrate freely.

A number of vocal sounds are interspersed within the poetic text. *Ah* is used as an internal vowel. *Aranae* (pronounced *a-ra-ney-a*) is Ovid's rendering of Arachne, and *Athene* (*a-they-na*) is used in Ovid's pronunciation. The longest section in Latin is between the third and fourth songs during Arachne's transformation into a spider. *Aranea, exerce antiquas telas* (pronounced *a-ra-ney-a, eks-er-kay an-tee-kwas tey-las*) is adapted from the last line of this story in Ovid's "Metamorphosis": "Spider, weave at your loom as before!"

If special lighting is possible, a sense of *mystery* should surround the performer. The performer may simply be statuesque—as though she has just come to life to warn the audience that the gods of old are still present.

Arachne may be performed with or without staging. Julie Kabat, who commissioned the piece and has performed it many times, uses a shawl with metallic thread to great effect, and her ideas may be adapted to concert performance. For example, the shawl might be draped over the performer's head during the Oracle's warning, "*A Primer for Those Who Have Dealings with the Gods*." The shawl may then be wrapped around the performer's shoulders for "*Arachne's Boast*" (as Arachne remembers herself as a young girl). For "*Athene's Song*," the shawl may cover one shoulder in toga fashion as a representation of Athene, the goddess of wisdom, the arts, and martial prowess. During Arachne's transformation between the third and fourth songs, the shawl may drop slowly to the floor or be used to hide the performer's face. For the last song, "*The Spider's Valediction*," the shawl may be left on the floor (suggesting that the transformation is complete) or may be placed over the performer's head and arms to suggest the contained world of the spider.

ARACHNE

A Dramatic Song Cycle
for Soprano Solo (with Crotale)

Jordan Smith*

Hilary Tann

I. A Primer for Those Who Have Dealings with the Gods

Andante flessibile (♩ = 52)

D crotale
l.v.

mf

p

A - - - - - ra - ne - a. Say

5 *poco parlando*

first the cat is stretch - ing in the sun, knead - ing her paws. The

7 *più cantando*

low sun streaks the ta - ble, gilds the loom, the room where work is done. Tell

9

plain - ly what you see, the sta - ble house - hold. These things are the

11

sun - light's al - tars, un - al - tered and spe - ci - fic,

13 *mf* *cantando*

splen - did flecks of con - stan-cy. For the gods all

15 *p*

this is nei - ther here nor there. They pre-fer

17

rhe-to-ric, the breath of force. They take noth - ing on faith. Ah,

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19 *mf*

Here are _____ the slim mar - gins _____ they re - serve for us. *Ah,* _____

21 *f*

We are _____ the stage - set _____ for their _____ play _____ of met - a -

23 *p*

mor - pho-sis. They are all nerve, the sway of branch-es _____ in your yard. _____

25 *mf* *p*

When they _____ ap - proach, _____ a slip-ping _____ knot of cun - ning, _____

27 *mf espr.*

of - - fer what you can least af-ford, a shard, _____ some loved _____ thing. _____

30 *p* *D crotale* *l.v.*

Show _____ what can't _____ be un - done. _____

II. Arachne's Boast

Allegretto semplice (♩ = 56)

33 *mp*

I was a girl _____ when I took to this craft _____ of thread en-twined with thread, _____

38 *p* *mp*

_____ A-the-ne's gift. _____ She taught my weft _____ to _____ fol-low the shut-tle's lead. I

43 *cresc.* *mf*

learned too well, _____ too well for her. More deft, *ah,* _____ sur-er in skill - and

49

speed, I no long - er weave to her de - sign, ah, no long - er weave the

55

p *sotto voce* *mf*

land - scape where power re-sides, our shim - m'ring coast where the di-vine

60

f *liberamente* *dim.*

ruth-less-ness, like a tide, floods, floods

a tempo

65 *mp* *mf*

like a tide, floods and floods. Why waste my fine

70

rit.

ta - lent to praise, praise, praise a

Poco meno mosso

75 *p* *deciso*

lie? I've learned to grasp the mo-ment when the gods' de-ceits are made

80

mp *dim.* *rit.*

plain, when Zeus' eag-le, bull, and swan are gone. See what re -

Tempo di Andante

86 *p*

mains: some tang - led girl, like a thread that turns at the sel - vage,

91 *l.v.* *l.v.* *l.v.* *pp*

turns, turns a - gain. Ah.

