

COMPOSITION

Music (La musique)

Gordon Kerry

In 2013, Sydney's Halcyon ensemble celebrated fifteen years in the business—no mean feat for a contemporary music outfit under today's conditions. Halcyon was formed by singers Alison Morgan and Jenny Duck-Chong, and uses a pool of local instrumentalists as required. One of the striking features of Halcyon is how several strong and attractive musical personalities retain their individual qualities while producing such beautifully integrated interpretations. My own history with the ensemble includes their performance of my short work for women's voices *Sappho's Reply* some years ago, and more recently the Australian premiere of my Goodison Quartet No. 1: *Country Music*, which Jenny Duck-Chong sang with the Acacia Quartet.

For their fifteenth-birthday celebrations numerous composers, including Katy Abbott, Stephen Adams, Nigel Butterley, Sharon Calcraft, Ross Edwards, Andrew Ford, Stuart Greenbaum, Elliott Gyger, Graham Hair, Moya Henderson, Raffaele Marcellino, Kevin March, Rosalind Page, John Peterson, Andrew Schultz, Paul Stanhope, Jane Stanley, Nicholas Vines, Dan Walker, Gillian Whitehead, and I, were only too happy to write short pieces for the ensemble's anniversary concerts. Halcyon offered composers various combinations of the two voices, flute, clarinet, cello, and percussion. I chose soprano, mezzo, and an ensemble of clarinet, vibraphone, and cello. Halcyon asked that the pieces be no longer than four minutes in duration, and that the text in some way relate to the connotations of the word 'halcyon.' These include the image of the kingfisher itself, which according to legend could calm stormy waters, hence the expression 'a halcyon day' to describe such tranquil conditions. By extension, halcyon could refer to the sea itself: its colours and its moods. I felt it appropriate to use a text, if possible, by an Australian writer. After some trawling through kingfisher-related literature (sadly, T.S. Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins, both of whom had written stunning poetry on the subject, weren't Australian) I decided to go with the broader oceanic theme that Alison and Jenny mentioned in their brief.

My requirement for an Australian text was met when I was leafing through *The Jaguar's Dream*, a volume of translations of, and riffs on, a range of non-English poetry by John Kinsella, one of this country's greatest poets and one whose work I have set in various other pieces. Nearly thirty years ago I composed a set of songs to poetry by Charles Baudelaire (who, I had to inform a publisher, wasn't Australian either and, having gone to his eternal reward, didn't need the royalties) the first of which was his sonnet 'La musique,' of which John has a beautiful version in this collection. As Baudelaire wrote, 'Music often carries me away like a sea! / Toward my pale star ...' —his poem continues this metaphor: the lungs of the singer swelling like sails, the journey encompassing steep and exhilarating waves, tempestuous passion, and becalmed despair. While Baudelaire was thinking specifically of Beethoven's work when he wrote his poem, I think its imagery of the protean and powerful nature of the sea is an apt image for music generally, and was thus a perfect way in which to thank Halcyon's musicians for their years of work in the service of our art.

Planning the Piece

Most commissions stipulate a new work's duration: sadly, it is currently the era of ten- to twelve-minute works. But such works are most often commissioned for specific programs, which are constrained by numerous factors including the length of the overall program, the available rehearsal time and so on; an attack of divine afflatus that produces a thirty minute work in place of a twelve minute one is going to be inconvenient for all concerned.

Working with an extant text gives one a sense of the mood and overall dramatic shape of a new work. Kinsella's translation is (like Baudelaire's original) a modified sonnet. The rhyme scheme is by no means strict, but the first two quatrains (or octave) reflect the conventional 'a-b-a-b' design. While the work alternates long and short lines—giving the verse a wave-like motion—it has fourteen lines that contain a dramatic shift or *volta* after the eighth line; it is here that the expansive sense of full sail gives way to a more rapid passage of contrasting emotions.

Music often carries me away like a sea!
Toward my pale star,
Beneath a ceiling of mist or in a vast sky,
I cast anchor.

My chest a bowsprit and lungs billowing
Like sails,
I scale the back of waves gathering
As night drops its veil;

I feel all the passions of a stricken
Vessel vibrating inside me;
The fair wind, the tempest and its convulsions

Upon the immense gulf rock me.
At other times, becalmed, great mirror
Of my despair!

In order to give the piece a sense of the groundswell I decided to use a relatively slow compound metre in bar lengths that varied between 6/8 and 9/8 to provide a sense of triple metre. The phrases, however, are longer than a 3/4 bar and avoid a regular downbeat. This was not a wholly successful strategy, as it creates long bars and some performers find it confusing to count quavers. It also creates what looks on the face of it to be unreasonably rapid demisemiquaver passages. But, having decided on a speed and metre, I could easily calculate the approximate number of bars required to fill four minutes and, within that frame, where significant events would need to fall in order to give the work satisfactory proportions.

