

an epic piano odyssey of ancient mythologies by Larry Sitsky

Dimensions of night

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Larry Sitsky's *Dimensions of Night* draws on ancient legend, myth and spiritual history. It reflects on the connectedness of the world's religious mythologies and their frequent exploitation to cause harm to the vulnerable. The epic employs a series of chords to underpin the sequence of harmonies throughout the whole cycle.

"Only a pianist of Harvey's calibre could tackle this work, which requires exceptional stamina and technique, and the ability to see beyond the forest of notes to its spiritual heart. There is little opportunity to relax in the work which evokes imagery from Ancient Egypt to the Kabbalah." *Stephen Whittington (Adelaide Advertiser)*

- 1 **Chant of Gatha Ushtavaiti** 5'11"
Zoroastrianism
- 2 **Ra Sails the Mesektet Barque** 9'08"
Ra, the Egyptian Sun God
- 3 **Thoh** 6'25"
The Maya God
- 4 **Mara** 6'38"
Mara, the Norse Ondine
- 5 **Sitra Achra** 8'49"
The other side or realm of impurity
- 6 **Eros** 9'19"
The God of Love
- 7 **Chant Ceremony of the Yei Gods** 6'45"
The Navajo gods
- 8 **Lord of the Smoking Mirror** 8'18"
Tezcatlipoca
- 9 **The Chaos of Aesiod** 7'01"
Hesiod's Works and Days
- 10 **Devekut** 12'04"
The cleaving to God of the Hasidic Jews

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Larry Sitsky
Dimensions of Night (2008)
commissioned by
Michael Kieran Harvey



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Introduction by Larry Sitsky

As a young man I wanted to be a poet. I began my creed of life writing poetry in both Russian and English. That had to be given away because the music became more important. But to this day I'm fascinated by words. So much of my music is based in literary sources, and over the years it moved to mythology. I call these inspirations: compositional springboards; mine is not program music.

Being a pianist, a lot of my music is written for the piano, and there are many arrangements and transcriptions which include folk music. Folk music is to me the beginning of all art music and indeed my first compositions quoted folk melody. Folk music generates ideas which then become my own through transformation, elaboration and dramatic shifting; in the end you can't recognise it.

Being a performer, I have the person for whom the piece is being written very much in mind. Composition is allied to

performance. The composer puts down what he can and then hands over the score to the performer who then does what he or she wishes with it. It's impossible to notate everything, so you give part of yourself to someone who then makes it part of themselves.

Recently I've been experimenting with other ways of organising material other than thematic construction. I've been playing with the idea of dynamics driving a piece, or other non-traditional ways of putting sounds together. It is also driven by a sense of the mystical; music has this incredible power to reach beyond the world we live in. There are other vibrations, other worlds, beyond ours, and I'm trying to give a glimpse of them. Composers don't necessarily write what's in their head, but we have antennae – we're tuning in to something – and now and then, when the 'reception' is clear, you tune in well.

Program notes by Michael Kieran Harvey

The piece came about after performances of the monumental piano cycle *Way of the Seeker* (2006) (based on Sufi texts) and the 2nd Symphony (2004): Larry wanted to write another cycle and suggested “nocturnes” ... but of course this benign idea, conjuring up images of a beperfumed french salon serenaded by a sickly pomaded fop, soon morphed into an anarchical mystery odyssey which debunks the originality of modern day religions – exposing the ancient ideas which were plagiarised by the powerful to hoodwink the gullible.



I – “Chant of Gatha Ushtavaiti”

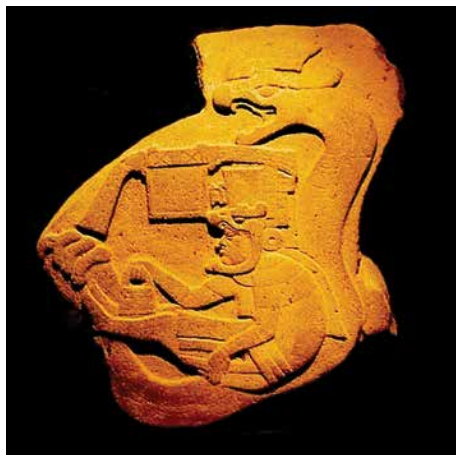
Cantabile con calore

Zoroastrianism – Zoroaster’s similarity to the Christ myth as expressed in the Gathas or hymns. Zoroaster sings, the chant evoking Eastern European and Buddhist influences, accompanied by tam-tams, gongs and bell trees. The melody outlines and foretells the 21 chords of Mara.



II – “Ra Sails the Mesektet Barque” *Molto ritmico*

Ra, the original sungod, the all-powerful Egyptian deity who rides the barge to hell every night. Drums, sinister choruses and wailing laments accompany the journey. A crescendo until the doomed diminished fifths herald the golden section. Magical static harmonies as the god surveys the underworld. A lone voice calls, answered by bass drums. The return is bathed in irradiated overtones.



III – “Thoh”

Thoh – the Maya god whose signature is 5 and who demands human sacrifice to keep the economy going. Embalmed in pedal, the tinnitus of the opening grows from single notes to 5-note chords, each section interspersed with premonitions of the other movements: IX, VII, VI, IV and finishing with 8 of the 21 chords in retrograde.

