

NWCR895

Derek Bermel

Soul Garden



1. *Soul Garden* (12:35) (2000)
Paul Neubauer, viola; Fred Sherry, cello;
Borromeo String Quartet: Nicholas Kitchen,
violin; William Fedkenheuer, violin; Mai
Motobuchi viola; Yeeseun Kim, cello
- Wanderings* (1994) (8:14)
2. I. Gift of Life (4:21)
3. II. Two Songs from Nandom (3:53)
Tara Helen O'Connor, flute; Bob Ingliss, oboe;
Derek Bermel, clarinet; Theo Primis, horn;
Frank Morelli, bassoon
4. *Coming Together* (1999) (5:25)
Derek Bermel, clarinet; Fred Sherry, cello
- Turning* (1995) (17:03)
5. Song for B (4:03)
6. Nightmares and Chickens (1:36)
7. Kowie at Dawn (3:06)
8. Passage (2:46)
9. Carnival Noir (2:53)
10. Coda (2:39)
Christopher Taylor, piano
11. *Theme and Absurdities* (1993) (4:09)
Derek Bermel, clarinet
12. *Mulatash Stomp* (1991) (5:21)
Heleen Hulst, violin; Derek Bermel, clarinet;
Christopher Taylor, piano
- SchiZm* (1994) (8:04)
13. Field of Stars (3:04)
14. Puppet State (5:00)
Derek Bermel, clarinet; Christopher Taylor,
piano
15. Quartet (1992) (6:55)
Borromeo String Quartet

Total playing time: 68:46

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Notes

Derek Bermel can make instruments sing. He can make them talk. Laugh. Scream. Sigh. A composer who is also a first-rate clarinetist, Bermel has an exquisite ability to capture the spirit of the human voice in his music.

Equally at ease in a New York City nightclub or a dusty village in West Africa and with a keen enthusiasm for rap, Messiaen, klezmer or Monk, Bermel is comfortable with any manifestation of the human soul. This naturalness in embracing our variegated humanity is perhaps what enables him to write such compelling music—music in which "each note counts," as *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini wrote of a Bermel piece.

Performed by Bermel on the clarinet along with cellist Fred Sherry, pianist Christopher Taylor, the Borromeo String Quartet, violist Paul Neubauer and others, and elegantly recorded by producer Judy Sherman, these eight works present, for the first-time an overview of Bermel's small-ensemble writing. *Soul Garden* is an album of consistently engaging chamber works—clean, smart and unique music. Bermel's is a garden in which to linger.

Like generations of American musicians before him, Bermel has been deeply inspired by African American music: jazz, blues, R&B and hip-hop have all influenced his writing. Gospel music especially is a cornerstone in many of Bermel's works, including the two which begin and end this disc.

Soul Garden (2000), for solo viola, two violins, viola and two cellos, and Quartet ("I'm Going Down to the Valley") (1992), for string quartet, are one-movement works that evoke the human voice.

Soul Garden and the Quartet take place in a world where definite meets indefinite, where tonality converges with music created from sliding pitches. Both works employ precisely defined glissandi, quarter-tones and techniques such as stomping and striking the body of the instruments—European methods to suggest an improvisational style. Substituting a quarter-tone for its corresponding chromatic counter part "connotes an emotional, even sensual, inflection," writes Bermel.

Seizing on string instruments' ability to slide between notes, Bermel creates a burnished alto gospel singer from a viola, a

rumbling church baritone from a cello. His choice of lead instrument in these two pieces is not coincidence. "The viola is neither the high nor the low," Bermel muses. "It's everyman and everywoman."

Bermel was struck by the *a cappella* "Doctor Jesus" sections from George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*. "I wondered what the result would be if I attempted to notate some of the inflections characteristic of gospel music, subtleties which Gershwin left to the singers," writes Bermel. "So I wrote a melody with 'dummy words, I'm going Down to the Valley'" (One can hear a brief tribute to "Doctor Jesus" about two and three-quarter minutes through: The cello plays tremolo while viola and violin "sing" lead in an *a cappella* style)

The melting tension in both of these string works stems from "the rub," as Bermel calls the use of African pentatonic scale against European diatonic scale "Harmonic tension in gospel music can result from the singer's non-diatonic note choices alongside the church organist's chords," he explains. "Without their juxtaposition, you won't feel the rub."