Analytical Remarks

The piece begins with an introductory bar for the instruments that is metrically somewhat ambiguous, but which establishes the importance of the major second interval. An A/B dyad echoes between the instruments within the interval of a ninth, and sets up what might be an ostinato, though the cello—perversely much more *cantabile* than the voicesat—carries them away into more ornate counterpoint. This is a recurring strategy in the piece: counterpoint, especially that which exploits suspended dissonance on strong beats between the vocal parts, contrasts with other passages where ostinatos seek to blur the distinction between the instruments. These ostinato passages also serve to articulate the *volta* at bars 13–14 and the two final tercets at bars 21–22 and 29–30.

The vocal lines are designed to present the words intelligibly to express the feeling behind the words themselves, and to be rewarding for the singers. In bar 3, the homophony from the previous bar gives way to counterpoint with the words ‘carries me away.’ The long ‘-ay’ of ‘away’ allows for a sustained high note from the soprano, while the mezzo iterates the phrase we have just heard. The same principle is at work in the setting of the word ‘sea’ (though the narrow vowel means a lower tessitura) and in bar 6 on the word ‘pale.’ This leads to the piece’s first climax, and unison, on the word ‘star’; here the harmony takes a Lydian turn, which has been adumbrated by the F♯ in the cello melody in bar 2.

The harmony to that point has been largely derived from more stable four-note chords, expressed, for instance, as imitative arabesques in the ostinato in bar 4 that stress the A/B dyad from the opening. In bars 8 to 15 the harmony is based on a minor triad inflected by an added second, and often in sequences of chords a third apart.

There is a certain amount of word painting, as in the melisma on the word ‘vast’ as mentioned above. The cello in bar 16, joined by the clarinet in bar 17, might suggest a sail swelling in the breeze and the rise and fall of waves through to bar 20. The poet’s imagery of passions, vibrations, and convulsions are reflected, of course, in the tremolos and imitative melismas of bars 23–9. The much less busy texture that occurs at bar 31 depicts the sense of being becalmed, and the voices’ contrary motion on the word ‘mirror’ is another kind of musical onomatopoeia. The piece returns to the A/B dyad motif and concludes with another tertian shift.

for Halcyon, with loving gratitude for 15 years
of new music

Music (La musique)

John Kinsella after Charles Baudelaire

Gordon Kerry

Gently flowing ♩ = 84

Clarinet in Bb

p

Vibraphone

softest mallets,
motor off

p

Soprano

mp

Mu-sic of - ten car-ries me a - way _____ like a

Mezzo-Soprano

mp

Mu- sic_ of - ten car - ries me a-way_____

Gently flowing ♩ = 84

sul II
III

sul tasto

mp >

p *espressivo*; >

Copyright © Gordon Kerry 2013

4

mf mp

mf mp

mf mp

sea! To-ward my pale

mf mp

like a sea! To - ward my pale

naturale

mp mf mp f

7

p mf

p mf

fp mf

star, Be-neath a ceil - ing of

fp mf

star, Be-neath a ceil- ing of

mp p mf

9

p *f* *mp* *f*

p *f* *mp* *f*

mp *f* *mp* *f*

mist or in a vast

mp *f* *mp* *f*

mist or in a vast

f *mf* *mp* *f*

11

mp

mp

mp

sky, I cast an - chor;

sky, I cast an - chor;

poco a poco sul pont *poco a poco.....nat.*

mp

13

15

ad lib 8^{va}...

mp
My chest a bows - prit and lungs bil - lo-wing Like

mp
My chest a bows - prit and lungs bil - lo-wing Like

sul tasto → sul pont → sul tasto *ad lib*

17

mp *f* *mp*

f *mp*

sails, I scale the back of waves

sails, I scale the back of waves

mp *f* *mp*

nat.



19

mf *f* *p subito non espressivo* *pp*

p *pp*

f *mp*

ga-ther-ing As night drops its veil;

f *mp*

ga-ther-ing As night drops its veil;

mf *f* *p subito* *pp*

sul I sul tasto

22

p *mp*

tenuto

p

p

I feel all the pas-sions of a

I feel all the pas-sions of a

mp *p* *mp*

nat. *sul pont.* *poco sul pont.*



25

mf *f* *f cantabile*

f *f*

f

strick-en Ves-sel vi-bra-ting in-side me; The fair wind, the

strick-en Ves-sel vi-bra-ting in-side me; The fair wind, the

nat. *f* *f cantabile*

27

mp
temp-est and its con-vul - sions Up - on_ the im - mense_ void rock

mp
temp-est and its con-vul - sions Up - on_ the im - mense_ void rock

mp



29

ff — *f* *mf* *mp* *p* *pp*

f *mf* *mp* *p* *pp*

ff
me.

ff
me.

ff — *f* *mf* *mp* *p* *pp*

31

p *mp* *mp* *mp*

At o-ther times, be - calmed, great mir-ror Of my_____

At o-ther times, be-calmed, great mir-ror Of my_____

mp *p* *mp* *sul II III*

35

p *pp* *ppp* *p* *pp* *ppp* *p* *pp* *ppp*

des - pair!

des - pair!