

The Rage of Achilles

Philip Armstrong in interview (2005)

The Rage of Achilles by Philip Armstrong, based upon Book I of Homer's Iliad, is a large-scale 90-minute work for orchestra, mixed chorus and five vocal soloists. It was written during 2003 and 2004, mostly while the composer was resident in Hiroshima, Japan.

David Puckett asked Philip Armstrong about the work.

Q: What caused you to write The Rage of Achilles? Why did you choose an Ancient Greek theme?

A: I've used Ancient Greek myths in many of my pieces, and in my novels too. I love the stories; they're exciting and compelling. And they have much meaning for our modern times. I'd been drawn to the Iliad for many years because of its immensity and its place in literature; after all, it's the first book! For several years I'd been considering setting the story as an opera, but settled in the end for a concert hall rendition.

Q: There is a diverse range of influences in your work, beyond the Ancient Greek theme. Which other composers have you looked to for guidance or inspiration?

A: Well, I have my favorite composers, as we all do, and I suppose my music has absorbed a great deal from others over the years. But I cannot say I have consciously drawn ideas from others' music. For instance, I have always liked German music. I lived in Munich for four years, and then in German-speaking Switzerland for five years. And even before then, since I was a student, I have admired a range of German composers from Henze to Rihm. But I don't consciously look to their music to influence my work.

Q: Henze has set many Ancient Greek myths himself, including a powerful operatic version of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Although that was written a while ago now.

A: Yes, that's true. I think it's natural to look to previous generations for cues, for a context. But there are some younger Germans that also fascinate me, such as Matthias Pintscher. Even so, I don't think my music is German-inspired, not in the same way as other composers who have settled in Germany, such as Dillon, or Hosokawa. I also admire many British composers, such as Birtwistle and Harvey. But as for the nature of their influence on me: again, it's never been direct. I think I'm more likely influenced through osmosis, and not directly.

A: The use of ritual has been important component of your work. Perhaps this is tied to your interest in ancient myth. Is the *Rage of Achilles* a ritual?

Q: It's less obviously ritualistic than some of my other pieces, but still contains the same qualities. I've always believed in the Francis Bacon premise that art should be provocative and life changing. The best music challenges pre-conceptions. I'm not interested in creating wallpaper music; there's too much of that in the world as it is. Ritual advances my objectives; it enhances music and gives it power to reach beyond the aural experience. The *Rage of Achilles* does this same thing.

Q: Did you write the libretto for *The Rage of Achilles* yourself?

A: Well, I prepared the text. Of course Homer wrote the original. I looked at several English translations and rewrote the material in a form that suited setting the words to music. The resulting text is not even an interpretation. I think my text is quite true to the original. At least that's the intent. There are many great contemporary pieces, including operas, that have set radically original interpretations of traditional texts, such as Birtwistle's *Mask of Orpheus*, but the *Rage of Achilles* is supposed to be a literal rendition of the text. The text so gripped me in its original form that I really had no desire to transform it.

Q: Not even after the movie Troy, which probably effects many people's perception of the story, and in particularly of the role of Briseis.

A: I didn't see the movie until after I'd finished composing The Rage of Achilles. In actual fact I was about half way through composing my score when I read that there was another big Hollywood blockbuster being made around the same theme. It really disturbed me for a while; I was concerned the movie would somehow invalidate my efforts. Homer is art, and Hollywood movies are, well, popular entertainment! But actually I'm quite impressed with the movie, even though it removes the role of the gods entirely. It changes the plot, and is not true to Homer's original in the way it treats Achilles, or Briseis, but that's OK. The Iliad is a story, a heroic adventure, and I think it's appropriate to tell it in different ways.

Q: The music includes a battle scene and a powerful argument between Achilles and Agamemnon. It's very war-like.

A: Well, to some degree. There are others able to write far more aggressive music than me. Certainly the Iliad is about a war, although I see the war as being the context for other themes, in particularly rivalry between the respective heroes, and of course the role of Briseis. Then of course there are also my references to trees and other things.

Q: This technique reminds me of Messiaen's musical description of birds. Are these literal descriptions of the scenery and other elements in the text?

A: It's quite common to find musical figures like this in my pieces, but they're not programmatic. They're a part of my compositional technique, rather than having a role in telling the story. These gestures are interrupts; I think of them as great interrupts! You throw a fiery interrupt into the lava flow of a volcano and you

disrupt your view of the eruption with a noteworthy display of fireworks, but without actually infringing upon the momentum of the overall flow. So, in this case, the ear of the listener pauses to hear the figure but then passes on in the same direction as before.

Q: There are other figures too that break up the otherwise relentless energy; there are several girls. Can you explain the reference to Elisabeth for instance?

A: Many of my pieces pause to reflect upon beauty. This is an important feature in the Rage of Achilles because of the role of Briseis. Although not all of these figures are relevant to the text. Sometimes they are unrelated descriptions or references to people I know or have known. Other times they're imaginary, or characters from my novels. Elisabeth is a character in my novel Bacchic Europa.

Q: I understand that you use waves in various parameters of the music. Are these descriptive or programmatic?

