



ORCHID CLASSICS

# ALCHYMIA

Thomas Adès

Mark Simpson, *basset clarinet*

Quatuor Diotima

## **ALCHYMIA (2021)**

### **Thomas Adès (b.1971)**

1	I A Sea-Change (...those are pearls...)	5.08
2	II The Woods So Wild	3.10
3	III Lachrymae	6.31
4	IV Divisions on a Lute-song: Wedekind's Round	8.40

**Total time** **23.29**

Mark Simpson, *basset clarinet*

Quatuor Diotima

YunPeng Zhao, *violin*

Léo Marillier, *violin*

Franck Chevalier, *viola*

Pierre Morlet, *violoncello*

*Alchymia* is a 2021 bass clarinet quintet by Thomas Adès composed for Mark Simpson and Quatuor Diotima. At its premiere it was Adès' most substantial new chamber work in over a decade, following *The Four Quarters* (2010). Its title - the Latin word for alchemy, from the Arabic *kīmiyā* - evokes two complementary postures: speculative, mystical capriciousness and experimental precision.

*Alchymia* is wrought from the base metals of four classically shaped movements. The first - 'A Sea-Change (...those are pearls...)' - sees a falling melodic sequence of four notes metamorphose, as the clarinet snakes its way downwards. In a quasi-developmental section rhythmic subdivisions shift continually as the clarinet grows more recalcitrant, probing the space available in each bar - seventeen, thirteen, eleven quavers squeezed into the time of eight. Ever more volatile syncopations accompany these unsteady figures before a whispered coda implies a recapitulation of sorts.

'The Woods So Wild', based on William Byrd, follows in scherzo-like fashion: *moto perpetuo* in scurrying triplets. Its feet only touch the ground in the final bars: an emphatic plucked F in the cello sets off a miniature coda and breaks the hypnotic spell. The abrupt closing unison is like suddenly emerging into a clearing. A slow movement - 'Lachrymae', after John Dowland - recalls the four-note figure of the opening in a middle section, flanked by music whose lyricism treads slowly and softly, albeit with growing emotional commitment. A set of "divisions" - a nod to Byrd's earlier keyboard music - closes the piece, with variations on music from Alban Berg's *Lulu*.

*Alchymia* is the precipitate of several musical chain reactions, each stage heaping transformation upon transformation. The music and culture of Elizabethan London provide a centrifugal force. 'A Sea-Change (...those are pearls...)' references Ariel's song 'Full Fathom Five' from *The Tempest*, recalling the drowned king whose eyes are transformed by the sea into pearls.

Shakespeare's play, with a text refashioned by Meredith Oakes, was the subject of Adès' 2004 opera. In *The Tempest* alchemy and music both loom large: the title denotes the dramatic moment of transformation in an alchemical experiment, the sort represented by the figure of Prospero as magical philosopher and scientist. Several songs punctuate a play in which music has talismanic properties. It is the "thousand twangling instruments" of the island's "sounds and sweet airs" that soothe and humanize Caliban. The connection between music and alchemy are found all over the writings of the period: in German physician Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* (1617) epigrammatic verse and prose are accompanied by fifty fugues, whose three voices represent the adept, their obstacles, and the philosopher's stone. One accompanying illustration is of a shipwrecked King swimming in the sea, calling out for help - eyes before they turn to pearls.

Metamorphosis is a pervasive feature of Adès' work. An 1842 painting by Daniel Maclise inspired *The Origin of the Harp* (1994) for chamber ensemble. The picture captures the moment before a Celtic nymph turns from woman into musical instrument, the drifting strands of her hair on the cusp of hardening into strings. 1993's *Living Toys* sees a child-hero dream his dumb playthings into brilliant and nightmarish life.

In *Alchymia* instruments aspire to take on other forms. In the first movement plucked strings are meant to imitate a lute, in one nod to the seventeenth-century background of the piece. When string parts occasionally dovetail with the clarinet line, echoing or shadowing it for a handful of notes, Adès writes "inside clarinet", as if one could show, like a magician, that a cello or viola were concealed in the bell of the instrument all along.

It represents an alchemical treatment of timbre. One of the principles of alchemy is that lead and gold are not different substances but at base share the same essence - it is only their external form that differs. 'As above, so



below' was the *Ur*-maxim of alchemy, from its cryptic foundational text the *Tabula Smaragdina*, attributed to the mythic Hermes Trismegistus. It embodies the wish for a system of knowledge that reconciles macro- and microcosms, heavens with earth, and asserts the fundamentally unitary connection of all matter, whatever its myriad forms.

*Alchymia* is also possessed by a transformational musical momentum already set in motion by the composers Adès draws on. 'The Woods So Wild' references a popular Tudor street song William Byrd had already turned into 'divisions' - variations - for keyboard, before Adès makes it over into a silken scherzo.

