

Michael Gandolfi

“The Garden of Cosmic Speculation” (2004/07)

MICHAEL GANDOLFI WAS BORN ON JULY 5, 1956, IN MELROSE, MASSACHUSETTS, AND LIVES IN CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS. HE WROTE THE ORCHESTRAL PIECE “IMPRESSIONS FROM ‘THE GARDEN OF COSMIC SPECULATION’ ” (IN FOUR MOVEMENTS) IN THE SPRING OF 2004 TO FULFILL A COMMISSION FROM THE TANGLEWOOD MUSIC CENTER WITH SUPPORT FROM THE PAUL JACOBS MEMORIAL FUND. IN EARLY 2007 HE WROTE SEVEN MORE MOVEMENTS, COMMISSIONED BY THE ATLANTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA FOR PERFORMANCES THAT TOOK PLACE IN MAY 2007, ALTHOUGH THE FIRST PERFORMANCE OF THE ELEVEN-MOVEMENT PIECE WAS BY THE NEW WORLD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, ROBERT SPANO CONDUCTING, ON APRIL 21, 2007. THE COMPLETE SUITE IS ABOUT SEVENTY MINUTES OF MUSIC. THE WORK IS CONFIGURED SUCH THAT ANY NUMBER OF MOVEMENTS MAY BE PERFORMED IN ANY ORDER, SUITING THE OCCASION; THE PRESENT CONCERTS WILL FEATURE FOUR OF THE ELEVEN (NOS. 10, 8, 6, AND 9, IN THAT ORDER), TOTALING ABOUT 21 MINUTES.

*THE GARDEN OF COSMIC SPECULATION* REQUIRES AN ORCHESTRA OF THREE FLUTES (THIRD DOUBLING PICCOLO), THREE OBOES (THIRD DOUBLING ENGLISH HORN), THREE CLARINETS IN B-FLAT (THIRD DOUBLING BASS CLARINET), THREE BASSOONS (THIRD DOUBLING CONTRABASSOON), FOUR HORNS, THREE TRUMPETS, TWO TROMBONES, BASS TROMBONE, TUBA, TIMPANI, PERCUSSION (THREE PLAYERS MINIMUM: XYLOPHONE, CROTALES [TWO-OCTAVE SET], GLOCKENSPIEL, TUBULAR BELLS, THREE SUSPENDED CYMBALS, SMALL SPLASH CYMBAL, CRASH CYMBAL, FOUR TOM-TOMS, BASS DRUM, BRAKE DRUM, AGOGO [AFRICAN BELL], TAMBOURINE, SLAPSTICK, SLEIGH BELLS, TRIANGLE), HARP, PIANO, AND STRINGS.

*The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* illustrates just one facet of Michael Gandolfi’s broadly flexible musical and intellectual imagination. The breadth of his interests encompasses not only contemporary concert music, but also the jazz, blues, and rock by which route he first became a musician; as both artist and teacher, he has sought to find connections between music and other disciplines, including science, film, and theater. He has collaborated with Shakespeare & Co. and director Tina Packer, filmmaker Pamela Larsen, artist and writer Dana Bonstrom, and videographer Ean White. As an educator, he has expanded on these interests by organizing innovative, cross-disciplinary collaborations bringing together Tanglewood Music Center Fellows with Shakespeare & Co., with the dance festival Jacob’s Pillow, and in a collaborative project with experimental filmmakers. While a Composition Fellow of the Tanglewood Music Center in 1986, he met and became associated with the British conductor and composer Oliver Knussen, who championed Gandolfi’s orchestral piece *Transfigurations*. His works were also performed by such groups as Speculum Musicae and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra; Orpheus led a consortium, also including the Saint Paul and Los Angeles chamber orchestras, to commission Gandolfi’s *Points of Departure*, a piece that has since been performed quite frequently, including by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Robert Spano in April 1998. He has also received commissions from Boston Musica Viva, Speculum Musicae, and the Koussevitzky Foundation, among many others; his wind-band piece *Vientos y Tangos* has received literally hundreds of performances. He is also a dedicated teacher, and has taught at Harvard, Phillips Academy in Andover, MA, and at the New England Conservatory for several years. He has been a member of the Tanglewood Music Center faculty since 1997.

Gandolfi’s recent projects include his *Fantasia for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra* for Kenneth Radnofsky and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, premiered in January 2007 under Gil Rose’s direction; two composer residencies with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (during one of which the complete *Garden of Cosmic Speculation* was performed by the orchestra); and a piece for the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, *Plain Song, Fantastic Dances*. This was premiered by the Chamber Players in October 2005, was repeated at Tanglewood in 2006, and is scheduled again for the final concert of their Jordan Hall series this season, on May 11, 2008. He is also writing a bassoon concerto for BSO principal bassoon Richard Svoboda and the Melrose Symphony Orchestra.

The original inspiration for Michael Gandolfi’s *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* was architect Charles Jencks’s book by that title, an extensive photographic documentation of a Scottish garden designed by Jencks. Gandolfi wrote the first, four-movement version of the piece in early 2004, and it was premiered at Tanglewood on August 16 that year by the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, Robert Spano conducting, during that summer’s Festival of Contemporary Music. The following season, David Zinman

conducted the first Boston Symphony Orchestra performances of the work, on January 27, 28, 29, and February 1, 2005. In 2006 Gandolfi visited Jencks's garden in person along with videographer Ean White to gather material for an expanded version of the piece; the additional elements were commissioned by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Robert Spano, music director. The complete eleven-movement work, now called, more simply, *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation*, was premiered by the New World Symphony with Spano conducting on April 21, 2007; Spano brought the piece to the Atlanta Symphony the following month. The original four movements were incorporated (in order) as movements 1, 2, 3, and 11 of the expanded piece.

