

Dark Harbor XXXV and Dark Harbor XI, from *The Strand Settings*

Anders Hillborg

The music of Anders Hillborg never lacks a highly incised character, but one never knows what that character is likely to be until after a piece is finished. The responses of critics, nearly all of whom wax enthusiastic when they hear his music, testify to the vividness of his scores. Here's a sampling of metaphors music journalists have proposed in print to describe various Hillborg compositions: "a seething sonic cauldron," "an aircraft revving up for take-off," "science-fiction robots being excited," "a softly shimmering and slowly changing sonic mist," "the sharpness of the Northern air, as well as a welcome brightness to penetrate the Scandinavian twilight," and — from a critic who gave up trying to explicate a piece — "indescribably wacky." Early in his career the composer assessed where he stood aesthetically:

My origins in rock music probably influenced my musical thinking a great deal; my compositions range from conventional rock music to wild experiments with microtonal structures, and, as opposed to previous generations of composers, maybe, I see no conflict in working with musical concepts so far apart. Experiment and tradition are not separate but are constantly intertwined in the process of composing. Maybe a Stravinskian attitude.

He studied from 1976 to 1982 at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, where he received intensive training in counterpoint, composition, and electronic music. His principal teachers there included Gunnar Bucht, Lars-Erik Rosell, Arne Mellnäs, and Pär Lindgren. These figures, greatly respected in Sweden, not only tended directly to Hillborg's artistic development but also connected him to various strands of modern composition elsewhere: Bucht had

studied with Carl Orff and Goffredo Petrassi, Rosell with Terry Riley and Morton Feldman (who also taught Hillborg directly), and Mellnäs with Boris Blacher and György Ligeti, while Lindgren was a specialist in electronic music and (like his pupil) a rock guitarist.

Hillborg's music has been commissioned by many of the world's leading orchestras, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Philharmonic, and Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, apart from the New York Philharmonic. He has served as composer-in-residence at the Avanti! Festival (Finland), Aspen Music Festival, Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, and NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra.

The Strand Settings reveals Hillborg in a more somber pose than usual, a stance that reflects the half-lit imagery of the four Mark Strand poems that lie at its heart. The third and fourth songs of the cycle, performed here, are drawn from the poet's *Dark Harbor* (1994), a 45-part poem preceded by an introductory "Proem," the entire set shaded by a gauze of mystery, evoking longing and desire, ultimately suggesting a journey from uncertainty to safe harbor, perhaps a consolation

In Short

Born: May 31, 1954, in Sollentuna, Sweden

Resides: in Stockholm

Work composed: 2013, on commission from Carnegie Hall and the New York Philharmonic. *Dark Harbor XXXV* was completed on February 5, 2013, and *Dark Harbor XI* on February 16, 2013; dedicated to Renée Fleming

New York Philharmonic premiere and most recent performance: April 26, 2013, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Renée Fleming, soprano

Estimated duration: ca. 11 minutes

of advancing age. Renée Fleming worked closely with Hillborg in selecting the texts, recalling of the planning stage: “Between Paris, New York, Stockholm, and pretty much anywhere we were in the world we traded a dizzying array of suggestions, poetry, prose, even the utterances of public figures.” Their quest led to Mark Strand. Said Fleming:

His work possesses exactly the qualities I look for in new music — a distinctive “voice,” and depth, but also an immediacy that enables me to feel something in the first read. ... We narrowed down the poems to ones that spoke most suggestively to us in a musical context, with Anders making final choices.

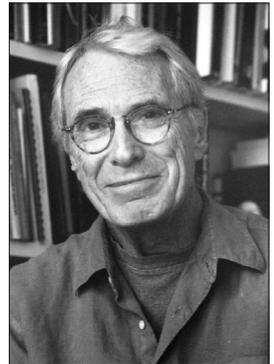
Kisses are the subject of *Dark Harbor XXXV*, although they are “blown out of heaven / melting the moment they land” in a wretched landscape. Yet the imagery is not

all dire. At the beginning, woodwinds wing their way upward, insect-like, in overlapping scales, and pizzicato strings later offer a texture that is at once perky and sinister. *Dark Harbor XI* displays a generally sustained atmosphere enlivened by glistening raindrops from the piano and woodwinds. Here we reach a happier conceit, the remembrance of a moment when lovers felt safe from the elements and from “the sorrow that had been,” with the orchestra drifting off in an E-flat triad that is stable and grounded at last.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes, three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, crotales, orchestra bells, tubular bells, cymbal, snare drum, wind chimes, glass harmonica (consisting of four wine glasses, with at least two players), harp, piano, and strings, in addition to the solo soprano singer.

About the Poet

Mark Strand (1934–2014) was born in Canada but lived mostly in the United States over the course of his peripatetic life. One of the most acclaimed of contemporary poets, he published 12 volumes of poetry of which *Blizzard of One* (1998) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. His other publications include works of prose, children’s books, translations of works by other authors, and monographs on modern visual artists — this last being an area in which he was immersed since the outset of his career, when he contemplated a career as a painter himself. In his final years he ceased writing poetry and returned to making artworks, particularly paper collages. From 1995 to 2000 he was a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and in 1990–91 he served as Poet Laureate of the United States.



Strand’s poetry is often described as dark; the word itself surfaces frequently in his work. He countered that he could find his poems “evenly lit” and confessed, “I’ve often thought I was a rather funny person, that I had a sense of humor. But you wouldn’t know it.” He observed:

In some ways dark or the darkness has always been my freedom because it’s where I can project whatever I want. I can create whatever arrangements of light I feel will satisfy me. But I always begin with nothing in the dark. Or when I’m writing, I begin with a white sheet of paper. White and black are interchangeable in that respect. You can fill the blackness with light and fill the light with dark or with color or with pigment or with words.

Text

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Text by Mark Strand

Dark Harbor XXXV

The sickness of angels is nothing new.
I have seen them crawling like bees,
Flightless, chewing their tongues, not singing.

Down by the bus terminal, hanging out.
Showing their legs, hiding their wings,
Carrying on for their brief term on earth.

No longer smiling; asleep in the shade of each other
They drift into the arms of strangers who step
Into their light, which is the mascara of Eden.

Offering more than invisible love,
Intangible comforts, offering the taste,
The pure erotic glory of death without echoes.

The feeling of kisses blown out of heaven,
Melting the moment they land.

Dark Harbor XI

A long time has passed and yet it seems
Like yesterday, in the midmost moment of summer,
When we felt the disappearance of sorrow,

And saw beyond the rough stone wall
The flesh of clouds, fresh with the scent
Of the southern desert, rise in a prodigal

Overflowing of mildness. It seems like yesterday
When we stood by the iron gate in the center
Of town while the pollen-filled breath

Of the wind drew the shadow of the clouds
Around us so that we could feel the force
Of our freedom while still the captives of dark.

And later when the rain fell and flooded the streets
And we heard the dripping on the porch and the wind
Rustling the leaves like paper, how to explain

Our happiness then, the particular way our voices
Erased all signs of the sorrow that had been,
Its violence, its terrible omens of the end?