

PROGRAM NOTES: “The Singing Rooms”

When I was asked by the Philadelphia Orchestra to write a concerto for violin that would include a choral part, I immediately started searching through all sorts of poetry. I looked for several things, the most obvious of which is, the poetry would need to “speak” to me in order for me to be able to set it to music. Also, the words would need to “invite” setting (in other words, easy to sing comprehensibly...can you imagine what it would be like to try to set the word “onomatopoeia?”...not very singer-friendly). To create the best form for the piece, I needed a group of poems that would not be too long (because I wanted to create different moods within this large work), and that would fit together somehow thematically. I looked for a long time, through poetry from various countries and time periods. But I discovered that sometimes the answer is in your own backyard: walking through the faculty lounge at Curtis one day, I asked Jeanne Minahan McGinn, the head of the Liberal Arts Department (who happens to be a poet) if she had anything that I could read. When I got some books of her poetry in my hands, I knew I had found what I was looking for...a series of poems, that resonated with me, and would provide different emotional settings, as if they were lessons in life arranged like different rooms within a house.

The Singing Rooms Program Note:

This is a house where the violin sings, the choir sings, and the orchestra sings. Every room is its own sound world. Not an ordinary house, this is the house that we all inhabit: that of life. The beauty of poetry and music is that each person brings their own experience to these art forms, and each reader takes away the message of the poet, mixed with their own story...but we all share these stories...

Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day

Set twice within this piece (at the beginning and at the end), the first musical setting is the emergence of the day, at its very early crescent of light...a more spare entry into this house of “The Singing Rooms”. It is the image and sound of “...cool and sweet, a blue cascade of watered light...”.

Things Aren’t Always

Always shifting, moving...not all things are what they seem.

The Interpretation of Dreams

As life sometimes moves in dreamlike fashion, I decided to set this with a gentle sort of “boat rocking” sensation (the poet refers to a dream on a boat). I also decided that I would set this poem three times, because of its brevity, and because of its position as the third poem in this set.

Confession

The fragility of handing over a confession to another is sometimes anxiety producing. This anxiety is mirrored in the opening of this movement, but calms at the moment that the choir unfolds with the opening stanza referring to the dream of sleeping within a flower (which I pictured as opening and expanding). An interesting note, Pleiades is mentioned in the 3rd stanza...its meaning: an open star cluster in the constellation Taurus, which consists of several hundred stars, with only 6 visible to the human eye. I found this particular tidbit fascinating mostly because, before reading the definition, I had written a 6-note figure for the violin that occurs repeatedly within this movement, in different guises. I confess that sometimes I don’t know where the music comes from, but I’m often startled by its appropriateness to the moment of putting note to page.

History Lesson

Falling gestures...rising gestures...the difference between (as the poet says) the "...brief pause between despair and comfort...". Of all the movements, this is the shortest...a mere 3 minutes. Why? It was an intentional decision to reflect on how we seem to remember the lessons of history for such short amounts of time.

A Word with God

For a composer, it is intimidating to think of how one sets into music such a thing as speaking to God. Certainly many other composers have done so throughout history. But I loved the idea of starting it as an intimate conversation, so I wrote a duet between the English Horn and the Solo Violin, which eventually evolves into a series of emotions and conversations, adding voices and varying degrees of urgency.

Jeanne Minahan opens this poem opens with an Irish Proverb: "Your feet will bring you to where your heart is". I chose to place this wonderful proverb at the end of this movement, because after the poem, "A Word with God", I wanted to carry the listener back to the original room of three windows, now with a new view of the day...at its end...and inevitably, your feet *will* bring you to where your heart is.

Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day

The 2nd setting of this poem presents the second version of the day: a view at the close in the day of life...a return to the original room, but with wisdom gained and all seen in a new light.

This work was commissioned in 2006 by The Philadelphia Orchestra, The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. It was premiered in 2007 by the Philadelphia Orchestra, Christoph Eschenbach, conducting.

--Jennifer Higdon