David M. Gordon is a Chicago-area composer, music theorist, and music educator. He holds a Ph.D. in music composition from the University of Chicago, as well as B.M. and M.M. degrees in composition from Northern Illinois University. Gordon has collaborated with a wide variety of performers and ensembles, including Eighth Blackbird, the Pacifica Quartet, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Chicago Sinfonietta, the Quey Percussion Duo, Far Song, Contempo, the Motion Trio, pianist Margaret Leng Tan, and steelpan virtuoso Liam Teague. His music has also been featured at numerous distinguished venues and events, including the Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music, the Ojai Music Festival, the Singapore International Festival of Arts, the Caramoor Music Festival, the Bang on a Can Summer Festival, the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, the San Francisco International Piano Festival, the MATA Festival, Chicago's Symphony Center, and Philadelphia's Kimmel Center. A recording of Gordon’s sacred chamber works entitled *Mysteria Fidei*, which features pianist Paul Sánchez and soprano Kayleen Sánchez, was recently released on Innova Recordings.

David M. Gordon (b. 1976)

Fabular Arcana (2021), concerto for retuned piano and orchestra

I. Hexefriri's Grand Parallactic Clockwork

II. The Coal-Bog Giantesses

III. Concerning the Great Bøyg's Various Reconstructions of Solveig's Song from the Degraded Memories of Malevolent Woodland Spirits

IV. Insecta ex Machina

On Thanksgiving of 2018, my friend Paul Sánchez—a fantastic pianist and longtime champion of my music—asked me if I would consider writing a piano concerto for him and the SDSO in honor of the latter’s centennial season. The answer was a no-brainer, but when the time came for me to begin composing the piece, I faced a number of difficult questions. First and foremost among them was whether I really wanted to contribute a new composition to a repertory that is already overcrowded. Indeed, so many great piano concerti have already been written that it would seem only the most intrepid performers and listeners are likely to seek out new ones. Yet it was unclear to me what other option(s) I had, considering that I was specifically asked to write a work for a solo pianist accompanied by orchestra.

A solution ultimately presented itself through my longstanding interest in tuning theory. Though many do not realize it, the way in which music is presently tuned throughout much of the world—with 12 equidistant pitches per octave (commonly referred to as “equal temperament”)—is a fairly recent innovation. Prior to the nineteenth century, classical musicians employed a wide array of other tuning systems, some of which sound quite exotic, if not outright “wrong,” to modern ears. And even now, countless forms of indigenous music use tunings radically different from equal temperament. From the evenly-spaced seven-tone scales of traditional Thai music, to the 22 “Shrutis” per octave of classical Indian music, to the 53 “komas” per octave of Turkish makam, to the intentionally imperfect octaves and markedly uneven five- and seven-note scales of Indonesian gamelan, to the octave-free tunings of Georgian vocal polyphony, the possibilities seem—and in fact are—endless.

As it turns out, it is the piano that is primarily responsible for the spread and virtual standardization of equal temperament. The modern piano is specifically designed for that tuning, and since pianos are now found in homes, schools, concert halls, and places of worship the world over, equal temperament is as well. But what if one tuned the piano in a drastically different way? Would it fundamentally alter the nature of the instrument? In one sense, the answer is no, since the piano would retain its essential physical structure, appearance, means of operation, and so forth. But in another sense, the answer is yes, since the piano’s color, resonance, and relationship to other instruments would all change in significant ways. Retuning the piano transforms its essential character. It was this realization that allowed me to move forward with the concerto. Though the piece features a solo pianist playing a standard grand piano, the unconventional tuning of that instrument metamorphoses it into a very different kind of musical animal.

The tuning I chose for the piano is an unusual one that was originally developed by California-based composer Bill Alves for a chamber work entitled *Metalloid*. It contains an array of purely-tuned fifths and natural sevenths, but very few conventional thirds. Even more striking is the fact that its “half-steps” come in a number of radically different sizes, with some so large they sound like whole-steps, and others so small that the two keys they separate seem like different shadings of the same pitch. In this peculiar intonational terrain, certain scales and chords sound astonishingly clean and sonorous, while others are shockingly abrasive. Consonances are more consonant, and dissonances are more dissonant. Shimmering near-unisons sit alongside bitterly narrow 1/3-tones, strangely alien “septimal” thirds, and completely smooth, concordant sevenths. Like coffee, the tuning takes some getting used to, but in the end it proves to be quite appealing.

The “arcane fables” referenced in the title are four interconnected musical narratives depicting purely fanciful scenes and events. The specifics of these “tales,” however, are mostly left for listeners to determine. In this sense, *Fabular Arcana* is a bit like a film score with no film. Though the work’s emotional trajectory is reasonably clear, the underlying causes of its various emotional states are not.