Melodically and harmonically rooted at first, *Soul Garden* and the Quartet slowly move away from their tonal centers. By the viola cadenza of *Soul Garden*, the glue holding the piece together is gesture, an element paramount in all Bermel works. Each gesture can be traced back to the viola's opening motive Bermel's "tribute to Beethoven." There is tribute to Bach as well: the dialogue that unfolds in the cadenza invokes both call-and-response in gospel music and Bach's multi-dimensional solo writing.

The very opening of a Bermel piece often contains the key to the whole. Each work's unique "world" is defined at the outset and the piece grows from that opening melodic or gestural seed. In both *Soul Garden* and the Quartet, that nugget of material is an achingly human viola phrase. By hearing just the first bar of the Quartet (C-E quarter-tone flat—F), for example, "you already know that the world you've entered is not quite diatonic," says Bermel, "or else the violist must be really out of tune!"

Soul Garden was commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and is based on a movement of *Messengers*, an earlier dance piece composed for the British company Jazz Xchange. The Quartet is dedicated to Bill Albright, Bermel's composition teacher at the time he wrote the piece. Albright died young, just a few years later, and Bermel now hears the Quartet as a eulogy (note the heavenly harmonic "amen" that ends the piece).

Many of Bermel's pieces employ harmonic development that moves by minor third (or by a tri-tone—two stacked minor thirds). The minor third is a "particularly emotional interval" for Bermel and one, he notes, that is intrinsic to the blues. Both *Soul Garden* and the Quartet use the minor third as a pivot, as do a pair of two-movement works, *Wanderings* (1994), for woodwind quintet, and *SchiZm* (1994) for clarinet and piano.

Commissioned by the New York Youth Symphony and written for young players, *Wanderings* conjures the atmosphere and energy of Jerusalem's Old City and a West African village. The movements are "two distinct ways of imagining the woodwind quintet," says Bermel.

"Gift of Life," the first movement presents three main portraits of Jerusalem's Old City, where Muslim and Jewish quarters exist side by side: a "dark, severe" opening using rooted fifths and the octatonic scale; a calmer flute cadenza over a drone; and a loose "klezmer-tango" by clarinet, horn, and boozey bassoon. Moods and styles shift abruptly, but the melodies, based on common material, weave together into a

musical whole. Bermel writes:

Strolling between the Wailing Wall and the Arab Market, the outsider may find a peculiar fascination with the interaction of these worlds whose fates history has inextricably twisted together. There are no absolute boundaries; those that are identified exist largely through a mix of tradition, community and fear. Similarly, the musical threads of continuity appear and suddenly vanish, remaining elusive.

The second movement, "Two Songs from Nandom," transports the listener to Ghana, where Bermel studied traditional Lobi xylophone (*gyil*). *Gyil* music, found in northwestern Ghana, southern Burkina Faso and northeastern Ivory Coast, informs several of Bermel's works, including *Turning*, a solo piano work on this disc, and *Dust Dances*, a 1994 work for orchestra. An eighteen-key instrument resembling a Western marimba, the *gyil* is constructed from tuned slabs of carved mahogany bound with animal hide to a wood frame. Each key has its own gourd resonator; crushed spiderwebs are seared with rubber over holes carved in the gourd, creating a buzzing membrane as keys are struck. During a typical session, two *gyil* players and a drummer may string together and combine songs, sometimes for more than an hour.

Following are the stories surrounding the two intertwined songs, as related by Bermel's *gyil* teacher Bernard Woma:

Kola Per Bir, jo kol' no op

The cat fell asleep under a tree; his enemy the mouse saw his opportunity, and bit the cat's testicle, whereupon the cat promptly died.

Baatazaa, ne no ne pulle; Baatazaa, fu ir ben kume.

Baatazaa, you have so many women; Baatazaa, please give me one.

(Baatazaa is a great chief.)

