

## THE LANGUAGE OF ALLUSION in Adès' *Arcadiana* – Sunny Knable

Good morning. Today I will be presenting, “The Language of Allusion in Thomas Adès' *Arcadiana*.” In this talk, I will explore the composer's method of alluding to pre-existing works of art and extra-musical ideas in his first string-quartet, and analyze how that becomes a basis for his musical language throughout the work.



### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Thomas Adès was born in London in 1971 and began his successful career in music as a piano prodigy. As an adult, he turned to composition and conducting, quickly receiving numerous commissions, awards and residencies.

In terms of his compositional voice, Adès is as influenced by the Post-Romantic musings of Ives and Janáček as he is to the tapestries of Nancarrow and Ligeti. While he tends to avoid the early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Expressionist aesthetic, he borrows everything from Ferneyhough's irrational time signatures to the steady pulse of Electronic Dance Music from the British pop world.



Common stylistic traits of his music are:

- elaborately patterned layers of texture
- a willingness to use functional tonality
- polymeter used in contrast to rhythmic unison
- extreme timbral diversity, using advanced techniques
- extramusical or programmatic elements
- and allusions to well-established genres, styles and pieces for expressive purposes

Most of these traits will be touched on in this analysis of *Arcadiana*, with special attention to how allusion operates through his work.



1'30”

## ARCADIANA – GENERAL

*Arcadiana* is one of the oldest pieces in Adès' published repertoire. It was written in 1994 as a commission from the Endellion String Quartet; and in 1998, it won the Elise L. Stoeger Prize. The 20-minute work is arranged in seven short movements, six of which evoke the idea of vanished or vanishing idylls, short descriptive works that deal with pastoral scenes. According to Adès, the odd-numbered movements are all aquatic in nature and would flow seamlessly if played consecutively.



The movements are: I. *Venezia notturno*, meaning “Venitian Nocturne”, which Adès describes as the ballad of a lugubrious gondolier; II. *Das klinget so herrlich, das klinget so schön*, meaning, “That Sounds So Wonderful, That Sounds so Nice”, based on Mozart’s “Magic Flute”; III. *Auf dem Wasser zu singen*, meaning “On the Water to Sing”, which is the title from a Schubert lied; IV. *Et... (tango mortale)*, which Adès calls the “joker in the pack,” at the literal dead center of the piece; V. *L’Embarquement*, which portrays a ship swirling away in L’Isle Joyeuse (The Island of Joy); VI. *O Albion*, meaning “Oh Britain”, which Adès describes as a pastoral Arcadia; and finally, VII. *Lethe*, which in Greek means Oblivion, as in the River of Oblivion.

Even on the outset, one can see from simply reading the movement titles, that Adès is influenced by many musical and extra-musical elements.



1’37”

## ALLUSION IN ADÈS

Concerning the concept of allusion, Adès says:

—□—

“I can now access more immediately the metaphorical implications of a note or two notes, without the need for an image or a picture, whereas in the past, the metaphorical freight was expressed in a title or an idea... I couldn’t see any reason not to quote heavily when it came to me... I didn’t know you weren’t supposed to.”

—□—

Arnold Whittal points out that 'composers cannot really function without shaking hands with other composers'... [but] Adès uses allusion 'without any hang-ups.' This is an important distinction which helps to define the use of allusion in the hands of Adès. He is not a composer simply writing in sonata form or quoting a melody; he is using allusion with the intent of communicating a connection to the past as a means of expression.

—□—

## TYPES OF ALLUSION IN ADÈS

In my exploration of *Arcadiana*, I have found seven different types of allusion that Adès uses as the basis of his musical material throughout the work. They are: Direct Quote of another source; Referential Allusion, as in indirectly referring to a piece without directly quoting it; Textual Allusion, meaning alluding to a word-based art-form; Visual Allusion, that is, being influenced by the visual arts; Stylistic Allusion, such as the use of a Tango in the fourth movement; Formal Allusion, such as the use of a Minuet and Trio; and finally, a Conceptual Allusion, as in referencing a specific place or idea to be represented in music.



