MICHAEL STIMPSON

AGE OF WONDERS

Maya Iwabuchi
Tom Poster
Philharmonia Orchestra
Stuart Stratford
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## CD 1

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**Total Time:** 66'29
CD 2

Transmutations $^{a f g}$

1  i  Inheritance  3'49
2  ii  Olivacea  3'45
3  iii  Fragmentation  3'33
4  iv  Decomposition  3'50

Readings and interviews

5  i  Introduction to Robert Tear $^h$  3'12
6  ii  Early Life $^i$  7'11
7  iii  Voyage of the Beagle $^j k$  8'49
8  iv  A Country Home $^l j$  6'06
9  v  Darwin’s Piano $^l$  5'00
10 vi  The Rush to Publication $^j m$  5'01
11 vii  Later Years $^i j$  8'44

59'02

Maya Iwabuchi  violin $^a$
Fiona Cornall  violin $^b$
Nicholas Bootiman  viola $^c$
Karen Stephenson  cello $^d$
Tom Poster  piano $^e$
Philharmonia Orchestra $^f$
Stuart Stratford  conductor $^g$

Michael Stimpson  speaker $^h$
Robert Tear  speaker $^i$
Ruth Padel  speaker $^j$
Jim Driscoll  speaker $^k$
Annie Kemkaran-Smith  speaker $^l$
George Beccaloni  speaker $^m$
The works of Michael Stimpson have been performed and commissioned by some of the UK’s most distinguished artists including the English Chamber Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Allegri and Maggini String Quartets, Bristol Bach Choir, Roderick Williams, Paul Agnew, David Campbell, Philippe Graffin, and Sioned Williams. A number of the UK’s finest venues have featured performances of his work including Wigmore Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, and Cadogan Hall, as well as a variety of UK festivals. International recognition has prompted performances in Australia, Europe, Iran and the USA, with an upcoming premiere of his third string quartet in Italy in 2017.

Michael’s works are varied in their subject matter, the stimulus often from contemporary events, favourite authors and poets. String Quartet No. 1 (Robben Island) reflected the breakdown of apartheid; The Stars Have Withdrawn Their Shining (harp), the life of John Ruskin; The Angry Garden (choir and orchestra) explored the issue of global warming; and A Walk Into War (tenor and piano quintet) was based on the writing of Laurie Lee.

His major work to mark the 60th anniversary of the end of World War 2, Clouds of War (choir and orchestra) was presented at Cadogan Hall in the presence of HRH Prince Michael of Kent. This was followed by a four-stage work, Age of Wonders, to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Beginning as a piece for violin and piano, it evolved through string quartet and string orchestra to a work for full orchestra, commissioned by the Darwin Symphony Orchestra in Australia. Michael went on to write the opera, Jesse Owens, a work in four Acts for soli, chorus and full orchestra based on the life of the iconic US athlete.

Other available CDs include Journeymen (Allegri Quartet), Dylan & The Drowning of Capel Celyn (Roderick Williams, baritone and Sioned Williams, harp) and Jesse Owens & Preludes in Our Time (Abigail Kelly, Johnny Herford, Megumi Fujita and the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Stuart Stratford).
AGE OF WONDERS

*Age of Wonders* is a four-stage work that was written to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Beginning as a piece for violin and piano, it evolves through string quartet and string orchestra, to complete as a work for full orchestra.

When writing the music it was fascinating to see how many similarities emerged between the process of musical development and that of scientific evolution. Not only did the work as a whole grow from such a simple beginning, but time and again small changes occurred, including some accidental ones, which proved to be strong enough to be kept, and indeed to grow to a larger form or variation. On other occasions something that I thought would be particularly important later on, withered and reduced to nothing of significance.

Naturally the attention to small detail was always present, but alongside this was the need for all four stages to form a complete work, just in the way that other large-scale works are done, albeit this time with the more unusual change of instrumentation. Thus, although each stage is an individual work that must stand alone, even if only for practical purposes of performance, they are all connected; what occurs is an outcome from what has already taken place. Certainly, the growth, development, and evolution is aided by the ensemble change, but like a life form, the music is finite, and the final orchestral section returns us ‘from whence it came’.

