

The King's Alchemist

Version for Violin, Clarinet and Cello

Sally Beamish

I Cantus

Andante misterioso ♩ = 76

Violin

Clarinet in B \flat

Violoncello

7

A

14

poco vib

THE KING'S ALCHEMIST

I	Cantus	1
II	Aqua Vitae	4
III	Pavane	11
IV	Avis Hominis	14

In 2013 I wrote a piece for soprano Shuna Scott Sendall and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, to commemorate the tragic Battle of Flodden Field in 1513. The subject was dark, and the resulting music an outcry against the devastation of war.

While researching the work, I visited Stirling Castle, the home of James IV. James led the Scottish army to disaster, and was the last British monarch to die on the battlefield. At the castle, I gained a vivid picture of the young king – who was highly cultured, with a passionate commitment to his country. He also, unfortunately, had a young man's sense of invincibility.

The court of King James IV was home to some extraordinary individuals, including the brilliant composer Robert Carver; but none so bizarre as John Damian, a European alchemist who charmed the King with promises of creating gold from base metals.

Damian, known to many in the court as the 'French leech', was not only given the post of Abbot of Tongland, Galloway, he also had his experiments, along with copious amounts of 'aqua vitae,' (supposedly for these experiments) financed by the King. Damien also took a hand in court entertainments, and organised the dances for New Year and weddings.

In 1507, possibly to distract the king's attention from his failed attempts at alchemy, Damian tried to fly to France from the battlements of Stirling Castle, and landed in the midden (rubbish tip) below, fortunately only breaking his thigh. He blamed his failure on the fact that he had not been granted the eagles' feathers he ordered, but instead too many hens' feathers, which were attracted to the ground rather than to the sky. There are also accounts of the 'flying abbot' being attacked by birds. John Damian is still recorded at court a few months before the Battle of Flodden.

I was enchanted by this colourful figure, and the trio reflects some aspects of his story. It takes the form of four variations on the French folksong 'L'Homme Armé' – a theme used by Carver in one of his masses; and perhaps appropriate to the court of the high-living James IV, who was fond of holding shooting competitions in the beautiful Great Hall of Stirling Castle.

In the first movement, *Cantus*, the theme is stated as sustained harmonics. The second, *Aqua Vitae*, is an unstable scherzo. There follows a *Pavana* – a courtly dance which originated in Italy. Lastly, after a brief reference to the harmonics of the opening, the fourth movement, *Avis Hominis* ('Bird Man') builds from overlapping ostinati into a counterpoint made from imagined bird calls and the flapping of wings. The piece ends with an unresolved ascent into the stratosphere.

The King's Alchemist, in its original scoring for violin, viola and cello, was commissioned by Britten Sinfonia and Wigmore Hall, with funding from Arts Council England. The first performance was given by Jacqueline Shave, Clare Finnimore and Caroline Dearnley, at Wigmore Hall, London, on 11th December 2013. In this version for violin, clarinet and cello, the clarinet part has been arranged by Kristoffer Hyldig.

The commission was made possible by the generous donations of 21 people as part of Britten Sinfonia's Musically Gifted campaign.

Sally Beamish