My method to portray these various types of allusion will to be compare and contrast Adès' music with the original source material; and in order to understand how he goes about operating with and around these materials, I will use an analysis developed by theorist John Roeder, Chair of the Theory Division at University of British Columbia, whose idea of 'Continuities' will serve as the main analytical tool for our purposes.

Roeder defines a Continuity as a pattern of successive pitches or rhythms which, when repeated long enough, give the listener a certain expectation of those patterns continuing. His method tracks the expectation against what really happens in the composition and finds that continuities are often combined for structurally important points in his music.



Here is an example of a Pitch Continuity, where a Bb moves predictably to an A, descending by half-step; this is symbolized by an arrow and a negative-one.



Here is an example of Rhythmic Continuity; the box at the top shows that a pattern has repeated by a duration of six; the box at the bottom shows that the expected duration was six, but that it was instead, seven.

In my analysis, I will concern myself with the material that is generated through Adès' many types of allusion and see how it operates through the lens of Roeder's Continuities. Thus, where allusion provides the material in Adès' music, Continuity often provides the process of how it is communicated.  2'03"

## MOVEMENT I – OPENING: STYLISTIC ALLUSION

The first sounds we hear of *Arcadiana* conjure up the Venetian night in *Venezia notturno*. The 6/8 meter and medium tempo, along with the overtly Venetian title, make for our first Stylistic Allusion to the Barcarolle, a song traditionally sung by the gondoliers of Venice.

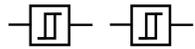


Adès paints this opening picture through lulling 16<sup>th</sup>-notes in the first violin, passing off to the second violin as triplet-16<sup>th</sup>'s, an interesting feature, for as the surface-rhythm quickens, the tempo decreases. This feature obscures the sense of clear meter until m. 5. The *sul tasto* bowing and open 5<sup>th</sup>'s in the treble create an eerie color, while the open 5<sup>th</sup>'s in the bass amplify the resonance of this gesture. Let's listen. **PLAY EXCERPT #1 (20"')**

One important aspect of the opening 5 measures is a transformational cycle of Perfect 5<sup>ths</sup>,



transposed down by enharmonic minor 6<sup>th</sup>'s, beginning with C# to F to A and back to C#.



This, of course, is a symmetrical transposition, bringing us to the first Continuity of the piece.



As you can see in Roeder's graph of these 5 measures, Adès constructs a transposition down by 8 half-steps which is carried out to its full conclusion.

The transposed Perfect-5<sup>ths</sup> in combination, of course, create a hexatonic set, here compacted into one octave.  As it turns out, the aspects of transposed 5ths and the hexatonic set play an important part throughout the work as a whole, a principal aspect of the composer's musical language.



2'05"

## MOVEMENT II – OPENING: DIRECT QUOTES

*Das klinget so herrlich, das klinget so schön*, the second movement of *Arcadiana*, presents to us our first Direct Quote from Act I, Scene 3 of Mozart's Magic Flute. The storyline at this point in Mozart's opera is that Papageno and Pamina enter searching for Tamino. They are recaptured by Monostatos and his slaves. Papageno plays his magic bells, and Monostatos and his slaves begin to sing and dance, exiting the stage mesmerized by the beauty of the music. They sing:

—□—

Das klinget so herrlich, das klinget so schön!

Nie hab' ich so etwas gehört und geseh'n!

(That sounds so wonderful, that sounds so nice!

I have never heard or seen anything like it!)

—□—

In terms of material that Adès quotes, it is limited to the accompaniment figure of the glockenspiel **PLAY GLOCK QUOTE (6”)**

—□—

and a quote from the Queen of the Night aria from Act II. —□—

**PLAY QUEEN QUOTE (7”)**

—□—

Adès transforms both of these into string harmonics with an overlapping polyrhythmic texture: first the glockenspiel becomes the opening viola line heard in measure one and two —□—; and the Queen of the Night's repeated figures are heard in measure two and three in the first violin —□—. Here are the opening three measures.

