

Robin Ilmar Miller

PIANO RECITAL

5:00PM SUNDAY 28 SEPTEMBER

Ilmar *Shadow out of Time*
 (A tone poem after H.P. Lovecraft)

Medtner *Ein Idyll*
 Prélude (Hymne)

∞ INTERVAL ∞

Beethoven *Appassionata*

This performance is being live-streamed at
<https://youtube.com/live/COZNRES6yAM>

ROBIN ILMAR MILLER (1981–)



I was born in Edinburgh to Irish and Estonian parents, though the Millers are originally from Dundee. Both sides of my family are strongly musical, and I grew up listening to Beethoven, Chopin, and Rachmaninov. I started playing the piano at about age seven, when my older sister very casually asked, “Would you like to learn the piano, Robin?”

Sporadic lessons with my dad followed (my sister moved to Spain shortly after, and I hope she’s able to catch tonight’s performance online!) before my mum insisted that both I and my brother needed

a proper teacher. However, ill health in my teens put something of a dampener on my pianistic ambitions. Focusing on composition and history instead, I read music at Glasgow University, finishing in 2003 with a Masters degree, the firm understanding that I was not, in fact, an academic, and also a wife, Rhiannon.

My pianistic ambitions were rekindled following our move to Perth. My old upright piano developed an extensive crack in the tuning board, and this provided the opportunity to upgrade. Purchasing a grand piano for the first time started me down a virtuous cycle of sounding better, which made me practice more, which in turn made it sound even better...

The early 2010s featured an increase in compositional and pianistic activity, which was, regrettably, cut short by further ill health. In 2012 I became the organist of this church, playing most Sundays and with the occasional choir.

It was at this point that I adopted the use of my middle name “Ilmar” for compositional purposes. This was simply because there was already another “Robin Miller” making music on the internet.* I did, very briefly, consider suing, but I guess it is his name too...

* A quick search when preparing this programme reveals there are now *two* people using my name for music online. Neither of them are me.

SHADOW OUT OF TIME

A TONE POEM AFTER H.P. LOVECRAFT

H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) was an American author mostly active in the 1920s and 30s and now remembered as one of the fathers of Horror. I first read his writing around the turn of the millennium and was immediately enchanted by the tone. Many of Lovecraft's stories were originally published in a magazine called *Weird Tales* and weird they are, full of cosmic horror with themes of devolution, knowledge as a curse, madness, and otherness.

Lovecraft is often experimental in an attempt to express the unnameable (in one story an alien "colour" descends to earth and wreaks havoc). They're also very dated, with his understanding of science, both physical and psychological, being a product of his era. Crucially, though, Lovecraft understood that what is *hinted*, what is *suggested*, is far more horrible and terrifying than what is seen. Lovecraft created a space – a shudderingly vast and terrible space – in which my imagination was sparked.

The inspiration for this tone poem came from one of his last stories, *The Shadow Out of Time*, first published in *Amazing Stories* in 1936. It's a longer tale by his standards, running to about 53 pages, but the music concerns itself with only a narrow section towards the end.

The backstory to the music details the tribulations of Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, an economics professor in New England. He undergoes a psychiatric event where, suddenly, he suffers complete amnesia and something like a new personality takes over. Then, just as suddenly, five years later his

original personality resurfaces with a five-year gap in memory.

Nathaniel is haunted by dreams and strange alien, quasi-memories. Being a learned man, he does the logical thing and retrains as a psychologist to research his ordeal. Discovering a handful of similar cases, he publishes reports of his experience and dreams in the scientific journals of the day. In these he includes sketches of masonry bearing alien hieroglyphs which are a recurring feature –and receives a letter from a mining engineer and amateur psychologist who claims to have found, deep in the Australian desert, ancient blocks of stone bearing these same markings.

An expedition is set up and Nathaniel travels to Australia to investigate. Was his amnesia the product of an ancient civilisation reaching across the gulf of time and transposing his consciousness with one of their own?

The tone poem, in five parts, is concerned with the events and terror of this expedition.

I. Shifting Sand

Andante – Più mosso – Andante

We open in the vast, red desert of north-western Australia. Though the warm and languid the opening already hints at the wrongness to come. While the character of the work is broadly tonal, we already build in significant dissonance. The $\frac{5}{4}$ time also serves to unsettle our expectations.

