

Toru Takemitsu (1930 – 1996) is one of the most acclaimed composers of the 20th century and the most internationally renowned from Japan. Unique instrument and sound combinations as well as both Western and Japanese elements give his music an individual beauty. It was famed composer Igor Stravinsky who propelled Takemitsu's career, when, upon hearing his Requiem by accident on a trip to Japan in 1959, proceeded to promote it internationally. Much success for Takemitsu followed, including the commission for the 125th anniversary of the New York Philharmonic in 1967 and induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1984. Takemitsu is also known for his film music, of which he has written over 100 scores.

Orion and Pleiades is a work from Takemitsu's constellation series, which includes Asterism (1967), Gémeaux (Gemini) (1971-86), Cassiopeia (1971), and Star-Isle (1982). According to Greek mythology, Orion was in love with the Pleiades, who were the seven maiden daughters of Atlas. To protect them, Zeus turned the Pleiades first into doves and then into stars. When Orion died, he too became a constellation, and to this day, one can find Orion chasing the Pleiades across the night sky.

Rather than a literal portrayal of the constellations, Takemitsu's work is an expressive interpretation of the eponymous characters. The first movement "Orion" is a slow and gestural fantasy, with microtones (notes between traditional Western half steps) and sliding tones expressing uncertainty and indecision. The orchestra sighs, ripples, and rocks back and forth while the cello sings in an elastic, ever changing manner. The form of the first movement is an arch, where the opening material, though slightly changed, returns at the end.

The second movement "And," acts as a short bridge between the two movements and is comprised mainly of exchanges between the cello and orchestra. The movement transitions without pause into the third movement, which is denser and more sonorous than the first. Despite its more singing and impetuous nature, a feeling of uncertainty remains, and the relationship between the characters is never resolved.

About this work, Takemitsu stated, "Whereas the modern Western concept of time is linear in nature, that is, its continuance always maintains the same state, in Japan time is perceived as a circulating and repeating entity". One can imagine floating weightlessly amongst the constellations as Orion courts the maidens, existing in a multi-dimensional state where time and space bend, stretch, and evolve in harmonious synchronicity.