Bermel incorporates the rhythmic complexity and melodic counterpoint of Lobi music into Western harmonic and formal structures. Layered pentatonic scales approximate the tuning of the *gyil*, while overlapping duple and triple meters allow for a flexible beat that suggests other pulses and polyrhythms. Multiphonics in the double reeds combine with stopped horn and flutter-tongue in the flute and clarinet to simulate the buzz of the xylophone's spiderwebs.

Like *Wanderings*, *SchiZm* for clarinet and piano (which also exists in an oboe and piano version) juxtaposes two movements in contrasting moods. The first movement, "Field of Stars," opens peacefully with the piano as a sensuous clarinet melody twists around it: Bermel describes the composition as "a short musical puzzle comprising three metric cycles (clarinet, piano left hand, piano right hand) that come together every sixty beats and which define the harmonic structure."

"Puppet State," the second movement, similarly weaves connections between different meters; however, this time the material juxtaposed is a patchwork of fragments in various styles. Alternating and sometimes mixing with a tentative salsa, the "klezmer-tango" reappears briefly here (to be resurrected further on as a limping "Habanera"-like tango). As in many of Bermel's works, both players' parts are fiendishly difficult to execute convincingly; the wide range of emotion and style demands a high level of virtuosity from the performers.

A similar degree of virtuosity is required for *Coming Together* (1999), for clarinet and cello, and *Theme and Absurdities* (1993) for solo clarinet. *Coming Together* is a quintessential Bermel work: humorous gesture-based and demonstrating a keen ear for invoking the human voice.

Commissioned by the Elaine Kaufman Cultural Center and Merkin Hall for Bermel and Fred Sherry (who perform it on this disc), this short duo consists entirely of *glissandi*. Says Bermel, "I wanted to write a piece without any 'straight' pitches, one which relied solely on gestural development, yet which would still be convincing and emotional." Bermel achieves this by specifying exactly where each pitch starts and ends and where each *glissando* occurs in time—this careful placement of tonal areas defines the structure and carries the piece forward.

As in *Soul Garden* or the Quartet, the playing field is defined in the first gesture of *Coming Together*: a low cello moan—*uhhhh*. The cello catches the clarinet's attention with bold *pizzicati*, the clarinet squawks in protest, the cellist petulantly drops his bow and lets it bounce on the strings (*col legno battuto*). At first distant in pitch and gesture, the two partners slowly converge, moving closer in range and rhythmic intensity. They seem to unconsciously mimic each other. Intense stroking by the cello incites the clarinet to high shrieks. The intimacy becomes disarming, like enduring the sound of cats in heat in the yard next door or overhearing a frisky couple in an adjoining hotel room.

By the end, the instruments have indeed come together—disparate lines have converged to a single point, and they groan in rhythmic unison. A husky-voiced clarinet produces a ripping multiphonic; difference tones emerge from the combined growl of the two instruments. The tryst ends with another *col legno battuto*.

Theme and Absurdities is another humorously virtuosic piece, this time for solo clarinet and performed here by the composer. Writes Bermel:

It's a spoof on all those loveable yet undeniably annoying theme and variations pieces based on some aria. A whole bunch of these were written for clarinet between about 1850 and 1930, and they make great encore pieces. This one is a particularly nightmarish tribute to the genre. The variations are served up in eight-bar chunks, growing steadily in ridiculousness.

Once again the nugget of the piece is contained in the opening phrase. The theme written by Bermel is complex—certainly unsingable with its large seventh jumps—and almost as absurd as the eleven "absurdities" (and coda) that follow.

Bermel employs a huge pitch range in *Theme and Absurdities*; at one point the clarinet ekes out a high D. Daring three-octave leaps are taken, technique itself becomes the subject of ridicule (chromatic runs, flutter-tonguing, notes jam-packed into a few measures), and directionality (in this recording's case, stereo) is added in the coda as the clarinet is unceremoniously waved from side to side. The variations end with a quote from *Also sprach Zarathustra*—a fitting bit of pomposity for the whole endeavor.

Virtuosity is also a requirement for *Turning* (1995), Bermel's first major solo piano work. This six-section theme and variations was written at the Tanglewood Music Center, where Bermel had worked with and befriended the French composer Henri Dutilleux. The piece is dedicated to him and to pianist Christopher Taylor, who premiered the work in Paris.

