



Sympho's ARCO is a modern creation myth that speaks of the human condition; it is at once a musical exploration of an architectural icon and a sonic voyage through time and space. The music is a journey in the landscape of the human soul, where we witness the soul's evolution in the place where the struggle toward divinity and grace finds its battleground.

Rich with metaphor, the title of the piece is taken from an Italian word whose meaning simultaneously refers to a "bow" as a weapon, or as a tool used to play a stringed instrument, and to the element of architecture, an "arch" or an "arc". In architecture, the arch represents a gateway often symbolic of the transition between two worlds, or a passageway where one moves through the process of transformation. An arc is also a section of a circle, which is a universal symbol for the sacred and divine. In the history of science, circles represent the infinite nature of energy. In mathematics, circles are symbolic of perfection.

Created in four sections, ARCO travels through the experiences of human development, investigating the building blocks of existence, the search for meaning and purpose along multiple emotional, spiritual, and psychological paths.

Written and musically directed by three contemporary composers, the language of ARCO is the convergence of these distinct voices, creating a visionary and dynamic soundscape reflective of the notion of human transformation and the parts of the symbolic circle that embodies the infinite inclusivity of the universe: creation, reincarnation, resurrection, and the continual process of redefinition. The piece unfolds the story of the formation of the self identity as matter forming from the void, following fragments of memories without awareness, through the process of overcoming aggression and learning the lessons that span the arc of a life. Utilizing the architecture and history of the Park Armory with site-specific intention, ARCO moves from beginning to end, at times iconographically calling forth the idea of the Ark in the biblical flood as a symbol of safety, while also encountering the cavernous space of nothingness from which something emerges.

The music is an amalgamation of time periods and styles from Western and Eastern Classical traditions. Old and new, each piece is contextualized within the grand journey devised by Fowler, Haas, and Yoon. The evening begins with a performance of Arvo Pärt's epic *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, and weaves its way through music that is both real and imagined, much of it in fragmented form, drawn from the works of composers ranging from Perotin and Monteverdi to Beethoven and Byrd.

Each section has been created and is musically directed by one or more primary composers endeavoring to compose music for Sympho's ranged orchestral forces and electronica, while additionally selecting separate pre-composed pieces for inclusion, or inviting the other

composers to create simultaneous voices or effects within their own music. The result is a multi-layered sound experience where perspectives overlap and the audience is enveloped by the experience of hearing three or even four compositions in concert with each other. Performing composers Paul Fowler, Bora Yoon, and Sympho Artistic Director Paul Haas are sculptors of sound whose work sonically and visually accentuates the unique spatial design of the Park Avenue Armory's vast Drill Hall. ARCO, Sympho's newest concert event, features the 53-member Sympho orchestra, vocal quartet New York Polyphony, and bass-baritone Charles Perry Sprawls.

In the first section, directed by Paul Haas, humankind's most sorrowful and abandoned state is exposed, revealing the fragility of the human soul in its unevolved beginnings as both hopelessly lost but also haunted by the seeds of memory and the notion of redemption. The audience's spatial awareness emerges from a small point in the center of the Drill Hall, expanding gradually to include the entire length, breadth, and height of this enormous space.

The second section, directed by Paul Fowler, employs the second movement of Beethoven's 7th Symphony as both a point of departure and a guide. Using the most learned and rigorous of musical forms - imitation, canon, fugue and passacaglia - Fowler's music witnesses mankind as he forms his singular identity, his perspective and his world, Interrupted twice by the divine (*deus ex machina*), embodied by William Byrd's *Sanctus* and *Ave Verum Corpus* as sung by New York Polyphony. As divine grace pours from the balconies, man turns to covetousness and militantly protects that which he has created and accumulated. A foreboding passacaglia is superimposed with fugal and imitative themes, leading to a march-like conclusion.

The third section begins with the explosion of Fowler's music, extending into the far reaches of the Armory, and the singular theme of the previous section is bombarded with ghostly apparitions of works performed in the Armory's distant and not-so-distant past. While moving towards its inevitable violent end, this soundscape is interrupted by something akin to a classical *intermezzo*: a musical battle between the warlike ego, personified in Charles Perry Sprawls, and the ecstatic realized self, sung and played by Bora Yoon. Haas composes and directs the warlike sections with bass-baritone, in conversation with Yoon's original performances. In opposition, these two voices personify the evolution of a being: the bass-baritone extols the power of the will and the strength of the ego, the soprano exalts the virtues of wisdom and grace. The ego, temporarily triumphant, leads us back into the terrifying conclusion of Fowler's music of aggression and power, but during the height of violence, the music shifts audibly into the fourth and final section of epiphany and ecstasy. An outburst of joy and wonder, by Haas, leads into a transportive realm of musical memory and transcendence composed and performed by Yoon.

Using binaural frequencies, soprano voice, looped electronics and sound design, Yoon creates a phantasmic sound journey in which hope overcomes her sister emotion, despair. Yoon embodies the appearance of the dove, flying over the Ark as a sign of salvation, and the freedom from the need for safety when the human being achieves its own divine evolution. In the distance, New York Polyphony sings William Byrd's *Agnus Dei* as an echo of the divine voice.

As it draws to its close, ARCO becomes an exploration of music within space, and space within music – serving as an analogy to the soul in its realized state, with a knowledge of where, what, and ultimately why it is.

ARCO arrives at its end in a hushed ecstasy, encompassing the vastness of the entire Drill Hall and including music of multiple times and places. Haas' music envisions a state of enlightenment and pure potential, known as Samadhi in Indian traditions but described using different names in all the world's holy books. Having traced the lines of the arc or shape through which the archetypal life traverses and takes form, the evening's journey culminates in a meditative silence and stillness that invites the audience to inhabit a moment of contemplation.

*-- by Ruth Pongstaphone*

*Illustration is of the arc found in the visual mathematics within music's intervals and ratios in a scale. From [Harmonograph: A Visual Guide to the Mathematics of Music](#) by Anthony Ashton*