The title, Age of Wonders, is taken from a poem by the Bishop of Oxford, discovered after his death. The Bishop opposed the views of Charles Darwin in the famous debate after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

**CD 1**

1. **The Man Who Walked with Henslow**

Charles Darwin was born on 12th February 1809. This work takes as its basis the early life of Darwin and the main events within his childhood and teenage years.

This one-movement piece, to some extent in a style contemporary to the time, sets up and establishes the musical structures (melody, harmony, rhythm, and form) which form the basis of the whole work of *Age of Wonders*. In one sense, the introductory section is a life in its simplest, amoebic form. It begins with the purest of beginnings, middle C, and the interval of an octave (the first within the harmonic series). The closing two notes of the first phrase, and the first of the second, form the next most simple of structures, a three-note scale figure, the importance of which cannot be underestimated. The second interval in the harmonic series, the fifth, is added but musically, there is a sense of space, anticipation, and if such simplistic structures allow, ‘wonder’.

The sections which follow acknowledge the important events in Darwin’s life up until his voyage on *HMS Beagle*. These include pre-school, the death of his mother when he was eight years old, his studies at school in Shrewsbury and as a medical student in Edinburgh. Darwin went on to study at Cambridge; one of the major influences in Darwin’s life at this point was Professor Henslow, and they could often be seen walking and discussing Darwin’s
increasing interest in science. A reference is made to an incident which disturbed them both, the near lynching of two prisoners by a mob - by now Darwin is a young man with a social conscience, conventional but beginning to think beyond established boundaries. The circumstances which surround Darwin's acceptance by Fitzroy as ship's scientist on *HMS Beagle* are well-documented, and he departed on the voyage when he was just 22 years old.

**2-3 String Quartet No. 2 (The Beagle)**

In 1831 Charles Darwin began his epic voyage on *HMS Beagle*. After some false starts due to bad weather they sailed across the Atlantic, along the South American coast, around Cape Horn, and back up along the coast of Chile before cutting across to the Galapagos Islands. From here they went on to the Pacific Islands, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa before returning to England. Throughout the journey, which lasted almost five years, Darwin collected specimens, observed the geology, and developed his extraordinary understanding of science.

This two-movement work evolves in a number of ways from the material of *The Man Who Walked with Henslow*. The opening, in the same key, is a much more involved working of the original introductory material, and throughout the piece the three-note scale figure which was first established in *Henslow*, continues to be redesigned.

Several distinctive points from the voyage form the basis of the quartet. Departure, Brazil, the Sargasso Sea, and Tierra del Fuego are the main influences on the first movement, but these are interspersed with moments of drifting, cold, and homesickness.

A sailors’ dance opens the second movement before the piece moves into a passage which acknowledges the many trips on horseback which Darwin made. For the Galapagos section I have used some motifs taken from recordings of Darwin's finches. Eight are incorporated (there are thirteen finches in all). Underpinning this section is a rather lumbering motif - the giant tortoises were a source of food for sailors who visited the Galapagos. *HMS Beagle* arrived back in England on October 2nd 1836.

**4-6 An Entangled Bank**

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.

*Charles Darwin*

In 1839, after his return from the voyage on *HMS Beagle*, Charles Darwin married his cousin Emma Wedgwood. They settled in Down House, Kent, in 1842 when Emma was pregnant with their first child. This beautiful house was to be Darwin's home for the rest of his life.

The first movement, taking Down House as its background, develops the three-note figure; this time it is spread across the strings to give a celebratory, 'English' feel to the opening of the work (Ralph Vaughan Williams was Charles
Darwin's great nephew). The lines interweave in a way reminiscent of Darwin's quotation (above), gradually stretching the scale to be longer and more chromatic. Also featured are memories of the voyage and the pre-school section of Henslow - Down House was full of children (the Darwins had ten in all).

