

Sonata for Unaccompanied Achilles

The telephone rings; Achilles picks it up.

Achilles: Hello, this is Achilles.

Achilles: Oh, hello, Mr. T. How are you?

Achilles: A torticollis? Oh, I'm sorry to hear it. Do you have any idea what caused it?

Achilles: How long did you hold it in that position?

Achilles: Well, no wonder it's stiff, then. What on earth induced you to keep your neck twisted that way for so long?

Achilles: Wondrous many of them, eh? What kinds, for example?

Achilles: What do you mean, "phantasmagorical beasts"?

FIGURE 14. Mosaic II, by M. C. Escher (lithograph, 1957).



Achilles: Wasn't it terrifying to see so many of them at the same time?

Achilles: A guitar!? Of all things to be in the midst of all those weird creatures. Say, don't you play the guitar?

Achilles: Oh, well, it's all the same to me.

Achilles: You're right; I wonder why I never noticed that difference between fiddles and guitars before. Speaking of fiddling, how would you like to come over and listen to one of the sonatas for unaccompanied violin by your favorite composer, J. S. Bach? I just bought a marvelous recording of them. I still can't get over the way Bach uses a single violin to create a piece with such interest.

Achilles: A headache too? That's a shame. Perhaps you should just go to bed.

Achilles: I see. Have you tried counting sheep?

Achilles: Oh, oh, I see. Yes, I fully know what you mean. Well, if it's THAT distracting, perhaps you'd better tell it to me, and let me try to work on it, too.

Achilles: A word with the letters 'A', 'D', 'A', 'C' consecutively inside it . . . Hmm . . . What about "abracadabra"?

Achilles: True, "ADAC" occurs backwards, not forwards, in that word.

Achilles: Hours and hours? It sounds like I'm in for a long puzzle, then. Where did you hear this infernal riddle?

Achilles: You mean he looked like he was meditating on esoteric Buddhist matters, but in reality he was just trying to think up complex word puzzles?

Achilles: Aha!—the snail knew what this fellow was up to. But how did you come to talk to the snail?

Achilles: Say, I once heard a word puzzle a little bit like this one. Do you want to hear it? Or would it just drive you further into distraction?

Achilles: I agree—can't do any harm. Here it is: What's a word that begins with the letters "HE" and also ends with "HE"?

Achilles: Very ingenious—but that's almost cheating. It's certainly not what I meant!

Achilles: Of course you're right—it fulfills the conditions, but it's a sort of "degenerate" solution. There's another solution which I had in mind.

Achilles: That's exactly it! How did you come up with it so fast?

Achilles: So here's a case where having a headache actually might have helped you, rather than hindering you. Excellent! But I'm still in the dark on your "ADAC" puzzle.

Achilles: Congratulations! Now maybe you'll be able to get to sleep! So tell me, what IS the solution?

Achilles: Well, normally I don't like hints, but all right. What's your hint?

Achilles: I don't know what you mean by "figure" and "ground" in this case.

Achilles: Certainly I know *Mosaic II*! I know ALL of Escher's works. After all, he's my favorite artist. In any case, I've got a print of *Mosaic II* hanging on my wall, in plain view from here.

Achilles: Yes, I see all the black animals.

Achilles: Yes, I also see how their “negative space”—what’s left out—defines the white animals.

Achilles: So THAT’S what you mean by “figure” and “ground”. But what does that have to do with the “ADAC” puzzle?

Achilles: Oh, this is too tricky for me. I think I’M starting to get a headache.

Achilles: You want to come over now? But I thought—

Achilles: Very well. Perhaps by then I’ll have thought of the right answer to YOUR puzzle, using your figure-ground hint, relating it to MY puzzle.

Achilles: I’d love to play them for you.

Achilles: You’ve invented a theory about them?

Achilles: Accompanied by what instrument?

Achilles: Well, if that’s the case, it seems a little strange that he wouldn’t have written out the harpsichord part, then, and had it published as well.

Achilles: I see—sort of an optional feature. One could listen to them either way—with or without accompaniment. But how would one know what the accompaniment is supposed to sound like?

Achilles: Ah, yes, I guess that it is best, after all, to leave it to the listener’s imagination. And perhaps, as you said, Bach never even had any accompaniment in mind at all. Those sonatas seem to work very well indeed as they are.

Achilles: Right. Well, I’ll see you shortly.

Achilles: Good-bye, Mr. T.