

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

LEE JOHNSON

" Sand Floor Cathedral"

Composing Sandfloor Cathedral began almost immediately after I read this passage from the Book of Psalms, "So is this great and wide sea wherein are things creeping innumerable. Both small and great beasts. There go the ships, there is that leviathan whom Thou hast made to play therein. These wait upon Thee." It's like the vast power and the spiritual quality of the sea sprang into immediate action in my mind and the opening chorale was written within minutes of me reading that passage. I chose to use additional passages from the Old Testament, from the Latin Mass, and from the First Book of Moses which I had performed in Hebrew. I had to have the text transliterated in order for the singers to prepare the music.

The opening monody for soprano solo has a deliberately timeless quality about it. And the text which is "et in terra pax hominibus" translated means, "and on earth peace to men of good will" for me sets the tone for the listeners voyage.

There is something wonderfully profound about artistic understatement. The lone voice of the soprano inaugurating this piece is a deliberate choice rather than having a group of singers sing in a very declamatory style, I think that this delivery singing very clearly and honestly helps maybe even halt our attention in a greater way than something that would be kind of "over the top" with energy. For me, this performance from Felicia Starks is near atmospheric and musical perfection.

I was very conscious about adding new instruments to the orchestra. New in the sense that they are not normally be found in the orchestra. This would continue the tradition of other composers like Mozart and Beethoven. Mozart added the clarinet, Beethoven added trombones and the piccolo to his symphonic work; and voices. I've used voices in my symphonies. Three of the five have voice in some way, large or small. In this particular symphony, in addition to the voices, I added twelve string guitar, solo girl soprano, whale song, narrator, three choruses, rhythm section, soprano sax, pipe organ, solo piano, etc.

This was a response to the vastness of the sea, but this was also an ongoing discovery process. For me, the sea has become nearly, "description-less" and these instruments seem to add more mystery and grandness to my musical language in an effort to keep pace with this ongoing discovery. The third movement, "Visits from the Pod" is a sectional, lento chorale with a massive climax at its conclusion. A composer friend of mine described it as a three dimensional virtual tour through harmony. The sonic structures are very large and for me they represent the overwhelming experience of swimming with humpback whales in the Dominican Republic. That experience is pivotal in my growing understanding of this "description-less" majesty of the sea and in this case I feel that the music is best to be experienced rather than to be analyzed.

The fourth movement, "Mutual Admiration" is the simplest of all the musical forms within the symphony and that's melodically, structurally and orchestrationally. It's very close to a lullaby. For me the honesty of a dolphin encounter is perhaps why it is so often a life changing event; at least for the human side of the experience. The wild dolphin can and does do what it wishes and if it chooses to spend time with you, you are the blessed one.

Now, for the guitar solo in "Mutual Admiration" I asked Jack Gallup to do a solo that would make a little girl smile with awe and with joy. I think the solo is so gorgeous that it really brings out the child in all of the listeners and for me, it makes me feel like my own soul is smiling. "Upon the Face of the Waters" is the name of the last movement, it's also the longest movement. It was inspired by the book that Donald Tipton was working on at the same time I was composing the symphony and they seem to have prodded each other

along in some sort of healthy wonderful way. For our art film we begin at the movement's internal adagio and then it continues on through the finale. I am particularly pleased with the harmonic richness of the adagio which, for me, has a floating "prayer-like" theme; and seems to represent the musical hallowed hideaway that was found by this diving experience on the shipwreck in the Dominican Republic. It was my first really significant free dive experience.

The finale is like a festival of joy and human aspiration in combination. There are two choruses, plus the orchestra which take us to the highest watermark of emotion that I was attempting to deliver in the symphony. Coupled with the video clip of the ascent of a wild dolphin pod it maybe even feels like a moment of truth or even an epiphany. Then I come out of this very complex cannon to a point where I use maybe its polar opposite. I go to homophonic passage which is very similar to a hymn to help orient or retighten the focus of the emotions for this dolphin ascent. This hymn-like moment helps to hold together entire work and, for me, completes the circuit with opening monody or the opening solo melody. These gestures frame the symphony together.

And then I close out with a very prayer-like coda with its recitation of the Hebrew word, "keytov" which provides my final thought for this "cathedral of the sea". "Keytov" means, it is good.