As the title suggests, Origins is a bringing together of the contributory material to the piece up to this point, as Darwin would have brought together the mountains of specimens and information already collected. Naturally the most important musical memory is of the finches, but the climax of the movement is via a setting of the three notes of the bells of Downe village church (there are now four bells in all in the village church) and the completion of the scale as eight notes, set across the strings with some intervals inverted.

The publication in 1859 of On the Origin of Species was hurried due to the closeness of Wallace to developing a theory of evolution. After the rigours of publication and the intense attacks on his thinking by the church and press, Darwin's life gradually settled to one of recognition and acknowledgement, the music closing with a more settled character.

CD 2
1-4 Transmutations
The thematic material of the three preceding stages of Age of Wonders evolves finally to these four post-Darwinian impressions (Darwin died on April 19th 1882). Transmutations (the early word for evolution) is made up of four shorter movements (variants), full of earlier material and similar to each other in many ways, but nevertheless giving a shape to the orchestral work as a whole.

The first movement, Inheritance, demonstrates a wider use of the scale, the movement closing with a full orchestration of 'drifting', originally heard in the first movement of the quartet. Olivacea opens with a blend of many different fragments before one of the finch motifs emerges to flourish in the movement. Fragmentation doesn't permit any one feature to dominate although some would like to do so. A hint of the close of An Entangled Bank forms the climax of this movement followed by a reminder of the warmth of Charles Darwin in the strings. This character continues in the opening of Decomposition, the movement gradually unwinding until it closes with the material which began the life of Age of Wonders, a three-note scale descending to the final gentle cadence.

5 Introduction to Robert Tear
Michael Stimpson introduces Robert Tear at the premieres of The Man Who Walked with Henslow and An Entangled Bank in a concert at the Wigmore Hall which marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Robert gave a collection of readings that evening which preceded the performances by Philippe Graffin, Elizabeth Burley, and London Sinfonietta.

6 Early Life
Robert Tear reads four extracts from the autobiography of Charles Darwin: an incident when Darwin was a child; a comment on Darwin by his father; his studies at Edinburgh in which Darwin expressed his distaste of autopsy and
operations; and a final reading which tells of Darwin's life at Cambridge where he enjoyed himself considerably. The music is from The Man Who Walked with Henslow.

from The Autobiography of Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

I must have been a very simple little fellow when I first went to the school. A boy of the name of Garnett took me into a cake shop one day, and bought some cakes for which he did not pay, as the shopman trusted him. When we came out I asked him why he did not pay for them, and he instantly answered, “Why, do you not know that my uncle left a great sum of money to the town on condition that every tradesman should give whatever was wanted without payment to any one who wore his old hat and moved it in a particular manner”. He then showed me how it was moved.

“Now if you like to go by yourself into that cake-shop (how well I remember its exact position) I will lend you my hat, and you can get whatever you like if you move the hat on your head properly.” I gladly accepted the generous offer, and went in and asked for some cakes, moved the old hat and was walking out of the shop, when the shopman made a rush at me, so I dropped the cakes and ran for dear life, and was astonished by being greeted with shouts of laughter by my false friend Garnett.

When I left the school I was for my age neither high nor low in it; and I believe that I was considered by all my masters and by my father as a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect. To my deep mortification my father once said to me, “You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family.” But my father, who was the kindest man I ever knew and whose memory I love with all my heart, must have been angry and somewhat unjust when he used such words.

As I was doing no good at school, my father wisely took me away at a rather earlier age than usual, and sent me to Edinburgh University with my brother. The instruction at Edinburgh was altogether by lectures, and these were intolerably dull. I also attended on two occasions the operating theatre in the hospital at Edinburgh, and saw two very bad operations, one on a child, but I rushed away before they were completed. Nor did I ever attend again, for hardly any inducement would have been strong enough to make me do so; this being long before the blessed days of chloroform. The two cases fairly haunted me for many a long year.

