

When We Three Meet

(1999)

(in ten sections performed as one continuous movement)

- i.** *foul is fair* (trio) **ii.** *scherzo: upon the heath (reprise)* (clarinet, bassoon)
iii. *fog and filthy air* (clarinet) **iv.** *hurly burly's battle* (clarinet, piano)
v. *thunder, lightning* (piano) **vi.** *done, lost and won* (bassoon, piano)
vii. *thunder and rain* (piano) **viii.** *set of sun* (bassoon)
ix. *scherzo: upon the heath* (clarinet, bassoon) **x.** *fair is foul* (trio)

Notes on the Work

The uncommon combination of instruments that this commission required certainly influenced my choice of extra-musical themes for this work, and the fact that the piece was to be for a trio automatically recalled the opening scene of *Macbeth*. The title crystallized instantly thereafter.

The title, in turn, suggested a very general concept for the shape of the piece and the function of the ensemble in it. The opening scene of *Macbeth* depicts the parting of the three witches, as if we have just discovered them at the end of the witching hour. So I decided to treat the work as a divergence of the three musical parts into duos and solos that eventually converge again in the finale. Thus the opening and closing sections (*i. foul is fair* and *x. fair is foul*) are points at which the three instruments' parts complement one another in a tightly interdependent unit, as if we were watching the three witches in their conjuring or even in a bizarre, shadowy dance, arms interlocked. As the instruments go their several ways, the piece extends to the extreme registers. The piano carries the work to the very highest register and links the very high register to the lowest register. From there, the convergence of the three parts brings the work back to the middle register in which it began, another way in which the three meet.

Formally, the work is a typical sonata cycle turned inside-out. I took this opportunity to re-explore those familiar old forms (sonata-allegro, ternary, binary and rondo), but, rather than beginning with an expansive sonata-form first movement, it seemed natural to make the beginning and end of the work the trio (usually the middle of a sonata's third movement). This tied in nicely with the witches-dance scenario and provided interesting possibilities for the shaping of the rest of the work. The usual first movement becomes the climactic, middle section of registral extremes (*iv. hurly burly's battle* – *vii. done lost and won*). As if held to a fun-house mirror, the other movements become diminutive in comparison to the opening and closing trio: the light, fast rondo which commonly ends a sonata becomes the clarinet solo (*iii. fog and filthy air*), and the slow ternary movement which is typically the sonata's introverted second movement becomes the bassoon solo (*viii. set of sun*).