Turning opens with a simple and sober "made-up Protestant hymn tune" in the key of B major. The hymn is followed by a pentatonic echo in the piano's high register, "a mirror of my musical consciousness—East versus West—when I returned from Africa," Bermel writes. The development of the hymn becomes more and more Romantic until the ghost of Rachmaninov himself seems to haunt the premises, only to retreat

back into the shadows.

"Nightmares and Chickens," the first variation, follows. Here the hymn is, as says Bermel, "pecked" out, culminating in "a schizoid frenzy of pointillistic clucking" that he composed using serial methods. "Itchy, uncomfortable" high notes wedge themselves between snippets of the theme before the movement "evaporates" into the top register of the piano.

"Kowie at Dawn," the second variation, is a portrait of a small Sissala village in Northwest Ghana. It starts peacefully with the sound of distant bells, but soon the town wakes and we are drawn into a lively dance, again evocative of Lobi xylophone music.

Next is a brief "Passage," perhaps through water, as polytonal arpeggios sweep impressionistically over blocks of chords patiently seeking the opening "Song for B." We are almost back on dry land when the hymn emerges like Debussy's *cathédrale* from the fog. This time, however it is tinged with blues, as though heard at a late-night piano lounge bar.

Ragtime meets a South American street fair in a sprightly and humorous fourth variation, "Carnaval Noir." A rag reminiscent of Joplin or Bolcom leads to insistent chords in the bass that interrupt the festivities and finally quash them, as the piano's uppermost register is ignited by the bass's anxiety.

"Carnaval" segues into a coda, in which an almost Cubist rendition of the hymn is played very quietly in the top registers of the piano. The pentatonic echo returns as "the work spirals backwards," describes Bermel, "into a hazy reflection of the opening song."

An early work rounds out the album. *Mulatash Stomp* (1991), for violin, clarinet and piano, was composed while Bermel was a student in Ann Arbor. He writes:

While I was working on the piece, Bill Albright mentioned that he had once spent a wild evening at an all-night "Mulatas" (the authentic Hungarian spelling) and the idea stuck in my mind. Having never been to a true Mulatas—and to make sure it got pronounced correctly—I called my second-hand piece "Mulatash" and wove a techno-rhythm into the mix for some added late-nite American spice.

Mulatash Stomp pairs a "Bohemian" theme with Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony and a modern "house" dance beat. It starts off playfully but winds up in some thick woods, with ominous harmonies and dramatic violin phrasing reminiscent of Piazzolla's dark tango quintets.

The Mozartian theme first appears as a ponderous piano line in sixths before reappearing in various levels of adulteration—directly quoted, broken into pieces, turned on its head in Bartókian spirit, woven into several different beat structures—by the trio. After the entrance of a second two-note motive, the "Jupiter" theme becomes bold and emphatic, played by the violin over a piano "house" beat that is rendered so slowly as to be almost unrecognizable. As the work closes, though, the "house" beat is liberated to the high registers of the piano and sped up to its characteristically frenetic tempo. Everyone stomps their feet at the end—a "mulatash" stomp, one would surmise.

—Mic Holwin

Mic Holwin is a Brooklyn-based writer and designer who has written about new music for the American Composers Orchestra, the American Symphony Orchestra League's *New Music Now* website, the American Music Center's *NewMusicBox* online magazine, *CRI*, *Chamber Music* magazine and other new music publications.

Derek Bermel has been hailed by colleagues, critics and audiences for his creativity and theatricality as a composer of chamber, symphonic, dance, theater and pop works, and his versatility and virtuosity as a clarinetist, conductor, and jazz and rock musician. He has received many important awards, including the 2001 Rome Prize, Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships, and several ASCAP Awards, as well as residencies at the Lincoln Center Directors Lab, Tanglewood, Banff, Yaddo, Music Alive and American Symphony Orchestra League/Meet The Composer.