Although there were some redeeming features in my life at Cambridge, my time was sadly wasted there. I got into a sporting set, including some dissipated low-minded young men. We used often to dine together in the evening and we sometimes drank too much, with jolly singing and playing at cards afterwards. I know that I ought to feel ashamed of days and evenings thus spent, but as some of my friends were very pleasant, and we were all in the highest spirits, I cannot help looking back to these times with much pleasure.
I have not as yet mentioned a circumstance which influenced my whole career more than any other. This was my friendship with Professor Henslow. Before coming up to Cambridge, I had heard of him from my brother as a man who knew every branch of science, and I was accordingly prepared to reverence him. He kept open house once every week when all undergraduates, and some older members of the University, who were attached to science, used to meet in the evening. I soon got an invitation, and went there regularly. Before long I became well acquainted with Henslow, and during the latter half of my time at Cambridge took long walks with him on most days; so that I was called by some of the dons “the man who walks with Henslow.”

7 Voyage of the Beagle
Ruth Padel reads two poems from her collection, *Darwin: A Life in Poems* - *The Awfulness of Plymouth* (HMS Beagle experienced very heavy storms during the period of its departure from Plymouth) and *Plankton*. This is followed by a section from Darwin’s autobiography read by Jim Driscoll which refers to the time when Darwin reached the Galapagos Islands. Here, he saw the various species of birds which have become known as Darwin’s finches, and included in this section are some original recordings of the finches by the scientist Jeff Podos. The music is from *String Quartet No.2 (The Beagle)* (first premiered by the Maggini Quartet in Plymouth) and a section which illustrates the link between the sound of the finches and the music.

The Awfulness of Plymouth
*Ruth Padel (b.1946)*

Laundering on a *ship*? His sisters mark his shirts ‘Darwin’.  
He packs *Paradise Lost*, the only book he’ll slip  
In his pocket wherever he goes. Plus his New Testament, in Greek,  
A brace of pistols and a portable dissecting microscope.

Captain Fitzroy gives him Lyell’s *Geology*. The Captain’s keen  
On Natural History too; they all are, even the crew.  
But now there’s two, three months’ delay. The cabins need  
Refitting, the little deck is raised. In the long provisioning

He starts a journal. The awfulness of Plymouth - and Devonport!  
His hammock twists like an eel and spits him out. They set sail  
In waves like fantasies of Jonah and then slink hugger-mugger  
Back to land. A letter, in his lodgings, from Fanny Owen.

Her sister’s married! ‘How I wish you had been there. Pray,  
My dear Charles, do write me one last adieu. How I wish  
You had not this horrible Beetle taste. You cannot imagine  
How I have *missed* you - how I long to see you again!’
Christmas - the crew get drunk ashore. So more delay?  
Black cilia sway inside him like a prophecy. They’re off again  
And he’s sick, awash, in bits. He’s one long see-saw  
Groan! The Captain beds him down on his own sofa.

**Plankton**  
*Ruth Padel*

The deck is dazzle, fish-stink, gauze-covered buckets.  
Gelatinous ingots, rainbows of wet flinching amethyst  
And flubbed, iridescent cream. All this  
Means he’s better; and working on a haul of lumpen light.

Polyps, plankton, jellyfish. Sea butterflies, the pteropods.  
‘So low in the scale of nature, so exquisite in their forms!  
You wonder at so much beauty — created,  
Apparently, for such little purpose!’ They lower his creel

To blue pores of subtropical ocean. Wave-flicker, white  
Like a gun-flash over the blown heart of sapphire.  
Peacock eyes, beaten and swollen,  
Tossing on lazuline steel.