**PLAY DAS KLINGET EXCERPT #1. (12”)**

—□—

1'25”

### MOVEMENT III – TEXTUAL ALLUSION

As we turn now to the third movement, we will see examples of Textual Allusion to a Schubert Lied on the same name, *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* (On the Water to Sing), on a poem by Leopold Graf zu Stollberg. There are moments in this movement which draw from Schubert's music, and others which draw from the inspiration of Stollberg's text, which is why I am primarily calling this an example of Textual Allusion.

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An important aspect of this movement is its relation to the three-stanza poem, seen here, translated to English. I have bolded the most important lines which concern Adès' movement.

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In terms of Schubert's lied, one can see that the stanzas are in three parts, which Schubert sets in strophic form, with the same music in exact repetition with the exception of the brief introduction and concluding bars.

–□–

The primary aspect of Schubert's setting is the depiction of the boat's movement on water. Adès takes this as initial inspiration, but also draws from the last stanza's text.

–□–

The last line 'vanish from the changing time' is especially of note in Adès' treatment, one for the concept which pervades six of the seven movements (vanishing idylls), and two, for the idea of changing time, which Adès treats in a variety of ways.

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### MVT III: OPENING CASCADE

Schubert paints the picture of a rocking boat on calm water with a stream of 16<sup>th</sup> notes in repetitive one-measure cascades, characterized by falling two-note slurs. This constant 16<sup>th</sup>-note motion begins with the first measure and only stops at the final chord. Here is the opening. **PLAY SCHUBERT EXCERPT 25” – shorten to 15”**



Adès retains the falling motion and two-note slurs of Schubert at the start of the third movement as well as some other of his characteristics. **PLAY AUF DEM OPENING 28” – shorten to 15”**

Adès takes for his starting point the minor second which is present in the Schubert, and literally expands that distance with each passing interval, from minor 2<sup>nd</sup> growing to a Perfect 4<sup>th</sup> in the viola, continuing on through to the Perfect 5<sup>th</sup> in the cello.



This collection, of course, is also known as the expanding interval set. At the same time, notice that the surface rhythm quickens from a dotted eighth note to quintuple 16<sup>th</sup>'s. A similar treatment is used throughout the movement, often used in an overlapping fashion with other cascades.



Many of these figures, like this opening, aim towards an Eb, which is also referencing the Schubert.



1'37”

## MOVEMENT IV – VISUAL ALLUSION

Movement IV of *Arcadiana*, entitled *Et... (tango mortale)*, offers up a sly allusion to the visual arts. The first word is a reference to the Latin phrase “Et in Arcadia ego” most famously used as a title and subject by the French Baroque painter Nicolas Poussin.

—□—

Here you can see his painting circa 1637, which depicts shepherds from Antiquity huddled around a tomb with the Latin transcription.

The phrase itself can be translated in different ways. Arcadia is a region in Greece that came to mean Paradise. So the phrase “Et in Arcadia ego” can mean “I too have lived in Paradise,” or “I, Death, exist even in Paradise,” or “Even in Paradise I had to suffer death.” In the Renaissance, the phrase came to be a theme for a group of artists who referenced arcane symbolism in art and literature. —□— —□— So Adès alludes to a phrase that was itself an allusion to Antiquity during the Renaissance; this is a kind of History of Allusion at the center of Adès’ piece, but he only uses the first word, “Et...” in the title and follows it with *tango mortale*, a kind of danse macabre.

—□—

1’18”

## MOVEMENT IV – SIMULTANEOUS CONTINUITIES AT CLIMAX

A process of voice leading is most evident in the climax of this movement starting at bar 35, in which multiple pitch and rhythmic continuities coincide, fluctuating across different registers of the individual strings. Each string is operating with different rhythmic continuities, as you can see in Roeder's groupings, and also within each string, there are multiple pitch continuities in relation to their register.