The pace picks up, and there is some expenditure of effort and energy, but to no great success. The desert is vast and trackless, and while the expedition finds some scattered blocks of masonry, they are without sense or context.

II. The Burning Moon

Poco Allegro, Agitato

Lovecraft had a decidedly unhappy relationship with the moon, and it features negatively in many of his stories. Here it provides the backdrop for our first piece of action and is described variously as “leprous”, “evil”, “fungoid” and “burning” – a far cry from the gentleness we might associate with musical *moonlight*. Unable to sleep, Nathaniel embarks on a solitary night-time wander; in a very unquiet state of mind he feels drawn to an “eldritch rendezvous”. And, as he walks, waking and dreaming merge, and he is not himself.

This section is much more rhythmical, as I try and embody the pull and the agitation. The form is quite repetitive – while we are pulled in our wandering, we don’t yet know the destination. The intensity builds as we approach this unseen goal, and we arrive at the first technical challenge for the performer as the music splits into three parts: a bass melody with right-hand accompaniment augmented by incessant repeated b-flats in the middle.

III. Elder City

Maestoso – Allegro, sempre agitato – Moderato (Metà movimento) – Allegro – Moderato (Metà movimento) – Allegro

The composition of the first draft of Shadow Out of Time took about four years.

I had a very clear idea of what I wanted; I knew exactly what how many sections there needed to be and what character each section had (for example, I knew right from the start that the fourth section would consist of repeated hammering chords to represent the chase), but I could not transition from The Burning Moon to the Elder City! I remember getting totally and utterly stuck here. I kept coming back to it every few months for several years before I found the answer. In the end it was very simple: bare, resonating, open chords, punctuated by crashing dissonance.

We have been led, under moonlight and through the desert, to the ruins of a vast, alien city. Unspeakably old. Grand. Terrifying. Wrong. And Nathaniel knows it. He has been here before.

Musically, this is comprised of several subsections trying to capture the multitude of emotions as we traverse this subterranean remnant. We pause in awe at the grandeur of it. We creep through furtively. We stride with a sense of dread.

In the end it builds to a climax as Nathaniel finds a terrible, terrible proof. A proof that he is not mad, he really has been here before, millions of years ago. The universe is much vaster than he thought, full of weird and terrible creatures. His mind was transposed with another; his dreams are not dreams but memories...

Of course, this is interrupted. Quite predictably, these ruins are not empty, and we hear an “alien whistling” which heralds the inevitable chase.

IV. Flight

Presto e molto terrorizzato

This tone poem should, on the whole, be thought of musically rather than narratively. Yes, there is a story, which progresses, but at each stage I'm trying to evoke the mood and feelings rather than depict a representation of each scene or action. However, in this section I wanted to specifically depict the "alien whistling" or "piping" that is all that is heard of our pursuer – which remains always unseen. How do you whistle on a piano? and an alien, out-of-this-world whistling at that?

My answer was this, very dissonant, chord. Right at the top of the piano, it is only ever heard with these exact notes, cutting across the tonal structure, sometimes quiet and distant, other times hammered with imperative urgency. It is often answered by a lower, dissonant chord, representing Nathaniel startling when he hears it.



Alien piping



Nathaniel startling

What follows is two minutes of pure terror. The first section represents the running, then this is followed by the other-worldly wind, always punctuated with the daemon piping and Nathaniel's jumping panic. The two ideas then merge into an unholy frenzy and we stumble headlong back into the desert, finally able to catch our breath.