IV – “Mara”

Allegro tumultuoso

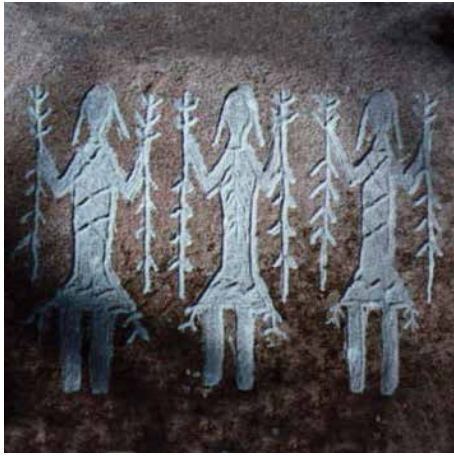
Mara, the Norse Ondine, the eternal succubus, origin of our word “nightmare” as the bitch rides us into chaotic horror every night. Frantic additive spirals lead to the 21 chords, now playful, now skittish, now triumphant and omnipotent. Seduction and death.

V – “Sitra Achra” Allegro

the heavenly Court of the Kabbalah, yes – we are never free of bureaucracy. Swirling gas reveals the chorus of judgement. Static polyphonic strands, drums recall Ra and the chant is evoked again in strong octaves. Obsessive ruminations culminate in the splash of cymbals.

VI – “Eros”

The god of love, whose syphilitic side is revealed when spelt backwards. Scriabinesque harmonies, yearning passages mixed with the spectres of disease and perversion. Ecstasy, Lisztian transports of emotion - Ra’s diabolic diminished 5th returns to put all in perspective.



VII – “Chant Ceremony of the Yei Gods”

Martellato

The Navajo gods, of whom Yeibichaii, the all-powerful, is invoked in the Night Chant ceremony. Phrygian harmonies, a re-evocation of the opening chant, but inverted. Frantic basslines, dance rhythms. Wraiths of trills, smoke, drums, glissandos, sacrifices to the totems or the Kabbalah from movement V.



VIII – “Lord of the Smoking Mirror”

Tezcatlipoca, head of the Aztec religion, not modelled after narcissistic Noel Coward as his name suggests but rather the translucent rock-glass obsidian. A nocturne of death – static, romantic minor 9ths as the blood flows, and consciousness slips away ...



IX – “The Chaos of Aesiod”

Hesiod’s (Aesiod’s) “Works and Days”, a sort of Greek “Kali Yuga”, and “Theogeny” a sort of “Gottterdammerung” were mercilessly plundered by monotheist scribes after 800 BCE to evoke the concept of a “Golden Age” from which the corrupt present has fallen. Out of the bliss of unconsciousness Thoh re-creates the gases of the primordial universe. Long chromatic passages undulate, coagulate and finally the planets collide, the galaxies spiral away to infinity.



X – “Devekut”

Molto ritmico

The cleaving to God of the Hasidic jews, with the “tsaddig”, a shaman figure, absorbing all the evil of his community, thereby cleansing it. The chant returns, summoned by Ra, but in retrograde. The 21 chords, themes from all the movements, a long decrescendo to nothing, the cold aloneness of the expanding universe.

Throughout the work, which could also be considered a kind of pantheistic Book of the Dead, certain mystic-chord progressions act as leitmotives, possibly suggesting the similar ideas between the disparate religious sources. In particular, the repetitive sequence of 21 chords heard in various rhythmic treatments in “Mara” are sourced for the entire work, and act as pitch, rhythm and structural generators for the 10 movements. Movements I, VII and X are related by the chant character, which also makes ghostly appearances in all other movements, generally in the background texture of the softer passages. Larry has prefaced the work with the following words:

“There are...gates that can only be opened by music” The Zohar

“For MIKHA-EL, one of the good guys”

Michael Kieran Harvey

More from Larry Sitsky

After Michael Kieran Harvey premiered my *Symphony for Piano and Orchestra*, we discussed my writing a new work especially for Michael. Jokingly, and keeping in mind Michael’s special brand of fiery virtuosity, I suggested composing a book of quiet, reflective nocturnes. Michael, however, took the light-hearted suggestion seriously, and pointed out to me that ‘nocturnes’ were simply ‘night pieces’. And they are not nocturnes in the Chopinesque sense.

From that remark came the notion of a huge cycle of ten pieces, which could be performed separately, but were also part of a linked series of pieces, with cross-references and thematic connections. As we go through the cycle you will hear references to previous material but at the same time this was written for

Michael’s special talent and special way of playing.

Dimensions of Night begins with a chant from Persia. The sound of drums is very important in the cycle as is rhythm and sometimes repeated note rhythms feature quite prominently. The whole cycle is composed from a matrix of chords; it’s a series of chords than can be used in toto or splintered into parts, for example in *Mara*.

I see no point in ‘explaining’ the titles, which come from a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds. Those listeners who are intrigued by them can easily research the references. Others may choose to ignore the titles completely, with no loss of musical understanding. The title comes from Gwen Harwood’s wonderful libretto for my first opera *Fall of the House of Usher*.



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