III. Athene's Song

Con fuoco (♩ = 80)

96 *f* *mf* *f*
 A - - the - (ah) - - ne, — ah,

102 *f*
 Lis - ten, A - rach - ne, my old — ap - pren - tice — who would re -

108
 ject me, bold, — so im - pa - tient to be the mas - ter that you have shirked the sim - plest

114
 tasks, ah, — *mf* *f* back, — ah,

119 *mf* *f* *mf* *più legato*
 back — to work. A - the - (ah) - ne. — In Cir - ce's

126
 house — my loom is bus - y, — perked ears, broad snouts on the crew — of O -

132
 dys - se - us. Ah, — ah, — Per - se - us hoists Me - du - sa's head — a - bove the

137 *f*
 feast as — my —

142 *mf*
 — shut - tle — speeds, and — see, — those glut - tons sit stone - still,

148 *mp* *3* *3* *3*
 stare rapt at the Gor - gon's wo - - - ven, wo - -

154 *mf* *3*
 - ven hair. Ah,

160 *f*
 So all your hab - its of greed, de - si - re, are threads in the

166 *ff* *3*
 web of our, of our great - er hun - ger. Sley the

172 *3*
 reed, draw the warp tight - er my proud, my

177 *rit.* *f*
 greed - - y hand - - - maid, my,

182 *ff liberamente* *6* *6*
 ah, my,

186 *rit.* *f*
 my spi - der.

192 *Recitando* (♩ = 52) *p* *pp*
 A - - - the - ne, ah,

198 *p* *A* - - - - the - ne, ah, *f* ah, *4*

204 *rit.* *p* *a tempo* *pp*
A - - the - ne, -the - ne, ah, ah,

210 *pp* *pp liberamente* *l.v.*
 ah, Ah,

215 *l.v.* *mp* *l.v.* *mp* *l.v.* *mp* *a tempo* *mf*
 ah, ah, ah, *A* -

219 *rit.* *p*
 ra - ne - a, ex - er - ce an - ti - quas te - - las.

IV. The Spider's Valediction

225 **Andante flessibile** (♩. = 52)

225 *p*
 At the edge of things, I pull a thread dyed like li - chen, like -

230
 leaves dwin - dling, as mor - tal as I must be, as mor - tal in its un -

235 *mf*
 rav - el - lings. as I know I must be. *A* - - ra - ne -

241 *mp*
 a. A - the - ne's craft is noth - ing: a tang - led skein.

245

Here in the warp's ten - sion of drawn strands, what is her an - ger to me?

250

She wove me to her de-sign: a spi - der. Ah, As

255

spi - der I find the skill to ren - der from noth - ing my min - or ne -

260

ces - si - ty. A - - ra - ne - a. Ah, ah, ah,

Tempo primo (♩ = 52)

266

Who else stirs the web's heart in the sun - lit dew? Ah,

270

Who spins sub - stance from shad - ow? A - - ra - ne -

276

a. I am A - rach - ne, loom of the

280

gods, ah, and the gods' un - - - do - ing.

284

A - - - ra - ne - a.

ARACHNE

I. A Primer for Those Who Have Dealings with the Gods

Say first the cat is stretching in the sun,
Kneading her paws. The low sun streaks the table,
Gilds the loom, the room where work is done.
Tell plainly what you see, the stable

Household. These things are the sunlight's altars,
Unaltered and specific, splendid flecks
Of constancy. For the gods all this is neither
Here nor there. They prefer rhetoric

The breath of force. They take nothing on faith.
Here are the slim margins they reserve
For us. We are the stage-set for their play
Of metamorphosis. They are all nerve —

The sway of branches in your yard.
When they approach, a slipping knot of cunning,
Offer what you can least afford, a shard,
Some loved thing. Show what can't be undone.

II. Arachne's Boast

I was a girl when I took to this craft
Of thread entwined with thread,
Athene's gift. She taught my weft
To follow the shuttle's lead.

I learned too well for her. More deft,
Surer in skill and speed,

I no longer weave to her design
The landscape where power resides,
Our shimmering coast where the divine
Ruthlessness, like a tide,
Floods and floods. Why waste my fine
Talent to praise a lie?

I've learned to grasp the moment when
The gods' deceits are made plain,
When Zeus' eagle, bull, and swan
Are gone. See what remains:
Some tangled girl, like a thread that turns
At the selvage, turns again.

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III. Athene's Song

Listen Arachne,
 My old apprentice
 Who would reject me,
 Bold, so impatient

To be the master
 That you have shirked
 The simplest tasks,
 Back to work.

In Circe's house
 My loom is busy,
 Perked ears, broad snouts
 On the crew of Odysseus.

Perseus hoists
 Medusa's head
 Above the feast
 As my shuttle speeds,

And see, those gluttons
 Sit stone-still, stare
 Rapt at the gorgon's
 Woven hair.

So all your habits
 Of greed, desire
 Are threads in the web
 Of our greater hunger.

Sley the reed,
 Draw the warp tighter,
 My proud, my greedy
 Handmaid, my spider.

[Insert]

Aranea, exerce antiquas telas.
(Spider, weave at your loom as before!)

IV. The Spider's Valediction

At the edge of things, I pull
 A thread dyed
 Like lichen, like leaves dwindling,
 As mortal
 In its unravellings as I know
 I must be.

Athene's craft is nothing:
 A tangled
 Skein. Here in the warp's tension
 Of drawn strands,
 What is her anger to me?
 She wove me

To her design: a spider.
 As spider
 I find the skill to render
 From nothing
 My minor necessity.
 Who else stirs

The web's heart in the sunlit
 Dew? Who spins
 Substance from shadow? I am
 Arachne,
 Loom of the gods and the gods'
 Undoing.