

Orchestrating Surrealism In Thomas Ades's *Living Toys*

Rolando J. Gómez

University of Syracuse — Setnor School Of Music

April 2, 2024



- Born in London on March 1, 1971
- Studied at the Guildhall School of Music and at King's College, Cambridge, from which he graduated in 1992
- He wrote his first opus, "Five Eliot Landscapes," in 1990 which is an art song for Soprano and Piano.
- Just five years later, he wrote one of his most infamous works, which was his chamber opera Powder Her Face, Op. 14 (1995) based on the 1963 scandals of Margaret Campbell, Duchess of Argyll.

Context

- Thomas Ades's *Living Toys* (1993) Op. 9 was Commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain for the London Sinfionetta and was conducted by Oliver Knussen on February 11th, 1994.
- The piece follows an invented narrative that was written after the composition was completed:

“When the men asked him what he wanted to be, the child did not name any of their own occupations, as they had all hoped he would, but replied: ‘I am going to be a hero, and dance with angels and bulls, and fight with bulls and soldiers, and die a hero in outer space, and be buried a hero’. Seeing him standing there, the man felt small, understanding that they were not heroes, and that their lives were less substantial than the dreams which surrounded the child like toys.” — from the Spanish

- Ades, in the provided program note, provides some musical connections to the story:

Interest in The Spanish

- The score is also accompanied by the following cover which is an etching of Francisco José de Goya's *The Agility and Audacity of Juanito Apiñani in the ring at Madrid*.



Interest in The Spanish Cont.

- It is evident from the program and the cover art that Ades seems to have an interest in Spanish culture and history. This interest has re-emerged in his later works. His piece *America: A Prophecy* (1999) for mezzo-soprano Orchestra and chorus is based on the arrival of the Spanish to the new world, specifically Mexico, and the fall of the Mayan Empire.

Interest in Surrealism

- Ades interest in Spanish culture and with Surrealism may be traced to his mother, who was a scholar specialized in the art of Salvador Dalí, a Spanish surrealist artist.
- His Opera *The Exterminating Angel* (2016) is based on the 1962 Mexican film, with the same title, written and directed by Luis Buñuel, a Spanish surrealist.
- Before we analyze how Ades's music relates to Surrealism, we must first address how it has manifested in the visual arts.

Salvador Dali's The Persistence Of Memory



Key Observations

- Realistic style and use of familiar subject
- The symbolic significance of familiar subjects
- Distortions of these objects subverts and creates new meaning

Thomas Ades And Surrealism

- Thomas Ades uses a variety of musical topics, styles, references, associations and distorts them through the use of polythematic textures, polystylism, a dizzying rhythmic language, and emphasizing the extremes of sonic range.
- These techniques work together to create a sound world whose lack of stability and constantly fluid state creates a musical equivalent of a dream state.
- Furthermore the use of musical signs brings the narrative to life.

Movements

I Angels
II Aurochs *
BALETT
III Militiamen *
IV H.A.L.'s Death *
BATTLE
V Playing Funerals
TABLET

INSTRUMENTATION

flute = piccolo

oboe = cor anglais + sopranino recorder

clarinet in B \flat = E \flat clarinet + bass clarinet

bassoon = contrabassoon

horn = whip


trumpet in B \flat = piccolo trumpet in B \flat

trombone

Instrumentation

percussion (1 player)

3 gongs 

2 large pedal timpani 

2 crotales  (with bow)

talking drum, triangle, 2 suspended cymbals: small and very small,
suspended sheet of paper (A3 to A4, struck centrally with side drum beater†),
2 cowbells: medium high and very high, 2 temple blocks: medium and high,
guero, castanets, piccolo snare drum, field drum (deep, with snares),
kit bass drum, vibraslap.

† Paper must be fastened securely and be tough enough to withstand repeated strokes.

Ossia: pile of newspaper crudely folded and placed flat on a hard chair.