–– – – The first violin's disjunct melody follows two, sometimes three different voices;

–– – – the second violin's triple stops interspersed with single notes follow three to four voices;

–– – – – the viola follows four voices;

–– and the cello's double stops follow two voices often in oblique motion – the last, it should be mentioned, is primarily, again, made up of the descending expanding interval set. Let's hear this climactic moment.

**PLAY TANGO CLIMAX 15”**

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'55”

## MOVEMENT V – VISUAL ALLUSION

While Adès calls the fourth movement “the joker in the pack”, it shares one important similarity with the fifth movement as well, and that is its allusion to the visual arts.



In *L'Embarquement*, we find an allusion to the *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, also called, *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*, by French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau of the late Baroque, early Rococo style.



28”

## MOVEMENT V – FORMAL ALLUSION

Like the fourth movement, *L'Embarquement* translates the Visual Allusion with the help of another, in this case, a Formal Allusion. The idea of form and balance in the Rococo period is reflected in Adès' use of a Trio, Scherzo, Coda, and short balanced phrases within the anachronistic form. This graph from Jacqueline Greenwood charts the overall form of the movement which could be likened to an altered Rondo or a simplified Sonata form; within those, you find the Trio in section C and the Scherzo in B-prime. It is interesting that Adès chooses the word "Scherzo" and not "Minuet" to describe this section, which is slightly incongruent with Watteau's time period; in addition, the Scherzo arrives after the Trio, which is in reverse to what is normally found in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Both of these facts support the idea that Adès again is dealing with the concept of the passing of time, and the vanishing of these musical and artistic allusions.



Here is the opening A section, replete with a quasi-half cadence before its repeat.

**PLAY L'EMBARQUEMENT OPENING 25" – shorten to 10"**

As you can hear, this section, like every section that follows, has an internal logic of clear and balanced phrases.



1'26"

## MOVEMENT V – CONTINUITIES

Here is a condensed version of the opening 10 measures with a harmonic analysis below it. The unison harmonic rhythm and Ravel-like 7<sup>th</sup> chords make for quite a pronounced effect after four movements of much more dissonance and rhythmic complexity than is present here.



The following B section in this movement stands out for its non-apologetic melody, which has a hint of late Romanticism combined with an early American jazz language. Here is the start of this contrasting section. **PLAY B SECTION 16”**

I think one could find many examples of similar shape and rhythm in the classical canon. Adès is obviously Referentially Alluding to a sweet, simple kind of Romanticism – perhaps this is his idea of Cythera, the birthplace of Venus. As the movement progresses, this sweetness vanishes piece by piece, as the musical language and processes become more complex. In the following sections, each instrument takes on different roles and various rhythmic continuities arise.



1’13”

## MOVEMENT VI – DIRECT QUOTE/REFERENTIAL ALLUSION

Like *L'Embarquement*, the sixth movement uses tonality to express the nostalgia of an idealized past. *O Albion*, which is an old English way of saying, “Oh Britain,” is a kind of nationalistic ode to Edward Elgar’s *Nimrod* from his *Enigma Variations*. In a compact 17-measure movement, Adès is able to conjure up the power and emotion of the original, though presenting it in an almost elegiac fashion.

Here are the first 4 measures of Elgar.

**PLAY ELGAR BEGINNING 29” – shorten to 15”**



As you can see at the start of Adès’ movement, he has retained the elements of tempo, key, motive and texture of *Nimrod*. It is notable that the time signature and thus rhythm is altered from a 3/4 to 4/4. While the entire movement is condensed, the material is broadened, helping to create the effect of a kind of elegy. Let’s hear the beginning phrase of *O Albion*. **PLAY O ALBION BEGINNING 38” – shorten to 15”**

As you can hear, the two are unmistakably related. Whether we should call this a Direct Quote or Referential Allusion is debatable, because I think Adès does a bit of both. He quotes the first two notes of the melody,  a G and Ab, though of course an octave displacement, but goes his own way by the third note. He retains the melodic shape of the first phrase with the exact same pitch at its peak, an E-flat.  In terms of the root movement,  the cello mirrors the bass line verbatim, but alters it by the fourth note, also retaining some of the same shape as well,  with a C near the peak of the melodic phrase. This, in a sense, is also a reharmonization of the original.