Bermel has been commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the National Symphony Orchestra, WNYC Radio, Fabermusic's Millennium Series (UK), Birmingham Royal Ballet (UK), the Westchester Philharmonic, American Composers Orchestra, Albany Symphony, the Pacific Symphony Orchestra, De Ereprijs (Netherlands), Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, New York International Fringe Festival, Jazz Xchange (UK), the New York Youth Symphony and St. Louis Symphony. His music has been featured at Huddersfield (UK), De Suite Muziekweek (Amsterdam), Gaudeamus Muziekweek (Amsterdam), American Guild of Organists (Washington and Los Angeles), Great Day in New York (Lincoln Center, NY), Interlochen (Michigan), Thunderclaps (The Hague), Tanglewood and Banff (Alberta, Canada).

Bermel has studied ethnomusicology and orchestration in Jerusalem. Lobi xylophone in Ghana, uilleann pipes in Dublin and Thracian folk style in Bulgaria. Well-versed in classical and jazz repertoire on clarinet and piano, he trained at Yale University and the University of Michigan and later in Amsterdam, studying composition with William Albright, Louis Andriessen, William Bolcom and Michael Tenzer.

A sought-after clarinetist, Derek Bermel has performed concertos and given recitals internationally, which have been featured on the BBC (London); NCRV (Amsterdam) and WQXR (New York). He is founding clarinetist of Music from Copland House and, along with electric guitarist Wiek Hijmans and poet Wendy S. Walters, co-founded the Dutch-American interdisciplinary ensemble TONK. Bermel has premiered dozens of new works for clarinet and his own clarinet concerto, *Voices*, enjoyed great success when he premiered the work at Carnegie Hall in New York in 1998 and performed it in Boston in 2000. He will perform with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under the baton of composer John Adams. Bermel's music is published by Peermusic and Fabermusic (UK).

The **Borromeo Quartet** has been cited by the *New York Times* as "outstanding" and the *Boston Globe* as "simply the best there is." The Quartet has received numerous awards, which include top prizes in the 1990 International String Quartet Competition in Evian, France; Chamber Music America's Cleveland Quartet Award in 1998; and Lincoln Center's Martin E. Segal Award for 2001. A Borromeo CD of Ravel's music on Image Recordings was honored with the Chamber Music America/ WQXR Award for Recording Excellence in 2001. Upcoming recordings include a release of Beethoven Quartets on Image Recordings.

Borromeo, which was the ensemble-in-residence for National Public Radio's "Performance Today" is also heard frequently on WGBH in Boston and WNYC in New York. The Quartet has been the quartet-in residence at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston since 1992.

Violinist **Heleen Hulst** has appeared as a soloist with many orchestras, including the Radio Symphony Orchestra and the London Sinfonietta, with whom she performed in 1998 under

the baton of Oliver Knussen at the Aldeburgh Festival. As an ensemble and chamber musician, she has performed with many groups including the Schoenberg Ensemble, Nieuw Ensemble, Remix Porto, London Sinfonietta, Wendingen and l'Archibudelli. Hulst plays in a contemporary-focused duo with pianist Gerard Bouwhuis. In 1995 and 1997 she participated in the Tanglewood Music Festival.

Robert Ingliss is principal oboe of the American Symphony Orchestra, Philharmonia Virtuosi and the Santa Fe Opera and is a member of An die Musik and the Ensemble Sospeso. He also makes frequent appearances with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and Speculum Musicae and can be heard on dozens of record labels and films.

Frank Morelli, the first bassoonist to be awarded a doctorate by the Juilliard School, has an international reputation as soloist, chamber musician and teacher. Several CDs on which he was featured as a member of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra have won Grammy nominations and awards. He is a founding member of the woodwind quintet Windscape and is principal bassoonist of the New York City Opera and American Composers Orchestra. He succeeded his teacher, Stephen Maxym, on the faculties of Juilliard, as well as Yale and the Manhattan School of Music. He compiled the landmark orchestral excerpt book, *Stravinsky: Difficult Passages for Bassoon and Contrabassoon*.