'Lachrymae' takes its title from a 1600 lute song by Dowland reworked for viol consort. Mark Simpson noted of *Alchymia* that it represents Adès' musical past (as well as present and future). This is especially evident in the slow movement. Dowland's lute songs were the starting point for two 1992 works for piano: the blu-tack muffled melancholy of *Still Sorrowing* (based on 'Semper Dowland, semper dolens') and *Darknesse Visible*, a shimmering, tremulous 'explosion' of 'In Darknesse Let Mee Dwell'. The use of basset clarinet again recalls Adès' early music - he had originally intended his Op. 2 Chamber Symphony (1990) as a concerto for the instrument, being enamored of its extended range.

In the final movement Adès invokes Berg's opera *Lulu*. Here the raw material comes from Frank Wedekind's 1905 ballad 'Konfession', in which a sex worker sings of her life, which Berg molds into an orchestral interlude. This allusion might seem like an aesthetic departure from the piece's Tudor grounding, albeit a characteristically eclectic one from Adès. But Wedekind's song is a *Lautenlied*, evoking the instrument of Dowland and Purcell, reworked by Berg to sound like a barrel-organ (another seventeenth-century instrument, albeit for the street rather than the Court). Even in high modernist orbit, *Alchymia*'s gravitational pull remains Elizabethan.

Adès has long admired that sequence in *Lulu*. In 2012's *Full of Noises*, a book of conversations with Tom Service, he describes the way Berg is able to integrate the street song into the language of the opera. It appears "at once something literally external, heard outside the window in the street in King's Cross, and outside the serial environment we are living in, but at the same time woven into the web so that it belongs to the supremely intricate universe Berg has created. There is a total unity between the highest and lowest material." As above, so below: Berg's musical alchemy, transcending generic boundaries, is remade in turn through Adès' set of variations.

For Adès composing means transforming matter. It is a kind of alchemy that unleashes something vibrant and fluid from the thick and intractable. In a 2022 Guardian interview Adès said of writing music:

There are obstacles in my way, dense solid knots, like ganglia; they block my path, infinitely heavy...They consist of everything, every sound, all at once, compacted into an instant. They are dangerous, suffocating masses. While they are in the way, I can't breathe...By undoing these knots, I release a living thing.

Benjamin Poore

## **Mark Simpson**

Mark Simpson enjoys a dual career as both composer and clarinettist working with the leading musicians and orchestras of his day.

With *Alchymia*, a new clarinet quintet written by Thomas Adès and dedicated to Mark and the Diotima Quartet he has performed at La Scala, Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, Elbphilharmonie, Bozar, King's Place London and La Jolla Music Society in San Diego amongst others.

2023 saw the German premiere of his first opera, *Pleasure* at the Theater Erfurt in Spring 2023; His *Violin Concerto* written for Nicola Benedetti (co-commissioned by London Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony, WDR and RSNO) was performed in Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, and his orchestral work *Israfel* with Deutsche Symphonie Orchester Berlin. *Nachtstück* for horn and piano, written for Ben Goldscheider (as an ECHO Rising Stars Artist) continues to be performed in major concert halls across Europe.

Upcoming premieres include *Piano Concerto* for Vikingur Ólafsson (co-commissioned by London Philharmonic Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony, Bergen and Essen Philharmonic orchestras). *Phôs* for the Bachchor Salzburg and a new work for viola and orchestra for Timothy Ridout.

As a performer Mark continues his partnerships with Pierre-Laurent Aimard and Jean-Guihen Queyras in performances of music by Helmut Lachenmann.

He is a regular guest at the BBC Proms and has performed Lindberg's Clarinet Concerto and Nielsen's Clarinet Concerto with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. In 2012 his orchestral work *sparks*, opened the Last Night of The Proms.

In 2022 he was an Aldeburgh Festival artist in residence and has also been focussed in Lammermuir and Trondheim. Between 2015-2020 he was BBC Philharmonic Composer in Association.



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Mark's recording of his own *Geysir* alongside Mozart's *Gran Partita* (Orchid Classics) won a Presto Recording of the Year award and was shortlisted for the 2021 Gramophone Awards. He was recipient of the Royal Philharmonic Society Composition Award in 2010. His oratorio *The Immortal* received the South Bank Sky Arts Award for Classical Music in 2019. To date he is the only person ever to have won both the BBC Young Musician of the Year and BBC Proms/Guardian Young Composer of the Year in 2006.

### **Quatuor Diotima**

The Quatuor Diotima is one of the most in-demand chamber ensembles in the world today; it was formed in 1996 by graduates of the Paris national conservatory (Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris). The quartet's name evokes a double musical significance: Diotima is at once an allegory of German romanticism - Friederich Hölderlin gives the name to the love of his life in his novel *Hyperion* - and a rallying cry for the music of our time, brandished by Luigi Nono in his composition *Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima*.

