

# the dance of death

for piano trio  
(2002)

Strindberg's play *The Dance of Death* depicts a husband (the Captain) and wife (Alice) locked in a loveless marriage. Alice's cousin Kurt visits the couple. Horrified by the emotional malaise pervading their household, Kurt initially attempts to be an optimistic moderator for them. However, Alice and the Captain enlist Kurt in their ruthless scheming against one another and make him their battlefield.

Director Karen Kirkham commissioned this score, and our numerous and lengthy discussions helped shape it. The intimate nature of the play called for an intimate ensemble. We wanted the instrumentation and music to reflect the *fin-de-siècle* decadence of the play's setting and tone. Obviously, the piano trio affords the possibility of linking each character with a musical instrument. I extended these connections to the music as well. Alice and the Captain are represented by the violin and cello respectively. Each part has its own intervallic and rhythmic qualities. The violin and cello melodies interlock in a waltz, but not comfortably because the typical waltz rhythm has been skewed differently for each instrument. Only when the piano enters does the music take on a more comfortable, steady lilt, and only temporarily.

The present one-movement work served as the overture for the play in the Jean Cocteau Repertory Theatre production. Episodes were extracted from this overture to provide underscoring for the action. As a whole, the overture depicts the play's complete plot musically. The eerie beginning and end of the piece illustrates the alienation and frigidity of the couple; the violin-piano duo depicts the plot between Alice and Kurt against the Captain; and the extended cello solo portrays the pantomime in which the Captain, suspecting their alliance against him, dismantles various symbolic props of the home's decor in alternating fits of rage and regret. By the end, little has changed between the unhappy couple.

Robert Pound (2002/2013)

*dedicated to Karen Lordi-Kirkham with gratitude for her friendship and artistry*

duration: 13 minutes