Violist **Paul Neubauer** has appeared as soloist with the New York, Los Angeles, Taipei and Helsinki philharmonics; the National, St. Louis, Dallas, Detroit and San Francisco symphonies; and St. Luke's, English Chamber and Santa Cecilia orchestras. He gave the world premiere of the revised Bartók Viola Concerto as well as concertos by Penderecki, Picker, Jacob, Lazarof, Suter, Ott and Friedman. Neubauer was first prize winner of the Whitaker, D'Angelo and Lionel Tertis International Competitions and an Avery Fisher Career Grant recipient. He was principal violist of the New York Philharmonic for six years, joining at age twenty-one. Neubauer is an artist member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and on the faculty of the Juilliard School.

Tara Helen O'Connor is flutist of the 1995 Naumburg Award-winning New Millennium Ensemble and flute soloist of the Bach Aria Group. She performs regularly with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Orpheus, Bargemusic, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Chamber Music Northwest and Music from Angel Fire. O'Connor was awarded an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2001. She has recorded for Arcadia, CRI, Koch International and Bridge Records. O'Connor is professor of flute at the Purchase College Conservatory of Music. An avid photographer, she has photo credits in *Time Out*, *Strad* and *Chamber Music America* magazines.

Theo Primis, horn, is a New York freelance musician who performs with the Extension Ensemble. He has performed with the Metamorphosen Chamber Orchestra and the Prometheus Chamber Orchestra, as well as with other orchestras in the United States and Europe. Primis has received scholarships and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, National Foundation for Arts Advancement, and a Tribute Award in Arts and Humanities from Discover Card. Primis has studied and performed at the UBS Verbier Summer Music Festival, the Sarasota Music Festival; Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival and the Kennedy Center National Symphony Orchestra Summer Music Institute.

Cellist **Fred Sherry** has introduced audiences on five continents to the music of our time through his close

association with such eminent composers as Babbitt, Berio, Carter, Foss, Knussen, Lieberson and Takemitsu. Mario Davidovsky, Steven Mackey, Somei Satoh and Charles Wuorinen have written concertos for Sherry, which he has performed with orchestras including the San Francisco Symphony, Municipal Orchestra of Buenos Aires, the American Composers Orchestra, the Orchestra of St. Luke's and the New York City Ballet.

Sherry was a founding member of Speculum Musicae and Tashi. He has been a member of the Group for Contemporary Music, Berio's Juilliard Ensemble, the Galimir String Quartet, and a close collaborator with jazz pianist and composer Chick Corea. Sherry has been an active performer with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center since the 1970s and was artistic director from 1988 to 1992. He has been a guest at festivals including the Aldeburgh Festival, Casals Festival, Tanglewood, Spoleto and Toru Takemitsu's Music Today and is a mainstay at the Scotia Festival of Music, Chamber Music Northwest and the Mostly Mozart Festival.

Sherry is creator and director of "A Great Day in New York" the groundbreaking festival featuring fifty-two living composers presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and Merkin Concert Hall in January and February 2001. He has been a soloist and sideman on hundreds of recordings on RCA, Columbia, Vanguard, CRI,

Albany, ECM, New World, Arabesque, Delos, Vox and Koch. Sherry is a member of the cello and chamber music faculty of the Juilliard School.

Pianist **Christopher Taylor** has been called "one of the most impressive young pianists on the horizon today" by the *Washington Post*. Taylor was named an American Pianist's Association Fellow for 2000; as well as receiving an Avery Fischer Career Grant in 1996 and the Bronze Medal in the 1993 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition—the first American to receive such high recognition in twelve years. In 1990 he took first prize in the William Kapell International Piano Competition and was one of the first recipients of the Irving Gilmore Young Artists' Award.

In recent seasons Taylor has concertized around the globe, performing in France, Korea, Spain, the Philippines and the Caribbean. At home in the U.S., he has appeared with such orchestras as the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, St. Louis Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, Houston Symphony and Boston Pops. As a soloist Taylor has performed in New York's Carnegie and Alice Tully halls and Washington's Kennedy Center. His most recent recording features works by American composers William Bolcom and Derek Bermel. Taylor is on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Production Notes

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Assistant engineer: Jeanne Velonis

Editing assistants: Jeanne Velonis and Hsi-Ling Chang

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