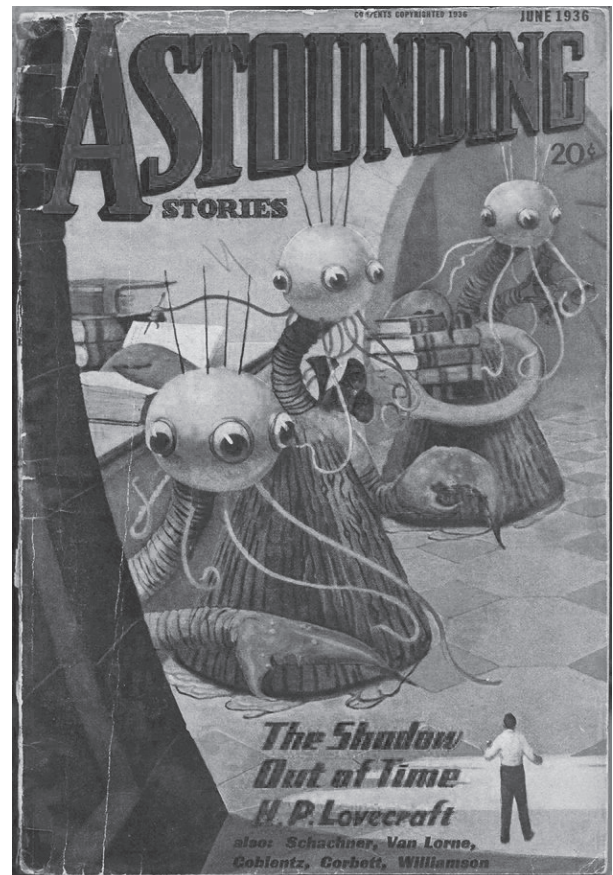
V. Doubt

Andante

With the dawn we return to camp, bloodied and torn. We have lost our flashlight and we have lost the proof. Worse, or perhaps better, the wind and sand have swallowed the ruins and no trace of them can be found.

Nathaniel, his nerve finally broken, cannot continue and takes the long boat back to America.

Musically, this is a section of echoes. We return, briefly, to the warmth of the desert and then the slow rolling of the boat, haunted by the remembrance of the piping and the terror. We conclude in stillness and in doubt. Perhaps we are, after all, just mad.



NIKOLAI MEDTNER (1879-1951)

A Russian composer of romantic piano music, Medtner lived and wrote at a time when the romanticism of the 19th century had been largely abandoned in favour of the modernist trends of the early 20th century. The publication of the *Romantic Sketches* quotes the Daily Telegraph calling him “Ein russischer Brahms”, and most of his compositions were completed in Russia before his exile in the early years of the Soviet Union. After exile he spent about ten years touring before settling in Britain in 1935. He is, perhaps, the most criminally underappreciated composer in the history of music.

If I was to give a one sentence introduction to Medtner it would be “a more introspective Rachmaninov”. Indeed, Rachmaninov was a lifelong friend, mentor, and champion of Medtner. It was Rachmaninov who organised the 1924 tour that extracted Medtner from the Soviet Union, and he considered Medtner the better composer.

My association with Medtner begins with my grandfather, Ernst Öpik (1893-1985), who briefly attended Moscow Conservatory in 1910, which is the same year that Medtner stopped teaching there. Did they meet then? I don't know. It seems quite possible. Or did perhaps his inability to study with Medtner contribute to his leaving after a short time? Whether or not they met, Medtner became and remained his favourite composer and influenced his own composition.

What this meant for me was that, whilst at university, I uncovered a small cache of Medtner sheet music languishing in my

parents' attic. Although I've acquired quite a lot more music since that time, both the pieces I'm playing today come via my grandfather.

Medtner is infamously difficult to sight-read. As a nineteen-year-old I took them to the piano, opened Opus 1, number 1 (a fabulously beautiful piece of music) and got absolutely nowhere. The opening bars have three distinct, conflicting rhythms spaced between two hands and it made no sense at all. So having been liberated from a tea chest in an attic these books languished on my shelf for nearly another 20 years.

Being primarily a pianist, and not an organist, I have a tradition in this church of playing piano music for my voluntaries during Advent and Lent. This allows more time at the organ to prepare something special for Christmas and Easter. During these seasons I want quieter, reflective music and, from time to time, I like to play new music. This led me, in Advent 2019, back to my bookshelf and back to Medtner.

Unlike my previous experience (when my question was “what is this?”), this time I was looking for something very specific. I found it in the Idyll which is the first of the pieces I'm playing tonight. I was completely blown away by it. Here was music that spoke not just to my head, or my heart, but reached my very soul. I inflicted it, probably quite badly played, on the congregation during that Advent, and then during the pandemic lockdown that followed I listened voraciously to every recorded album of Medtner's music I could lay my hands on.

