

DAWNPATH

Nicola LeFanu

Chamber opera for soprano, baritone and dancer, with an ensemble of five instruments: fl, cl, hn, cello, perc. Duration 50'.

Dawnpath is based on two American-Indian myths: that all creation sprang from a single song; and that the first beings on earth were given the choice of living for ever in darkness or of dying that night might always give way to day.

In the words of a Zuni legend: 'the first being was lonely, by himself on earth; and so he sang; and in his singing all the creatures and growing things of the world were created.' The opera opens as the song begins. The singer becomes conscious of himself and his surroundings. First it is the elements of his world: sand, rock and water; the earth 'water-shining' after rain; the 'shining sunpath'; the wind 'as it sings far over the world'. Then the shapes of his world: he gazes up towards the mountain; toward the valleys: 'in the valleys I see trees, cottonwoods, walking to the cool shade: as my shadow grows and walks before me...and I see myself, tall as a tree'.

From the trees and plants to the birds and animals: 'soaring eagle', 'singing blackbird', the deer with 'shining horns' and the horse with 'rainbow mane' and 'eyes made of big stars'. Through the objects and creatures he becomes aware of himself and his potential. 'The earth in all its voices is calling me...to where? To what path?'

As he becomes a man rather than a being, so the woman emerges: 'with all your voices you have called me: I greet you, world; my voice dances for you'. She sings of rain, from which everything can grow, and of the life giving breath of the wind. 'World, I breathe with you', they sing: they breathe as one being, and they breathe in the rhythm of the world with which they are one. They rejoice in their wholeness and in their newfound individuality.

The man senses his own power; his creative energy threatens to become possessive and destructive. Fear comes into their world as he playfully chases the deer.

The death of the deer leads to the conflict between the man and the woman which is the climax of the opera. It grows dark: 'the deer stands between us and the sun'. The woman wants to go into the unknown, even to die like the deer, to search for light. She cannot stay where it is dark and barren...'let us go from here - it echoes with silence...I cannot breathe here, I feel the darkness twist in me...In this great darkness my heart will go out'. The man wants to stay in his world, the known, where he can live for ever.

As in myth, so in the opera: man would have chosen eternal life and darkness, but the woman cries out for light, even through death: 'for there is only one great thing: to live and see, resting, journeying, the great day that dawns over the world...come...' She persuades him to accept the idea of death and they turn to reach for distant horizons. A new day dawns.

'We greet the day
We shall sleep under the stars
following the stars
following the dawnpath'

The themes of the myths are universal, but I was drawn to the particular American-Indian ones I have chosen for several reasons: the richness of their literature, the extraordinarily vivid imagery, and especially the central image of creation through singing, and the unity of music, word and dance. All the participants (singers, dancer and players) share equally in creating or recreating the myth.

I first explored the possibilities of composing music, libretto and dance simultaneously in *Antiworld*, and it was after directing it in 1972 that I began to have clear ideas about how I wanted to develop this. While I lived in the USA (1973-74) I became increasingly interested in the culture of such South-Western American Indians as the Zuni, Hopi, Papago and Navaho. The seeds of *Dawnpath* were sown, and I collected the source material in Spring 1976. After completing two large instrumental works (*Columbia Falls*, for orchestra, and *The Same Day Dawns* for soprano and chamber ensemble) the musical ideas for the opera had germinated, and *Dawnpath* was composed August-December 1976 at Pittwater, New South Wales. It is dedicated to my mother Elizabeth Maconchy.

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