Jencks's garden is a series of plots or zones, each of which was inspired by a scientific concept, from the smallest of concepts (quarks and DNA) to the largest (the structure of the universe). The architect's reactions to these concepts range from a more-or-less direct depiction of the idea, such as the sculptural double helixes of the DNA plot and the wave-forms that recur throughout the garden, to less concrete, more poetic elements such as the little functionless building known as The Nonsense, a demonstration of serendipitous design incorporating architectural "found objects" scavenged by Jencks from a project by fellow architect James Stirling. Gandolfi's music is a second level of translation: he responds both to Jencks's designs and to the concepts that inspired them. For example, in "Soliton Waves" (the second movement of the whole), melody and orchestration are used as musical illustration of the concept of waves that interact and transform and yet retain their essential qualities. The final movement of the whole, "The Nonsense," takes the freely, even absurdly matched postmodern architectural materials of its namesake as a cue to explore contrasting high-energy musical passages juxtaposed with jump-cuts. Both the garden itself and Gandolfi's piece are concerned deeply with patterns and their interaction and evolution.

Michael Gandolfi's concept in the present work is open-form: any performance may feature all eleven movements or any different selection, suggesting a walk through a different sequence of "plots." The four movements performed in these concerts take us through "The Quark Walk," "Fractal Terrace," "The Universe Cascade," and "The Jumping Bridge."

The Quark Walk is a short path beside a burn, or stream, connecting the Water Dragon with the Slug Lakes (see photo on this page). (The Jumping Bridge leaps it.) A quark is (as far as we know) the fundamental particle of matter; there are seventeen different kinds, all but one of which (Higgs's boson) has been first hypothesized, then proven to exist through subatomic research. One of the methods of this research is through the use of a supercollider to burst open the nucleus of an atom. Quarks, although they can't themselves be seen, leave evidence of themselves in unique swirling "bubble tracks" in a chamber of hydrogen (sort of like blowing air into gelatin). Jencks's Quark Walk combines with the garden feature The Ultimate Particles of the Year 2000, a celebration of the known or posited quarks, which features sculptural representations, in metal, of individual particles' spiraling bubble tracks. These are mimicked in Gandolfi's rapid, spinning patterns.

"Fractal Terrace" employs a foreground pattern of sixteenth-notes along with larger and smaller versions—longer or shorter note-values and wider intervals—in combination as a shifting mosaic of orchestral color. This is Gandolfi's reaction to a Jencks terrace that transforms gradually from a strict grid adjacent to a (very square) building to a no-less-ordered but more complex, dynamic alteration of shapes as the terrace approaches nature.

Jencks's Universe Cascade is a timeline of the physical universe represented by a sequence of stair-courses zigzagging up a steep hillside overlooking the main house. Each flight of steps (which are opposed to one another in herringbone pattern) ends in a sculptural element representing a point in time in the theorized history of the universe. At the bottom of the hill, below the surface of a small body of water, is the pre-universe, pre-time, pre-space. As the steps ascend, they pass through points of change, too many and too complex to recount here, but including the initial super-rapid expansion (at the time point of 0 plus 10 to the negative 41st power, or a decimal followed by 41 zeros and a 1), through the creation of light (+300,000 years), through the moon's stabilization of the earth (8.55 billion years), to the present/future (13 billion years) beyond the top of the hill. This is probably the most conceptually complex of all of the garden's plots or structures. A "Big Bang" opens the movement, but in its continuation Michael Gandolfi has the very interesting idea of linking the timeline to a timeline of Western music history. Among other quotations, we hear, in chronological order, Gregorian chant, an *Ars Nova* motet, the English round "Sumer is icumen in," and quotations from Dufay, Palestrina, Alessandro Scarlatti, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Berlioz, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Sibelius, Bartók, Miles Davis, and Steve Reich, chosen and joined in such a way that each emerges organically out of the background texture of sustained strings.

The Jumping Bridge (photo above), with The Nonsense one of the most playful structures of the garden, is a design of “fractals that lean against one another.” The Jumping Bridge “jumps over two streams and dives into the ground” and we can assume its path continues under the earth, at least conceptually. This movement incorporates several levels of syncopation with rapid shifts in texture, meter, and pattern groupings that might suggest a duality of flight/movement and groundedness.

Like Jencks’s garden, Gandolfi’s *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* is a work of transformational potential: a garden, like a piece of music, is never the same from one visit to the next, whether or not deliberate intervention on the part of the visitor or designer takes place. Plants grow according to their own rules and schedules; as Jencks puts it, “Gardens, like cities, are whispering games in which the key is to pass on meaning even as it changes. They may reach momentary equilibrium, but should never be pickled. Respect is shown by continuing and transforming the plots.” A piece of music relies, in its finest details, on the indeterminate nature of interpretation of all of the performing participants, an interpretation that must shift each time the work is approached anew, even if by the same players—a kind of seasonal change touches the work as it “grows.”

Robert Kirzinger

Of further interest, here is a complete (current) list of movements for “The Garden of Cosmic Speculation”:

Part 1:

*The Zeroroom*

*Soliton Waves*

*The Snail and the Poetics of Going Slow*

*Symmetry Break Terrace/Black Hole Terrace*

*The Willow Twist*

Part 2:

*The Universe Cascade*

*The Garden of the Senses Suite (in six movements):*

*Allemande (Audition)*

*Courante (Olfaction)*

*Sarabande (Gustation)*

*Passepied (Palpation)*

*Gigue (Vision)/Chorale (The Sixth Sense: Intuition)*

Part 3:

*Fractal Terrace*

*The Jumping Bridge*

*The Quark Walk*

*The Nonsense*