Ein Idyll (ИДИЛЛИЯ) from Three Arabesques (Три Арабески) (Op. 7, No. 1)
Allegretto tranquillo e dolce

An early work begun in 1901, when Medtner was just 21, this is a very dark piece despite its gentleness. The Berlin Philharmonic website describes an Idyll thus: “The Idyll embodies the longing for a simple, peaceful life far removed from the tensions of modernity. In music and art it symbolizes a better world, idealistic and yet fragile.” In Medtner’s piece that “longing” is infused with melancholy.

Imagine, if it is helpful, a quiet stream through an ancient forest. In the world above the sun is shining, but here it breaks through the canopy only in patches. Walking beside the flowing water, two lovers are meeting for the last time. Not, I think, a forbidden love; but fate has conspired to separate them. Perhaps, in the morning, one of them is leaving for war, maybe never to return. It is a tender, fragile meeting, arrested with moments of ardent passion.

Prélude (Hymne) from Romantic Sketches for the Young (Op. 54, Bk IV, No. 1)
Allegretto tranquillo

A much later work, dating from the early 1930s (just before he settled in Britain), this Prélude is one of eight short pieces intended to be more accessible and more playable. And, by Medtner’s standards, they are fairly straightforward. Despite having the same “*Allegretto tranquillo*” tempo marking as the preceding piece, it is quite different, with the C major key providing an uplifting contrast.

It opens with a figuration that wouldn’t feel out of place in Bach’s work: a rising bass arpeggio (which returns throughout

the piece), with right-hand broken chords. Medtner’s romanticism quickly asserts itself in the form of a luscious, lyrical melody.

Having presented the theme, we go on a bit of a journey. It reminds me, albeit on a much smaller scale, of the search for Joy in Beethoven’s ninth symphony, which is a journey down many different paths before the famous Ode. Here, if we follow the subtitle “Hymne”, Medtner is taking us in search of the divine. In the space of a page, we travel to strange keys, and the music becomes faster and more intense, leading to the apparent climax. It’s intense but somewhat shallow, unsatisfying.

Almost as if realising that we’ve taken a wrong direction, everything is toned down and as if a veil is lifted in the stillness, we reprise the opening theme – Ah! it is quite possibly the most beautiful thing you’ll hear all week. Many of the dynamics are inverted, contrasting with the first statement, the soft beginnings contrasting the strong original, and where theme dies away the first time, in the reprise Medtner builds it further to new, profound depths. It is here, almost at the end, that is the emotional heart of the piece. For a moment we can almost believe that the divine is within touching distance.

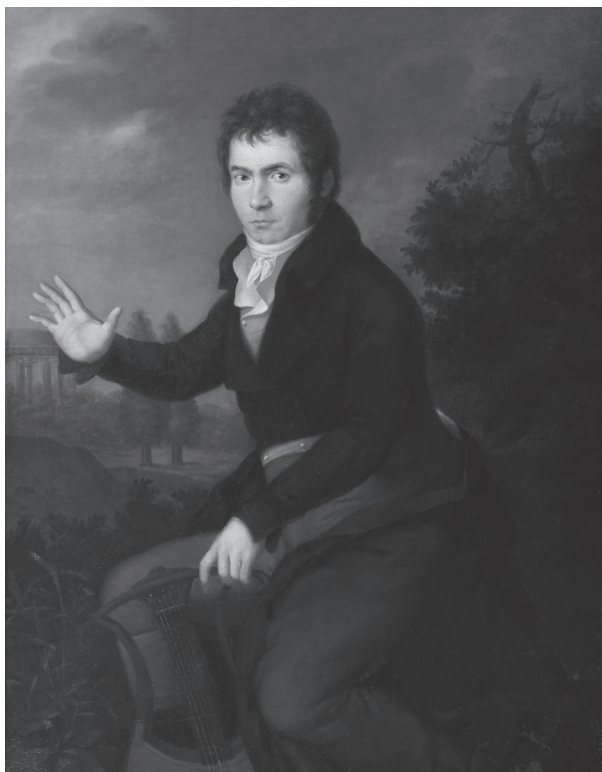
The Prélude finishes gently, tenderly, with the impression – the echo – of church bells.