2’05”

## MOVEMENT VI – CONTINUITY

In terms of Continuity, Adès presents an interesting feature in measure 5, for, like the Elgar, the melodic phrase here repeats the opening material, whereas the bass line becomes out of sync – a half measure ahead of the melody. Thus, Adès has set up a melodic and harmonic continuity based on the Referential Allusion to Elgar, but alters it on repeat to play with the expectations of the listener.  The bass line does not rejoin the original until measure 8, making for another kind of reference to memory and the elapse of time.



## MOVEMENT VII – CONCEPTUAL ALLUSION

This brings us to the final movement of *Arcadiana*. Before we delve into the music and its processes, Adès gives us a quote which summarizes well his intentions in this movement:

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“*Arcadiana*... was once played in Hyde Park in London. I loved it because the reality of the music was more apprehensible, the piece felt more real, with the traffic going past, the leaves rustling, people shouting and playing games in the distance... [but] the final movement, ‘Lethe’, seemed unnecessary in the open air because we already had around us what that movement represents – the things that are outside my piece, going on, indifferent to it... ‘Lethe’ functions as the sound of a forest in a concert hall.”

—□—

*Lethe*, meaning ‘Oblivion’ in Greek, is a Conceptual Allusion to the River of Oblivion in Greek mythology, one of the five rivers of the underworld of Hades. As the myth goes, all who drank from it experienced complete forgetfulness and oblivion. It is as if this movement exists so that the whole 20-minute composition that is *Arcadiana* will vanish as well.

—□—

1’02”

## MOVEMENT VII – CONTINUITY

Adès brings expressive closure to a piece dealing with vanishing idylls by creating a complex and fragile texture of fragments from the beginning to the end of *Lethe*. Here you can see the opening three measures, which present multiple overlapping and wispy phrases of grace notes and string harmonics, under which the cello plays an eerie melody, reminiscent of the opening gesture of the first movement.

### **PLAY LETHE BEGINNING 20” – shorten to 10”**



Adès operates these fragments by routine serial techniques. Here you can see Roeder’s graph of a repeated 11-note set, which contains in it two overlapping hexatonic sets – this is another strong connection to the first movement.

According to Adès, the problem with serialism is that there is no room for the possibility that not all pitches should be equal. Here he presents material which has been serialized for the express purpose of not giving the listener much to hold on to; creating the effect of *Lethe* vanishing, like all six movements and five idylls that came before it.



1’37”

## CONCLUSION

This brings us to the questions which many writers ask about Adès' music, especially of his early work: what is the broader intent of *Allusion*? Is it to subvert and distort the source material? Is it just to be ironic? Is it to be accessible and thus, popular? Is it to wink to an audience who is in the know? To what extent is this work original? To what extent is it a manipulation? These are all the common questions that can be found in nearly every writing on his work.

In the analysis of *Arcadiana*, I often found myself approaching these questions as a performer and a composer myself. In his score, I see a mind which is wrestling with the conundrum of being a performer and conductor of the classical cannon, a composer who is aware of all the modern trappings of 20<sup>th</sup> Century composition, and a human being who is influenced by the ubiquitous vernacular music. Being a modern classical musician is a complex thing already, and each of us must reconcile the past with our present.

Where Adès succeeds as a composer is that he is honest in his approach: *Allusion* is not just one thing. Using it is at once serious and silly business; it is for the cultured and for the uninitiated; it references and yet creates a new context; it plays with our own associations of memory and draws us on a path Adès paves with continuity; and best of all, it is full of many meanings, many of which are debatable. Though I count myself as a much different composer than he, there were many times in which staring at the score of *Arcadiana*, I nodded in recognition of his materials and his processes. *Allusion* is what brought me to Adès in the first place, but it is in his *Process* that I found what makes the language of *Allusion* uniquely his.

—□—

Thank you.

1'52"