

COLUMBIA FALLS (1975)

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Columbia Falls is written for a large orchestra, and listening to it is rather like looking at a broad landscape: you are aware both of the overall contour, the balance of forces that shape it, and of the multitude of details. The orchestral 'families' each have their own kind of music, their own area of the landscape. The brass are outgoing, brilliant, virtuosic: the woodwind are also soloistic, but in a much gentler, more intimate style, like chamber soloists. The strings create a harmonic continuum which fills all the musical space; sometimes they are in the foreground but more often they are ambiguous in their perspective.

Listening, you can move between foreground and background, taking bearings from the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, ideas that are recurring, meeting, parting, changing. The perspective is always shifting, the music always growing about you.

Columbia Falls lasts about twenty minutes. It is a continuous arch, created in three sections and a coda. The first section ends with an extended cascade in the strings; little bells and wind chimes make the transition into the second section—brass melodies flowering into a wild ensemble. Woodwind, very quiet and inward, begin the last section in which all the musics gradually draw together until they fuse in a big climax. (Here, it is like the widest view of the landscape, each area perceived in relation to each other and the whole). The work ends with a solo alto flute which creates a final ambiguity as to perspective and mass. Is this solo a detail, a shred of melody heard from afar? or does it refer us back to the clarinet solo that opened the work, so that the whole broad landscape appears to be the expansion of a single song?

Columbia Falls was commissioned by the Feeney Trust for the CBSO, who gave the first performances in autumn 1975.