

Phantastes

Phantastes is a fantasia for solo piano, composed for Alison Edwards in 2008 by J.A.C. Redford. The title is taken from a novel by 19th century Scottish author and clergyman, George MacDonald, whose works of fantasy sparked the imaginations of a generation of English writers, including W. H. Auden, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. MacDonald's novel is introduced with the following verse:

*Phantastes from 'their fount' all shapes deriving,
In new habiliments can quickly dight.*

The word "dight" means "transform" and the reader is led to understand that a phantasm or ghost, without altering its essential nature, may nevertheless change shape as easily as we change clothing. Throughout his novel, MacDonald mines the metaphoric value of this idea.

The passage is also about as cogent a summary of the musical development of this shape-shifting piano composition as one could wish. In the course of the work, all of the musical gestures can be traced back to their "fount" in two primary ideas:

The first of these is the relationship between A minor and D^b Major, which provides an acerbic vocabulary of unsettled and mysterious chords and scales which are developed and transposed throughout the composition. The second is a lyrical theme with hints of Gaelic history that also appears in the work played backwards (retrograde), upside down (inversion), as well as backwards and upside down (retrograde inversion).

These two primary ideas alternate throughout the composition, creating a narrative form over which the improvisatory embellishments of the classic fantasia are draped like "new habiliments."