Instrumentation

piano

2 violins

viola

violoncello

double bass (with C extension)‡

‡ Ossia are written for double bass without 5 strings

Score in C

Irrational Time Signatures

CONDUCTOR'S NOTES

The first movement is 'in one'; square-bracketed arabic numerals indicate suggested subdivisions where ensemble might require them.

Time signatures with **/6** or **/12** denote quantities of single triplet subdivisions of the beat, for example, bar 330:

The notation shows a 12/12 time signature. The first half of the bar contains two groups of three eighth notes, each with a '3' above it. The second half contains another two groups of three eighth notes, each with a '3' above it. Below the first group of three notes is a bracket with a '3' underneath it. This is followed by an equals sign and a 2/4 time signature. The first half of this 2/4 bar contains two groups of three eighth notes, each with a '3' above it. The second half contains another two groups of three eighth notes, each with a '3' above it. This is followed by a plus sign and a 1/3 time signature, which is then followed by a single eighth note with a '3' above it.

Aurochs

- An Auroch is an extinct European bison, also known as a big and bold bull.
- Based on the title, this is the bull fighting movement.
- Ades relies on referencing musical styles through instrumentation and cultural associations.
- The piccolo trumpet plays a major role in both referencing Spanish Paso-Doble music with the use of Jota triplets, which is accompanied by castanets and clapping; vividly capturing a bull fight scene in Spain.
- However; the representation of Spanish music is distorted which adds to the fantastical nature of the scene.
- Since the piccolo trumpet is an octave higher than the regular trumpet, it gives the trumpet lines a more cartoonish flavor.

Aurochs cont.

Score for Aurochs cont. featuring four staves:

- Hn.** (Horn): Rests throughout the passage.
- Picc. Tpt.** (Piccolo Trumpet): Plays a melodic line starting in the second measure, marked *mf brillante*. The line consists of eighth-note triplets and sixteenth-note triplets, ending with a quarter rest in the fifth measure.
- Tbn.** (Trombone): Enters in the third measure with a melodic line marked *f*, featuring eighth-note triplets and sixteenth-note triplets, ending with a quarter rest in the fifth measure.
- Perc.** (Percussion): Plays a rhythmic pattern in the first measure, marked *mf*, consisting of eighth-note triplets and sixteenth-note triplets, ending with a quarter rest in the fifth measure.

Aurochs cont.

Handwritten musical score for the piece "Aurochs" (continued). The score is arranged in five staves, each with a label on the left: Hn. (Horn), Picc. Tpt. (Piccolo Trumpet), Tbn. (Trombone), Perc. (Percussion), and Pno. (Piano). The Hn. staff is empty. The Picc. Tpt. staff contains a melodic line with dynamic markings *p*, *mf*, *p*, *f*, *p brillante*, and *f*, and triplet markings. The Tbn. staff contains a bass line with a dynamic marking *f* and a triplet marking. The Perc. staff contains a rhythmic pattern with dynamic markings *p*, *mf*, and *p*, and a 5-measure rest. The Pno. staff contains a harmonic accompaniment with dynamic markings *mf quasi pizz.* and triplet markings.

Militiamen

- The Deléclusean nightmare that is the percussion part vividly depicts a mad old-fashioned soldier marching down a field given the close associations between the snare drum and military music.
- The percussionists, performing mainly on a piccolo snare (with occasional hits on a field drum, bass drum, and a piece of suspended paper acting as a suspended cymbal), I believe is performing a distorted version of a Delécluse styled snare etude.
- The rhythms are however, very complex and lack a steady pulse.
- The military drum line is oddly paired with a jazz inspired trumpet line and stabs from the orchestra.

Delécluse

1

Soliste au Théâtre National de l'Opéra
et à la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire

$\bullet = 76$

mf *p* *mf* *f* *p* *f* *p subito* *f* *p* *cresc.* *f*

Militiamen cont.

Perc.

Paper
Picc. S.D. (snares on)

fffz pp

Field Drum
(snares off)

B.D.