A: Not really. Recently I have enjoyed incorporating waves in all kinds of ways, but again this is a compositional device: nothing more. Most listeners wouldn't be aware of this, at least not at a first listening. While on the subject I should clarify that this and other compositional strategies in my music are only ever used intuitively and not applied in a serial or overly regimented manner. I think the



Figure 1: Rage of Achilles, Scene 11, Measures 30-32: the pitches of the flute fluctuate up and down in an gradually increasing rate, while the vibraphone plays chords that accelerando and decellerando in a wave-like manner.

days are gone when music was written to explore mathematical patterns or other such non-acoustic pre-compositional constructions. I use waves to enhance the sound of my music. Sometimes they're rhythmic pulsations, like slinkies, or sometimes pitch waves, such as in Scene 11. They often appear in percussion instruments.

Q: You call yourself an international composer? What do you mean by that?

A: *(laughs)* In my work in education we spend a lot of time exploring internationalism, and it's not as difficult to define criteria for such a thing as people might imagine, provided there's clarity about underlying values. Beyond that, I have lived most of my adult life away from the UK where I was born, and I have always had a passion for traveling and operating in cultures that are new to me, or beyond my usual frame of reference.

Q: And different types of world music have influenced your music?

A: Yes, certainly, although again not in a direct way. I don't write pieces that sound like a Japanese gagaku, or a Javanese gamelan, but I am always soaking up ideas from all kinds of sources and building them into my style, as do many composers. For instance, I wrote *The Rage of Achilles* while living in Japan and while investigating Kabuki music. Kabuki theatre is more modern than the ancient performance practices of gagaku. It developed about the same time as western opera with traveling groups, and it represents, at least in my experience, a less restrained use of Japanese traditional instruments. The music is still formal and stylized, but it has more flexibility for setting the mood or describing some element of a scene. It also allows performers plenty of opportunity for adding their own input. For instance, a shamisen player might play a few notes making reference to some other melody or context, which then in turn becomes a subtle comment upon the scene at hand. He might conjure the memory of a pretty girl during the melancholic song of a lonely man. The musical landscape thus has this

level of playfulness, which is all but impenetrable to an outsider such as myself, but still fascinating to delve into.

Q: Is this just a passing interest, or do such things impact your compositional technique?

A: I think this music is intriguing because it touches upon a similar phenomenon that western composers face. Building upon the heritage of Bach and Beethoven, composers can barely write two notes without making reference to a whole weight of tradition. I have felt burdened by this at times in the past, in my quest for originality and a personal voice. But this recent experience with Kabuki has made me more aware of all of this in a playful sense, and I have found myself poking fun in all kinds of ways in my music. It might be a passing C major triad emerging out of a complex harmonic environment, or it might be a reference to a Webern tone row, or a Birtwistle chord, all done in good fun! The Rage of Achilles has this sense of playfulness lurking beneath the surface. For instance, the war-like snare drum that finishes the piece is hardly serious, and is not very subtle in the way it refers to other composers' pieces that have used the same effect.

Q: You also have a strong interest in Balinese music.

A: Yes, I do. Many western composers have found gamelan music fascinating, from Debussy onwards. I have traveled to Yogyakarta in Indonesia and to Bali several times, and am fascinated by the music and also with the important role given to music in people's daily lives there. It's very inspiring. It's fascinating the way gamelan music is structured according to rhythmic cycles. Larger sections are marked by the striking of the largest gong, and subdivided into shorter sections that are marked by the striking of successively smaller gongs. Not that I use equal metrical units, but I do use different types of gestures in my own music to indicate a hierarchy of structural levels. This is not done in a systematic way, only

intuitively, and so I'm not sure whether there's always much order to the chaos. I sometimes might use a simple triangle as my 'gong ageng', which is the gong with the lowest pitch in a gamelan used to mark the largest of the sections. It gives a feeling of balance to the music when it's used at the end of a long melodic section. I'm not sure I always achieve the same with my triangle usage, but that's the intended effect.

Q: You're influenced by African music?

A: Oh, yes, and the list of influences goes on; such is the eclecticism of our modern world. Again, I've traveled to sub-Saharan Africa many times. I spent six months traveling through East and Southern Africa when I was right out of university and fell in love with the landscapes and with my interaction in the various cultures. I have traveled to East Africa on numerous occasions, including leading groups of Middle-school students to fairly remote spots to do development work, such as building schools and hospitals. Musically, it's the rhythms of African music, both traditional and modern, that I carry with me, and that have influenced me, in particular the way rhythm is used to exaggerate the power of minimal harmonies. My music doesn't have the same pulsing or hypnotic rhythms as African music; my music is more focused on harmonic rhythm, but I do use rhythm to exaggerate my use of harmony. I've thought a lot about how African musicians achieve this, which has in turn had an impact upon my composing.

Q: Three of the twelve scenes that comprise *The Rage of Achilles* are orchestral interludes. Why did you include these?

A: I began with the intent of having three ballet scenes, which would be performed by dancers at various points in the piece. The idea was to represent the compromising of Briseis through dance, perhaps one angelic scene, one kidnap scene, and finally something traumatic or ugly. But somehow this idea fell away during the long period it took me to compose the piece, and I ended up with

orchestral interludes. Performed alone, I think they're quite representative of the musical language of the entire piece, which was the intent.

Q: Can we look forward to hearing *The Rage of Achilles* performed soon?

A: That would be nice. I'm like many other composers today who mostly only get to hear their pieces played by computers. Ours is a creative age, but without the resources for live performances. Well, not for 90-minute epics for large choir and orchestral anyway.