

ARBORESCENT

for String Quartet

Christopher Churcher

(2022)



The Title

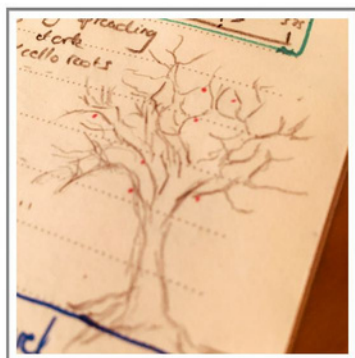
ar·bo·res·cent | \,ä-r-bə-'re-s^ənt \ resembling a tree in properties, growth, structure, or appearance. Late seventeenth-century: from Latin, *arborescere* 'to grow into a tree', and *arbor* 'tree'.

Composer's Note

The notion of arborescence was introduced to me through reading Amanda Gorman's poetry collection, *Call Us What We Carry* (2022).

In a triptych of poems entitled *Arborescent I, II & III*, she uses the sprouting of a tree as a metaphor for humanity: repressed secrets, hidden like roots; distortion from grief and trauma, like a tree warped by winter winds; an inherent desire to 'twist forward all that shoots us through with sun,' towards hope and light.

The basis of the music in *Arborescent* is the notional structure of a tree; as sketched in my notebook (see below). The piece can primarily said to be arborescent in terms of its structure and texture, starting from a place of simplicity and homorhythm; gradually sprouting branches and leaves, as its gestures become more variegated and knotted.



It can also said to be arborescent in the way that the sounds and techniques evolve throughout. A highly resonant, lyrical outset – idiomatic of period string instruments – branches slowly into the resonances of natural and, ultimately, artificial harmonics, typical of more modern string writing. In this way, the music can also be said to branch from the past to the present.

Whilst listening you may imagine exploring a tree; your line of sight moving from the base, to the progressively more verdant branches. Increasing life, vibrancy, and light through vertical ascent.

Performance Notes

This piece is composed envisaging the sound and techniques of the period, gut-string instruments of the Consone Quartet, using classical pitch (A=430Hz).

Stimulated by the Quartet's use of expressive fingerings – through *portamenti* – I have written many of the more lyrical lines of *Arborescent* with the intention of an audible effect of sliding. Whilst – in some places – slides are explicitly notated with lines (see below), this does not need to be at the exclusion of other opportunities for *portamenti*.



Example of portamento indicated in score

Arborescent explores the natural resonances of the open gut strings and, thus, many double, triple and quadruple stops – as well as melodic lines – deliberately use these open strings.

I also have tried to explore the resonant potential of natural harmonics, which are all notated in the same way throughout:



The lower, translucent note, is the pitch which is lightly pressed in order to produce a harmonic, and the upper, stemless note is the sounding pitch. Above the notation, the string on which the harmonic should be played is indicated. In this instance, a harmonic on the G-string of the 'cello produces the pitch of B4.

Some pitches are notated with ties leading onto rests (see below). These are meant in the sense of '*laissez vibrer*.' In other words, the note should not be too short, and allowed to resonate. Especially in the case of pizzicati, which should resonate as much as possible if marked with these ties.



Example of '*laissez vibrer*' tie in score

Talking more holistically, the metronome markings are generally suggestions, rather than exact prescriptions. This is especially true in the case of markings such as the opening, 'Melancholy ♩ = c.56' which should be very free. It is important, however, that sections such as 'Sighing ♩ = 72' (b.11) do not drag, and remain light and buoyant.

The opening of the piece calls for the 'cello, viola and second violin to use mutes.

Arborescent

Christopher Churcher (2004-)

Melancholy, ad lib. (♩ = c.56)

very freely and lyrically

Violin I

mp *p*

Violin II

pppp

Viola

pppp

Violoncello

pppp

sul tasto. hold until end of vln solo

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

7

Vln. I

mp

p echo

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

10

Sighing ♩ = 72

Vln. I

pp

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

p very resonant

mp

pp

p very resonant

mp

pp

14

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

p *very resonant* *mp* *pp* *mp* *p*

p *mp* *pp* *p*

p *mp* *pp* *p*

p *mp* *pp* *p*

18

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

p *pp cresc.* *mp* *pizz.*

p *pp cresc.* *mp* *p pizz.*

p *pp cresc.* *mp* *p pizz.*

p *pp cresc.* *mp* *p*

21

Vln. I arco *mp* pizz. *mp*

Vln. II arco *mp* pizz. *p* arco *mp* pizz. *mp*

Vla. arco *mp* pizz. *p* arco *mp* pizz. *mp*

Vc. arco *mp* pizz. *p* arco *mp* pizz. *mp*

Moving Forward ♩ = 82

25

Vln. I arco *mp warm* *pp* *p* *pp* *arco III*

Vln. II arco *mp warm* *pp sub. poco stacc.* *p* *pp* *pizz.*

Vla. arco *mp warm* *pp sub. poco stacc.* *p* *pp* *pizz.*

Vc. *mp warm* *pp sub.* *p* *pp*

66

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

sf

sf

sf

67

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

poco accel.

cresc. poco a poco

cresc. poco a poco

cresc. poco a poco

cresc. poco a poco

68

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

sf

7

Crystalline ♩ = 60

69

Vln. I

fff

flautando

ppp very delicate

Vln. II

fff

ppp very delicate

Vla.

ppp sub. (glassy)

flautando

ppp sempre

Vc.

fff

ppp very delicate

73

Vln. I

p gentle

Vln. II

pp fleeting

Vla.

Vc.

pp fleeting

8va

3

3

3

3

76

Vln. I

III

rit.

8va

pp

ppp

Vln. II

pp fleeting

ppp

Vla.

Vc.

pp fleeting

ppp

6/4

6/4

6/4

6/4

Very Tender ♩ = 48

19

Violins I and II, Viola, and Cello, measures 78-81. The score is in 6/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measures 78 and 79 feature a melodic line in the Violins and Viola, with the Cello providing a harmonic accompaniment. Measures 80 and 81 show a shift in texture, with the Violins and Viola playing sustained chords and the Cello continuing its accompaniment. Dynamics include *pp* (pianissimo) and *ppp* (pianississimo). Fingerings and bowings are indicated throughout.

duration: approx 4'