My teacher, Gavin, has been on at me to detach more from the music while practicing. The emotion must come through the music, rather than weigh down the performer. “You can’t feel everything all the time, it is too much!” he says. And for the most part this has been successful (and helpful), but not here. The more I’ve practiced, and the better I’ve played this, the more intense and emotional it’s become.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

SONATA NO. 23 IN F MINOR, OP 57

“APPASSIONATA”



Until I was about 11 years old, I shared a bedroom, with bunk beds, with my brother. And, as brothers do, we fought. I wanted the light off at night, but he wanted the light on. A compromise was reached with the door to the hall open and the light on there. The effect of this, or possibly the real purpose, was that we could hear our dad playing the piano in the evenings after we'd gone to bed.

This was hugely influential on me as a kid and definitely inspired me to play. One of the things he would play was the slow movement of the *Appassionata*. Not all of it – just the theme and the first two variations. Not always the most technically perfect

performance, but with real, meaningful expression. The second variation is a favourite of his, and indeed mine. It's an extraordinary oasis of calm at the very centre of this otherwise tempestuous work and quite possibly the most beautiful thing you'll hear all week. With a bit of luck, he has made it to tonight's performance: Dad, this one is for you.

1. *Allegro Assai – Più Allegro*

Beethoven composed this work at about the same time as his 5th Symphony, and I am often struck by parallels between the two. The keys (f minor here and c minor in the symphony) are very closely related, and the tempo markings of the first two movements of each are quite similar.* In this first movement there is also a prominent role for the “fate motif” from the symphony:



Appassionata bar 10



Symphony no. 5 bars 1-2

Rather than this being an intentional quotation I think rather that Beethoven, like us lesser mortals, got tunes and motifs stuck in his head. Both first movements also

* Here we have *Allegro Assai* which is “extremely lively”, while the symphony is *Allegro con brio*: “lively with brilliance”. Both slow movements are directed *Andante con moto* – “at a walking pace with movement”.

feature an economy of ideas where motivic and thematic fragments are developed and reused in different contexts throughout the movement.

This is music of contrasts, with moments of delicacy juxtaposed with sharp, forceful accents. We engage the full dynamic range of the piano, in places switching for *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* in the space of a beat, and the full compass of the piano that Beethoven had available to him. This not safe music, but wild and unpredictable; yet it is underpinned by a strong formal structure.

This follows a clearly defined *sonata form*: exposition is followed by development, followed by recapitulation, and then a coda – just as you might see in Mozart. But none of that prepares you for the violence, or the drama, or the grandeur of the *Appassionata*.

Here are some things to listen out for:

- The use of the Neapolitan Chord. The opening gesture is immediately repeated a semi-tone higher with the f minor chord transforming into the out-of-key G_b major. While not an uncommon device in works of the period, it is especially prominent here.
- After the lyrical, major key, second theme we're ambushed by a third theme, a boiling tempestuous assault in A_b minor, a key in which every note is flat.
- This movement features two cadenza-like passages: the first leading us back from development to recapitulation, and the second, much longer, passage heralding the faster *Più Allegro* second in the coda.
- The reprise of the opening theme is accompanied by an added bassline of throbbing repeated notes while the right

hand has the challenging privilege of playing both parts of the original.

- Extended Coda. The ending section takes up nearly a quarter of the whole movement and becomes a distinct and important part of the structure of the work. It features further development, a quasi-improvisatory cadenza, before stepping up the tempo for the final page and a half. This results in a tremendous ratcheting up of the passion and drama before Beethoven pulls one last surprise: the music dies away to nothingness at the end almost as if Beethoven is saying “nothing happened, nothing to see here”.

2. *Andante con moto*

The slow movement is structured as a theme with a set of variations. A form that Beethoven worked with occasionally throughout his life, this set is one of the more straightforward. Variation form is a means for extending a short, self-contained, often song-like piece of music into a larger scale work. In a song you can repeat the music with different words, but in instrumental music the tune has to be varied to keep the music interesting over several repeats. This can be used to showcase dramatically different moods from the same base (see Beethoven's *Diabelli* variations for an extreme example of this) or, as in this case, to preserve the basic character of the theme over an extended period.

For the majority of his variation pieces Beethoven employs a quite rigid system of preserving the bar count and harmonic progression while adapting the details. In this movement he employs a very logical progression of *double*, where the note values get progressively shorter, and raising the

pitch. The theme and first variation are in the bass, the second variation is an octave higher, and the third moves an octave above that.