The first movement, “Hexefriri’s Grand Parallactic Clockwork,” begins with the resonant chiming of bells and delicate ticking of differently-paced timekeeping mechanisms. These two motives pervade the entire movement, accompanying and demarcating various statements of two larger themes, one of which is reminiscent of slow-moving Medieval organum, and the other of which is more rhythmically active and folk-like. The musical ambiance is at turns mysterious, reverent, and strangely majestic, with the solo piano moving gradually from more conventionally-tuned, diatonic sonorities to less familiar, chromatic ones, and then back.

“The Coal-Bog Giantesses” begins deep in the abyss and slowly rises upward through a haze of ghostly moans. A low, torpid piano melody slowly unfolds over a spectral drone. The piano eventually gives way as grotesquely low woodwinds begin to intone snaking, chromatic lines over ominous microtonal pulses. While the music laboriously rises in pitch, it also builds in intensity, eventually erupting into thunderous crashes, lurching metallic clangs, and anguished shrieks. A brief respite is provided by the onset of quietly rumbling machinery, though the sense of menace remains, as oversized exhalations, ethereal groans, and droning static provide the backdrop for twisting violin and clarinet melodies. Three more explosive screams mark the commencement of a more frenzied build-up with rapid passagework in the solo piano. This ultimately leads into a bellicose bacchanalia. After a time, the revelry collapses, followed by an exhausted, lumbering return to the depths. As the movement draws to a close, a brittle, rasping fanfare accompanied by distant chiming signals the arrival of the Great Bøyg.

Movement 3’s lengthy title references Edvard Grieg’s famous *Peer Gynt*, a 90-minute assortment of short pieces that he composed as incidental music for Henrik Ibsen’s play of the same name. Grieg’s music achieved fame mainly as the result of two orchestral suites that he extracted from the play: op. 46 (published in 1888) and op. 55 (published in 1893). The latter of these contains an instrumental version of “Solveig’s Song,” an aria strongly inspired by Norwegian folk music. In the song, a young farmer’s daughter who has committed her life to the wayward Peer Gynt sits at a spinning wheel and sings of her faithful love for him after he has abandoned her. The song is comprised of three sections: a monophonic, recitative-like string introduction (first heard here at the end of movement 2); a slow, minor-key lament; and a faster, major-key vocalise in triple meter. All three sections appear in various guises throughout movement 3, which proceeds in the manner of a theme and variations set. The variations represent sundry attempts to recreate the song by the Great Bøyg, one of the most bizarre characters in *Peer Gynt*. Originating in Scandinavian folklore, the Bøyg is generally described as a kind of troll or gnome, though in *Peer Gynt* it appears as a disembodied voice, “not dead, not living; all slimy; misty. Not so much as a shape!” The creature traps Peer in the forest and mocks his futile attempts to defeat it using force, but then unexpectedly “shrinks to nothing” when he hears the distant singing of psalms and says of Peer in a final gasp that “he was too strong. There were women behind him.” Why the Bøyg would later attempt to recreate Solveig’s Song is an enigma, but its reconstructions come in an array of forms, including a Chopin-esque rendition in an eccentric tuning, a ritualistic version highlighting tuned gongs, cowbells, and xylophones, and a fully-orchestrated adaptation that comes close to the rendering heard in Grieg’s orchestral suite, though with added melodicas and considerable interference from the solo piano. Near the end, the movement veers into a virtuosic cadenza modeled on the one from Grieg’s celebrated Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 16, yet still employing themes from Solveig’s Song.

“Insecta ex Machina” opens similarly to movement 1. In this case, however, the delicate workings of Hexefriri’s Clockwork are quickly torn asunder in a violent rupture. This sets off a chain reaction of alarms and popping fissures, followed by the rhythmic skittering of mechanical insects. As the wildly active texture evolves and branches, material from the previous three movements returns in oddly altered forms, as though time itself has been contorted. After a powerful build-up, the texture shatters into fragments, leaving behind only the work’s opening chant, though now in an altered tuning, accompanied by a forlorn motive from movement 3. Whether this represents a triumph or a catastrophe is for you to decide.

*Fabular Arcana* is dedicated—with gratitude and admiration—to Paul Sánchez, Delta David Gier, and the SDSO. It was also written in memory of Dr. Jan Bach, my first official composition teacher. The references to Grieg and the folk music of Norway are a deliberate homage to both Sioux Falls’ Norwegian community, which played a pivotal role in the SDSO’s growth and longevity, and my maternal great-grandparents, among whom were a musical devotee of Grieg and two Norwegian immigrants from Bergen, Grieg’s hometown.