from **The Voyage of the Beagle**  
*Charles Darwin*

I have not as yet noticed by far the most remarkable feature in the natural history of this archipelago; it is,  
that the different islands to a considerable extent are inhabited by a different set of beings. My attention  
was first called to this fact by the Vice-Governor, Mr. Lawson, declaring that the tortoises differed from the  
different islands, and that he could with certainty tell from which island any one was brought. I did not for  
some time pay sufficient attention to this statement, and I had already partially mingled together the  
collections from two of the islands. I never dreamed that islands, about 50 or 60 miles apart, and most of  
them in sight of each other, formed of precisely the same rocks, placed under a quite similar climate, rising  
to a nearly equal height, would have been differently tenanted; but we shall soon see that this is the case.  
It is the fate of most voyagers, no sooner to discover what is most interesting in any locality, than they are  
hurried from it; but I ought, perhaps, to be thankful that I obtained sufficient materials to establish this  
most remarkable fact in the distribution of organic beings.
8  A Country Home
After their marriage, the Darwins moved from Gower Street in London to Down House in Kent. Ruth Padel opens with a reading of The Extreme Verge of the World, followed by Robert Tear reading ‘Darwin at Down House’, a section from Darwin’s autobiography, and a quotation, ‘an entangled bank’, from On the Origin of Species. The music is from An Entangled Bank, the title of the work being inspired by this famous quotation.

The Extreme Verge of the World
Ruth Padel

They’re dreaming of a garden like the ones they knew
As children. They’ve searched the railway routes
So he can talk science in London and come back home
For dinner. They’ve lost a house in Woking -

Now it’s Kent. A gloomy day. Bolts of blue
From a chilly north-east wind. Sixteen miles -
Two hours by train. Fat hedgerows, skeined with paper trails
Of wild white clematis, and ancient wooded hills.

Step out. It feels remote. An old flint church:
St Mary’s, Downe. A yew, a walnut tree with bark
Like silver hair. Villagers smile from open doors.
The butcher, baker, post office. The villa they’ve come to see.

‘Ugly,’ she says. ‘A desolate air.’ The garden, though,
Makes up for it. Old trees - purple magnolia, a quince,
A medlar, Spanish chestnut. A goodish hay-meadow.
In September they’ll move in. A child will be born,

And buried in the family plot he’ll pick at the west door
Of this flint church. Through briar rose haws, twisting petioles
Of clematis will scribble these hedges like the pencil
Of a ferocious toddler with glowing, ochre-coloured wire.

from The Autobiography of Charles Darwin
Charles Darwin

It followed the course of a dry ditch, stopping regularly at buzzing places. I could only follow them along this ditch by making several of my children crawl in, and lie on their tummies, but in this way I was able to track
the bees for about twenty-five yards. I was able to prove this by stationing five or six of my children each close to a buzzing place, and telling the one farthest away to shout out ‘here is a bee’ as soon as one was buzzing around. The others followed this up, so that the same cry of ‘here is a bee’ was passed on from child to child without interruption until the bees reached the buzzing place where I myself was standing.

from On the Origin of Species
Charles Darwin

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.

9 Darwin’s Piano
Emma Darwin, wife of Charles, was a fine pianist. Annie Kenchoran-Smith, who was curator of Down House when she chatted with Michael Stimpson, talks about the piano (made by Broadwoods) and family life at the house. The music is from The Man Who Walked with Henslow.

10 The Rush to Publication
Darwin, as is well-known, had to bring forward the announcement and publication of his theory of evolution due to Alfred Wallace developing a similar theory while on his travels. Wallace wrote to Darwin who was shocked to receive the letter. Ruth Padel reads her poem, Your Words Have Come True with a Vengeance, and this is followed by a conversation between Michael Stimpson and George Beccaloni, an expert on Wallace at the Natural History Museum. The music is from An Entangled Bank.

Your Words Have Come True with a Vengeance
Ruth Padel

‘My dear friend, some years ago you recommended me
To read a piece by Wallace. He has today sent the enclosed,
Asking me to forward it to you. When I explained my view
To you of Natural Selection, you said to publish soon
Or I shd be forestalled. Your words have come true
With a vengeance. If Wallace had my sketch from ‘42

He could not have made a better abstract.’ His big book
Is half-written. ‘Even his terms now stand as Heads of my
Own Chapters. Please return the M.S. He does not say
He wishes me to publish it. But I shall write back at once
Of course, and offer to send to any Journal he desires.’
A taste of pepper on his tongue. Through the open door

He sees a wave gather, rear like a cobra, crash over the carpet
Towards him. ‘So all my originality, whatever it may amount to,
Will be smashed. Though my Book, if it have value,

Will not be deteriorated. For all the work consists
In application of the theory. I hope you will approve
Of Wallace’s sketch, that I may tell him what you say.’

