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



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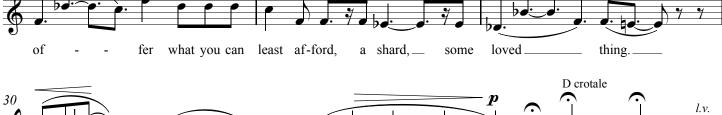
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II. Arachne's Boast









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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.