Repeat bar if Trumpet needs time to chan

The musical score for the Percussion section is written on a single staff with a 9/8 time signature. The tempo is marked with a 'Perc.' symbol at the beginning. The score features a complex rhythmic pattern with many triplets and sixteenth notes. The dynamics start with 'fffz' (fortissimo, fortissimo, fortissimo, fortissimo) and then change to 'pp' (pianissimo). The score includes instructions for 'Paper Picc. S.D. (snares on)' and 'Field Drum (snares off)'. A bracket indicates a 'Repeat bar if Trumpet needs time to chan'.

Militiamen cont.

- The piccolo trumpet is likely inspired by the playing style of Bubber Miley, a 1920s jazz trumpeter who was known for his characteristic use of the plunger mute.
- However, Ades also asks the trumpet player to play using a talking trumpet technique, which requires the trumpet player to “talk” in to their instrument based on the called for vowels, diphthongs, and consonants.
- Not only must the trumpet player perform this extended technique, but they are also asked to play in their “own meter” with “molto rubato”.
- The degree of freedom requested along with the precision of the notation gives way to performative paradox and tension.
- The jazz references are echoed in the woodwinds and strings with a set of really high-pitched stabs.

Militiamen cont.

Picc. Tpt.

$\left(\frac{3}{4}\right)$ own meter: molto rubato sempre
solo, parlato *quasi espress.*, *quasi dolce*,
con molto fantasia, in modo popolare

senza sord.; plunger

$\frac{9}{8} \left(\frac{3}{4}\right)$

pp f

i j^{Δ}

Militiamen cont.

Score for *Militiamen cont.* featuring four staves: Horn (Hn.), Piccolo Trumpet (Picc. Tpt.), Trombone (Tbn.), and Percussion (Perc.).

Hn. (Horn): Bass clef. First staff has a melodic line with a slur. Second staff continues the melodic line with a *mf* dynamic marking.

Picc. Tpt. (Piccolo Trumpet): Treble clef. First staff has a melodic line with a slur and a *mf* dynamic marking. Second staff continues the melodic line with a *mf* dynamic marking.

Tbn. (Trombone): Bass clef. First staff has a melodic line with a slur. Second staff continues the melodic line with a *mf* dynamic marking.

Perc. (Percussion): Snare drum. First staff has a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and quintuplets, marked *fffz* and *mf p*. Second staff continues the rhythmic pattern with various time signatures (5:6, 7:6, 5:4) and a *mf* dynamic marking.

Polystylism and Surrealism

- The combination of unrelated styles (polystylism) adds to the surrealist quality of the work.
- The dual role the piccolo trumpet plays in depicting Spanish music and American Jazz and how Ades's uses mutes and extended techniques as part of the switch.
- Ades's preference for high pitched sounds is a part of his style, put is also his preferred form of distortion.
- The work's overall virtuosic and soloistic writing creates an Instrumental-Drama that parallels the Hero's story.

H.A.L.'s Death

- This movement features a reference to the ending of 2001: A Space Odyssey; which itself is a reference to the first time a computer (the IBM 7094) in 1961 could sing, which itself is reference to Daisy Bell a tune by Harry Dacre from 1892.
- Ades's version of "Daisy Bell" is a fourth degree from the original Harry Dacre composition.
- Ades hockets the bass and contrabassoon and adds distortions in the form of "poorly executed" dove tailing—which obscures the Harry Dacre even further.
- The lack of lyrics, which is an element that carried through the IBM 7094 and H.A.L. versions, also adds to the greater degree of abstraction.
- This form of referencing has been pointed out in Jean Baudrillard's 1981 "Simulacra and Simulation". Feel free to google "Simulacra Memes".

Conclusion

- Musical topics such as styles, gestures, and references carry cultural significance and visual associations.
- The combination and manipulation of diverse musical objects with other extraordinary elements subverts and creates an imagined narrative.
- Ades's *Living Toys* uses these musical topics like toys to convey a surreal tale of a hero who tackles man's greatest obstacles, a spirit, a beast, other men, and artificial intelligence.