Compare the first bar of each section:

The image displays four musical staves, each representing the first bar of a different section. The first staff, labeled 'Theme', is in bass clef and 2/4 time, showing a simple melody with chords. The second staff, labeled 'Var. 1', is also in bass clef and 2/4 time, featuring off-beat chords. The third staff, labeled 'Var. 2', is in treble clef and 2/4 time, with a more active melody. The fourth staff, labeled 'Var. 3', is in treble clef and 2/4 time, showing a complex, fast-moving melody.

The theme has a texture reminiscent of a *chorale* or hymn, with slow chords supporting a very simple tune. It is in two halves, with each half repeated. The first half is very settled but punctuated by a very Beethovenian accented chord in the middle, while the second half builds to a climax before dying away. The structure of the theme is clearly discernible in the variations.

The first variation is characterised by off-beat left-hand chords increasing the motion without changing the character of the

tune. In the second variation the chordal texture gives way to an exquisite, flowing figuration. The third variation is the most elaborate, a figured accompaniment with a re-emergence of the chordal theme.

After the final third variation there is a restatement of the theme but without repeats. Even though it is quite audibly a reprise of the opening Beethoven can't help himself from a little bit more variation, most notably alternating the bass and treble registers. Right at the end we have, perhaps, the most striking feature of the movement: where we expect a calm, settled finish the music is interrupted with a pair of dissonant diminished chords which pull us directly, first gently and then imperatively, into the turmoil of the finale.

It's worth noting what *isn't* here: there is no minor variation, no change in tempo, no move beyond the doubling of note values, and at just three variations it's among the shortest variation count of any his works. Almost ironically, Beethoven's specific use of variation here produces a consistency of mood and feel that is quite unusual in his extended works.

3. *Allegro ma non troppo – Presto*

The *finale* of the *Appassionata* is an astonishing movement combining a boiling onslaught of *moto perpetuo* semi-quavers with an array of sharp motivic devices. I'm always struck by the tension between the sameness of the continuous figuration and the melodic devices that emerge from it.

The tempo direction is "Lively but not too much" and my temptation is always to push it. Like the first movement this, for all its logic and structure, is not safe music. It is daring, tumultuous, breathless. Tonight's performance will definitely be on the fast side, *ma* (hopefully) *non troppo*.

Like the first movement this is also in *sonata form*, but there are several notable features of this. There is no lyrical second subject, where the first movement reaches A_♭ major and sings; the finale moves to c minor and continues with material that is a development of the first subject. The repeat structure is, I believe, completely unique. In Mozart's music the exposition would be repeated before leading into the development and recapitulation which would both be repeated together. In later music, only the first section would be repeated and this pattern is common in Beethoven. Here, however, the exposition is played *once*, but repeats are directed for the development and recapitulation.

In the middle of the repeat, leading from the development back to the opening material, there is another quasi-improvisatory cadenza. However,

this could not be more different from the character of the first movement. Instead of furious virtuosity, the music breaks down, coming to an almost complete stop. A magical oasis of calm where we can catch our breath again before the plunge.

After the repeat we have another coda, lengthy in terms of bar count, but as the tempo increases to a full *presto* it flashes by in moments.

It is normal to breathe in phrases. Not just singers and wind players, but string players and piano players too, will subconsciously breathe in phrases. This coda is where I learned that you don't have to, and you can breathe at any time! In my mind the last page and a half is all one big phrase – while I've never passed out from holding my breath it has, at times, been close.

St John the Baptist Scottish Episcopal Church

SC011398

SPECIAL THANKS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has made this evening possible:

Members of the congregation here, especially:

- David for printing the flyers
- Rhiannon for designing the flyers and programme
- Joyce and her assistants for providing refreshments
- Alan for running the live stream
- everyone who helped distribute fliers!

All my teachers down the years, especially Gavin who has worked patiently with me over the last year to prepare this programme.

Edinburgh Piano Movers, for the hire of the piano.

My parents for their support and inspiration.

My daughter Zoe, who has had to put up with a lot.

Most especially, my wife Rhiannon who has been unwavering in her support for me (and put up with even more!) over the last 25 years.

ROBIN ILMAR MILLER
SEPTEMBER 2025

This is a charity concert to support continued music making in this church
(don't get me started on the problems we've had with the organ!).

If you have enjoyed tonight's performance then please do give generously
as you leave.