

**Christopher James**

## **IN FROSTIGER NACHT**

(A companion piece to Friedrich Hölderlin's Elegy *Diotima*)

For Piano, Flute, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, Violin, Viola, Cello, and Bass

(1999)

The North/South Consonance Chamber Orchestra

Max Lifchitz, Conductor

Joseph Kubera, Piano

Duration: 17'51"

### **Introduction and Notes**

*In frostiger Nacht* incorporates material from the composer's setting of Hölderlin's elegy *Diotima* for voice and piano (1992) in a considerably revised and expanded form, combined with newly composed material. The work is a hybrid, sharing characteristics of both song and piano concerto. It is founded in the romantic manner on strong and dramatic dichotomies, rather than Goethe's paradigm of chamber music as the "conversation of reasonable people". The work is in one continuous movement, divided into four contrasting sections.

The slow first section opens with a repeated rapid upward arpeggiation in the piano of a complex harmony, a concatenation of triads of B minor and C sharp major. This ambiguous chord (see Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II, seven measures into "O sink hernieder") is an important referential sonority, undergoing many transformations throughout the work. A brief shiver in the strings is resolved into E flat minor, the tonic of the work. The principal thematic complex of the first section, a somber, elegaic Adagio, unfolds in the winds and strings over an insistent pedal point on E flat. It is divided roughly in half by a fantasy-like episode which moves into distant harmonic regions; here for the first time the piano takes the lead in a cadenza-like passage. The main theme is taken up again, rising to an astringent, powerful climax, and then subsides.

The second section, Allegro molto moderato, begins with a quiet chorale-like theme in the piano, corresponding to Hölderlin's invocation, "Komm und besänftige mir". This theme undergoes continuous development and intensification as strings and winds enter gradually, and the piano assumes a pronounced concertante role; this culminates in a furiously militant passage in the "orchestra" (Hölderlin's "ordne den tobenden Kampf"). At this point, the music takes an excursion as the piano and ensemble instruments trade off phrases and combine in a variety of configurations, tempos and moods. A sense of balance returns following a particularly impassioned surge, as the piano restates the chorale theme in altered form, but the music soon resumes its high emotional pitch, relaxing at times into a gentler lyricism (horn solo). The chorale theme returns in the full ensemble, all instruments concertante, in its original key, quietly, but in a different meter and with extravagant figuration. A final surge of development, characterized by shifting meters and long-breathed phrases, rises to the highest pitch of vehemence, seems to falter on the verge of an abyss, and comes crashing down in dissonant shards.

The brief third section recapitulates material from both preceding sections in summary form. A quiet bassoon solo, elaborated by delicate passage work in the piano, evokes the rarefied, hothouse atmosphere of the lines "denn Diotima lebt... sucht sie die Sonne doch auch". The tragic alienation spoken of in the last two lines of the poem is reflected in the final tempestuous climax ("zanken Orkane sich nur"). The musical space becomes entirely saturated, presenting a musical impasse.

In the wake of the preceding turbulence, a reiterated dyad in the piano is resolved downward by semitones in the violin and viola. Over a static, gently pulsating accompaniment, wind solos adumbrate the tonality of E flat, offering a moment of consolation. The coda unfolds as a small, self-contained song form, thematically unrelated to anything preceding it, with cortège-like interludes. In the final measures, a concentrated summary of the principal tonal conflicts of the piece leads through obscure tonal by-ways to E flat major.

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