11 Later Years
After publication of On the Origin of Species there was much controversy about the theory of evolution, and in particular a stormy debate in Oxford where Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, attacked Darwin’s theories with great vigour. However, after the bishop’s death, a poem was found about evolution and included in it was the phrase ‘age of wonders’, which gave rise to the title of the music as a whole. Robert Tear reads the poem, followed by Ruth Padel presenting her poem, I Made His Coffin Like He Wanted It, All Rough. The music is from Transmutations, which was commissioned by the Darwin Symphony Orchestra in Australia.

Lines Written on Hearing that Professor Huxley had said that
‘he did not care whether his grand-father was an Ape’
Samuel Wilberforce (1818-1873)

Oft had I heard, but deemed the tale untrue,
That man was cousin to the Kangaroo;
That he before whose face all nature quailed,
Was but the monkey’s heir, though unentailed;
And that the limber Ape, whose knavish ways
And tricks fantastic oft our laughter raise,
Was just what we were in some previous state,
Ages ere Noah shipped his living freight.
But now a learn’d Professor, grave and wise,
Stoutly maintains what I supposed were lies;
And, while each listening sage in wonder gapes,
Claims a proud lineage of ancestral Apes.
Alas! cried I, if such a sage’s dreams,
Save me, ye powers, from these unhallowed themes;
From self-degrading science keep me free,
And from the pride that apes humility!
But O should fate bring back these dreams accursed,
And shuddering Nature find her laws reversed;
Should this, the age of wonders, see again
Men sunk to monkeys, monkeys raised to men;
Be mine the lot, on some far-distant shore,
Where Science wearies not nor savants bore –
Where no learn’d Apes our fallen race may scorn,
Nor point the moral which our tails adorn –
To shun the sight of metamorphosed friends,
Till time again shall shape their altered ends,
To soothe each fond regret, howe’er I can;
And, at he least, to dream myself a Man!

I Made His Coffin Just the Way He Wanted It, All Rough
*Ruth Padel*

They’ll bury him beside his brother. The village carpenter –
Who made his instruments, and boxes ‘for his queer
Experiments’ – knows what he likes. Simple and plain.
An old friend will take the service. The publican
At the George and Dragon prepares for crowds.

But you’re forgetting London. The Royal Society. The Dean
Of Westminster. A notorious freethinker, in the Abbey?
Questions in Parliament. An *Evening Standard* campaign:
‘A man who brought such honour to the English name
Should not lie in an obscure grave.’

‘It gave us a pang not to have him rest quietly here.
But we knew his gracious and grateful nature
Would have wished to accept the acknowledgement.’
The carpenter complains. ‘I made it as he wanted it, no polish,
Nothing, just as it left the bench. His coffin was not wanted!'
The one they sent, you could see your face in it.’
Black horses. The difficult, blue-glossy manes. The bearing rein.
The hearse with her spray of white lilies. She watches him depart
On those sixteen miles to London. She’s always prayed
They’d never part. She looked after him, moment by moment. Now

There’s one more thing. Surely the God of Love will not cast out
A good man who searched, so earnestly, for truth. Memories.
Ageing. Their youth. It is almost worth being sick
To be nursed by you. ‘Oh that I could remember more!
But it was the same loving gratitude, many times a day.’

Let’s leave her in the drawing-room, at the piano. ‘His tenderness
Seemed to increase. The last twelve years were happiest of all,
Most overflowing with affection.’ She’s looking at rain. At April grass.
‘She lived through her desolation,’ the children will say, ‘alone.’
This garden they made together. Its life beyond the glass.
Michael would like to thank Robin and Pegi Biellik-Henderson and the Elizabeth Eagle-Bott Memorial Fund for their generosity in making this recording possible.

Produced, engineered, edited, and mastered by Jonathan Stokes, Classic Sound (CD 1 and CD 2 tracks 1-4) and Ian Jones (CD 2 track 5-11).


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Darwin's Finches recorded by Jeff Podos, reproduced by kind permission (CD 2 track 7).

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