The Quatuor Diotima has worked in close collaboration with several of the greatest composers of the late twentieth century, notably Pierre Boulez and Helmut Lachenmann. The quartet regularly commissions new works from the most brilliant composers of our time. Reflected in the mirror of today's music, the quartet projects a new light onto the masterpieces of the 19th and 20th centuries and the Second Viennese School. It has dedicated itself to contemporary music, without, however, allowing itself to be limited by it.

Quatuor Diotima performs regularly in the world's most prestigious concert halls and concert series. This season will see concerts at the Philharmonie de Paris, Berlin Philharmonie, Cologne Philharmonie, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Konserthuset Stockholm, Círculo de Cámara Madrid, Lugano Musica, Granada Festival and Vienna Konzerthaus.



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Léo Marillier, Etienne Pipard, Franck Chevalier, Thomas Adès, Mark Simpson, Pierre Morlet, Yun-Peng Zhao

## Thomas Adès

Born in London in 1971, Thomas Adès studied piano at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, and read music at King's College, Cambridge. A prodigious composer, conductor and pianist, Adès was described by the New York Times in 2007 as one of today's 'most accomplished overall musicians.'

Adès's chamber opera *Powder Her Face* (1995) has been performed worldwide whilst *The Tempest* (2004) was commissioned by London's Royal Opera House and has since been taken up by international houses including New York's Metropolitan Opera, where it was recorded for a Deutsche Grammophon DVD which subsequently won a Grammy Award. Adès's third opera, after Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*, premiered at the Salzburg Festival in July 2016 before travelling to London, New York, Copenhagen and Paris. 2021 saw the premiere of *Dante*, Adès first score specifically written for dance, as part of *The Dante Project* at London's Royal Opera House with choreographer Wayne McGregor and artist Tactia Dean.

Between 1993 and 1995, Adès was Composer in Association with the Hallé Orchestra, producing *These Premises Are Alarmed* for the opening of the Bridgewater Hall in 1996. *Asyla* (1997) was written for Sir Simon Rattle and the CBSO. In 2005 Adès premiered his Violin Concerto 'Concentric Paths', with Anthony Marwood and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, at the Berlin Festspiele and the BBC Proms. His chamber music includes the clarinet quintet *Alchymia* (2021), two string quartets *Arcadiana* (1994) and *The Four Quarters* (2010), a Piano Quintet (2000) and *Lieux retrouvés* (2009) for cello and piano.

*Tevot* (2007), was commissioned by the Berlin Philharmonic and Carnegie Hall whilst *In Seven Days* (a concerto for piano with moving image) was premiered in 2008 in London and Los Angeles. *Polaris* (2011) was premiered by the New World Symphony with Michael Tilson Thomas in Miami. *Totentanz* for mezzo-soprano, baritone and large orchestra was premiered at the 2013 Proms by the BBC Symphony Orchestra.



As a conductor, Adès appears regularly with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, London Symphony Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw, and Finnish Radio Orchestra. He was the inaugural Artistic Partner with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, with whom he premiered a Concerto for Piano and Orchestra with Kirill Gerstein as soloist in March 2019. Other recent works include *Dawn*, a chacony for orchestra at any distance (2020), *Shanty – over the Sea* for strings (2020) and *Märchentänze* for solo violin and piano/orchestra (2021). *Air – Homage to Sibelius* for violin and orchestra was premiered at the 2022 Lucerne Festival, where Adès was Composer-in-Residence. From 2023-2025 he was the Composer-in-Residence with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig.

Adès has won numerous awards, including the BBVA Foundation Frontiers Knowledge Award (2023), the Léonie Sonning Music Prize (2015), the Leoš Janáček Award, and the Grawemeyer Award (2000, for his orchestral work *Asyla*). He was awarded a CBE in the 2018 Queen's Birthday Honours and was Artistic Director of the Aldeburgh Festival from 1999 to 2008. Adès coaches piano and chamber music at the International Musicians Seminar, Prussia Cove and composed *Növények*, seven Hungarian poems for mezzo soprano and piano sextet, for their 50th anniversary concert in 2022.

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Directeur technique: Jean Tabourel

Producer & editor: Etienne Pipard

Sound engineer: Jean-Baptiste Etchepareborde

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Cover image: Tacita Dean Painted Kotsch Tree V, 2008 Gouache on damaged August Kotsch albumen print, c. 1875. 19.4 x 16.2 cm Courtesy the artist; Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery New York/Paris/Los Angeles

To Tom for writing this masterpiece. It's an honour to serve this music wherever we play it.

To the Quatuor Diotima for their consummate musicianship and the laughs we've had along the way.

To Sam Wigglesworth at Faber Music for his support throughout the project.

To Joe, for helping to bring this piece into the wider world.

To Peter and Joanna Eaton who have been so generous with their time and expertise with any matter that is (basset) clarinet related.

To Tacita Dean for her generous permission to reproduce this beautiful artwork on the cover of this album.

And to Sheila and Vicki „immer für mich da.“

