

# The Ancestral Mousetrap

(Five Poems of Russell Edson)

*for singing string quartet*

David Reminick

(2014)

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I. Killing the Ape

II. The Old Woman's Breakfast

III. Oh My God, I'll Never Get Home

IV. Bringing a Dead Man Back into Life

V. The Ancestral Mousetrap

# Performance Notes

ST = sul tasto

SP = sul ponticello

MST = molto sul tasto (on the fingerboard)

MSP = molto sul ponticello

X → Y = smoothly transition from the first indicated technique to the second

..... = ricochet

∩ = fingernail pizz


⊕ = dampen string


⊗ = “dead stroke” - accented, dry, poco SP, slight overpressure


⌌ = overpressure

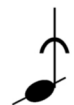
⊙ = circular bowing


pizz.

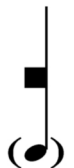
 = muted pizzicato

 = scratch-tone/pitchless

 = behind bridge

 = behind bridge, on winding of string

 = using the wood of the bow, tap the string to produce the indicated pitch (approximate).

 = undertone



= overpressure clef - place the bow over the fingerboard where you would normally stop the string to produce the indicated pitch(es), applying overpressure. The resultant sound should be at the same pitch, but with a jagged, perforated tone.

The performers are asked to sing throughout the piece. Classical vocal training is not required, and the musicians should feel free to sing in whatever manner feels most comfortable, regardless of their level of training.

## Program Note

*The Ancestral Mousetrap* is a setting of five prose poems by the “godfather of the American prose poem” Russell Edson. Edson is known for his short fantastical narratives about absurd, grotesque, impossible situations. His writing is tragic, hilarious, and spiritual, often all at once. It is also devoutly open-ended, offering no simple meanings, no well-worn metaphors. Throughout his catalogue, Edson confronts real yet intangible aspects of human thought and emotion, unearthing truths that are somehow at once profound and unnamable. While my settings reflect my personal understanding of Edson’s poetry, I’ve done my best to allow his words to remain open-ended – to resist the urge to directly portray his imagery in music (is that even possible with Edson’s work?). I spent a great deal of time reading and re-reading the poems, allowing Edson’s writing to elicit musical images from my subconscious. The job of the musicians in this piece is especially involved, as they sing the texts (sometimes in four-part harmony) while simultaneously playing dense and rhythmic music on their instruments.

## **The Ancestral Mousetrap: texts** by Russell Edson (1935-2014)

### **I. Killing the Ape**

They were killing the ape with infinite care; not too much or it runs past dying and is born again.

Too little delivers a sick old man covered with fur.

. . . Gently gently out of hell, the ape climbing out of the ape.

### **II. The Old Woman's Breakfast**

The old woman at breakfast, she is so weary she hardly tells herself from the porridge she eats.

She can't tell if she spoons the porridge into herself, or herself into the porridge . . .

The walls melt, and her mind seems to float all over the room like a puff of dust slapped out of a pillow.

She falls into the porridge, she becomes part of it.

She is a porridge of melting walls; her bones no longer different than her flesh, her eyes no longer different than her nostrils.

. . . She begins to spill over the edge of the table . . .

### **III. Oh My God, I'll Never Get Home**

A piece of a man had broken off in a road. He picked it up and put it in his pocket.

As he stooped to pick up another piece he came apart at the waist.

His bottom half was still standing. He walked over on his elbows and grabbed the seat of his pants and said, legs go home.

But as they were going along his head fell off. His head yelled, legs stop.

And then one of his knees came apart. But meanwhile his heart had dropped out of his trunk.

As his head screamed, legs turn around, his tongue fell out.

Oh my God, he thought, I'll never get home.

### **IV. Bringing a Dead Man Back into Life**

The dead man is introduced back into life. They take him to a country fair, to a French restaurant, a round of late night parties . . . He's beginning to smell.

They give him a few days off in bed.

He's taken to a country fair again; a second engagement at the French restaurant; another round of late night parties . . . No response . . . They brush the maggots away . . . That terrible smell! . . . No use . . .

What's wrong with you?

. . . No use . . .

They slap his face. His cheek comes off; bone underneath, jaws and teeth . . .

Another round of late night parties . . . Dropping his fingers . . . An ear falls off . . . Loses a foot in a taxi . . . No use . . . The smell . . . Maggots everywhere!

Another round of late night parties. His head comes off, rolls on the floor. A woman stumbles on it, an eye rolls out. She screams.

No use . . . Under his jacket nothing but maggots and ribs . . . No use . . .

### **V. The Ancestral Mousetrap**

We are left a mousetrap, baited with cheese. We must not jar it, or our ancestor's gesture and pressure are lost, as the trap springs shut.

He has relinquished his hands to what the earth makes of flesh. Still, here in this mousetrap is caught the thumb print of his pressure.

A mouse would steal this with its death, this still unspent jewel of intent.

In a jewel box it is kept, to keep it from the robber-mouse; even as memory in the skull was kept, to keep it from the robber-worm, who even now is climbing a thief in the window of his eyes.

Text from *The Tunnel: Selected Poems of Russell Edson*.

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commissioned by the Spektral Quartet

# The Ancestral Mousetrap

(Five Poems of Russell Edson)

Text by Russell Edson

## I.

David Reminick

## Killing the Ape

**Dark, uneasy, slightly shaky**

$\text{♩} = 100$

arco

(change bow as necessary)

The musical score is written for four string instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The piece is in 12/8 time and consists of 12 measures. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is marked 'arco' and includes the instruction '(change bow as necessary)'. The dynamics range from *pp* (pianissimo) to *f* (forte). The tempo is indicated as  $\text{♩} = 100$ . The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and fingerings (III, II, I, II). The Violoncello part starts with a *pp* dynamic and moves to *mp* by measure 4. The Violin I and II parts start with *pp* and move to *mp* by measure 4. The Viola part starts with *pp* and moves to *mp* by measure 4. The dynamics for all instruments increase to *mf* by measure 6, *f* by measure 8, and *f* by measure 10. The score ends with a final *f* dynamic in measure 12.

**A** overlapping slightly with v2/vlc

The musical score consists of four staves, measures 15 through 18. The notation includes various dynamics and articulations:

- Staff 1:** Measures 15-18. Dynamics: *f*, *f*, *f*, *sim.*. Includes a box 'A' with the instruction 'overlapping slightly with v2/vlc' above measure 16. Fingerings: I, II.
- Staff 2:** Measures 15-18. Dynamics: *f*, *f*, *sim.*. Includes the instruction 'overlapping slightly with v1/vla' above measure 16. Articulation: *pizz. arco*, *pizz.*, *arco*. Fingerings: I, II, III.
- Staff 3:** Measures 15-18. Dynamics: *f*, *f*, *f*, *sim.*. Includes the instruction 'overlapping slightly with v2/vlc' above measure 16. Fingerings: I.
- Staff 4:** Measures 15-18. Dynamics: *f*, *f*, *sim.*. Includes the instruction 'overlapping slightly with v1/vla' above measure 16. Articulation: *pizz. arco*, *pizz.*, *arco*.

25

II  
III

*f* *p* *f* *f* *f* *f* *f*

(*♩* *I* *II* *♩* *♩*)

**B**

*f*

II

II

*p* *f* *f* *f* *p* *f* *sim.*

II

(*♩* *I* *♩* *♩* *♩*)

*f* *f* *f* *f* *f*

(*♩* *♩* *♩*)

*f* *f* *f* *p* *f*



36 C

The musical score consists of four staves. The first staff begins at measure 36 with a *sim.* dynamic and a  $\phi$  symbol. It features a 12/8 time signature, a key signature of one flat, and dynamics of *f* and *ff*. The second staff starts with *pizz. arco* and *> p*, followed by *sf* and *pp*, and includes a *SP* instruction. The third staff begins with *sim.* and *f*, and ends with *pizz.*, *p*, and *ff*. The fourth staff starts with *pizz. arco* and *sf*, and concludes with *pp* and *SP*. Time signatures are 12/8, 6/8, and 12/8. A section marker 'C' is located at the top right.

47

arco III

pizz.

arco ST

**D**

mf < f > mp

p ————— ff

ord

II

III (2nd time)

ST

ord

< p f > mf p ————— pp

f ————— pp

f

arco

pizz.

arco ST

arco ST

ST

ord

p < f mp > p p ————— ff

f

f

ord II

I (2nd time)

ST

ord

< p < f > p > pp

f ————— pp

f

58

The musical score consists of four staves. The first staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains six measures of music with various note values and rests. The second staff is also a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains six measures of music, with dynamic markings 'pizz.' and 'arco' alternating between measures. The third staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains six measures of music with various note values and rests. The fourth staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains six measures of music, with dynamic markings 'pizz.' and 'arco' alternating between measures.

64

[p] < ff

pizz. arco

pizz. arco

pizz. arco

pizz. arco

[p]

Detailed description: This musical score consists of four staves of music, numbered 64 to 70. The first staff is in treble clef and contains a series of chords and melodic fragments, with dynamics [p] and ff indicated at the end. The second staff is also in treble clef and features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, alternating between pizzicato (pizz.) and arco (arco) playing. The third staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with some slurs and accents. The fourth staff is in treble clef and features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, alternating between pizzicato and arco playing. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, and various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings are used throughout.

71

3/4

3/4

12-20 seconds

Slow bow speed until individual pulses are audible. Then continue to slow pulses until they are occurring sporadically, approximately every two beats.

Speeding up again, becoming a sustained tone.

*ff*

*p*

3/4

3/4

**E** Calm, grotesque

72 ♩=90

The musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is a piano accompaniment in treble clef, starting with a *p* dynamic. The second staff is the vocal line in treble clef, with lyrics: "They were kill-ing the ape with in fin-ite care; not too much or it runs past dy-ing and is born a gain". The third staff is a piano accompaniment in treble clef, with dynamics *mp*, *mf*, and *p*. The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment in treble clef, with a *p* dynamic. The fifth staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef, with a *p* dynamic. The score includes various time signatures (3/4, 2/4, 4/4) and dynamic markings (*p*, *mp*, *mf*). A rehearsal mark '13' is present in the fourth staff.

*p* *mp* *p* *mp* *mf* *mp* *mp* *p*

They were kill-ing the ape with in fin-ite care; not too much or it runs past dy-ing and is born a gain

*mp* *mf* *p* *mp* *mf* *p*

*p*

*p*

87 rit. ..... ♩=78

*p* *mp* *p* *mp* *mf* *p* *mp* *p*

Too litt - le de - liv - ers a sick old man cov - ered with fur. Gent - ly gent - ly out of hell, the

Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.

96 **F**

ape climb-ing out of the ape.

warmly ord

warmly

Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.

Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.

Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.

Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.