

## Danza de los voladores

This short piece originated in 1978 as a duo for flute and harp. It was written for the flautist, Ingrid Culliford and the harpist, Frances Kelly, and was entitled simply Recitative. I recently came across the sketches of the piece and was reminded that I had always been very dissatisfied with the harp part, which was not only extremely difficult to play, but also did not serve the coloristic and harmonic demands of an appropriate and supportive accompaniment for the flute. In a flash, I could suddenly imagine an accompaniment full of activity, colour and energy, and from an ensemble of stringed instruments, plucked, bowed and struck, and as a result decided to completely rework the harp part, effectively creating a new piece.

As I began to expand the harmonies, rhythms and gestures of the original accompaniment (especially in the birdsong-like piccolo solo and pulsating drum rhythm in the second section), I recalled the extraordinary ritual I had seen in Mexico - the so-called *Danza de los voladores* (literally 'Dance of the Flyers'). I immediately thought that this piece seemed like a perfect recollection of this ritual, but given that it was originally composed in 1978, and I did not witness this dance until my visit to Mexico in 1993, we see an almost portentous case of a composition describing an experience I was to have some fifteen years later!

The *Danza de los voladores* itself is extremely old, originating in the Papantla region of the state of Veracruz some 500 years ago following a severe drought. The ritual was devised to appease the Gods and bring back the rains. Five men perform the ritual, and start by climbing a 30-metre pole. One man plays both a small flute and small drum, whilst simultaneously dancing on top of the pole with a breathtaking combination of balance and dexterity. The other four men attach themselves by their feet to four ropes, which are laid over a square rotating frame fixed to the top of the pole. During the opening flute and drum dance the four men rotate slowly around the pole, winding up the ropes. At a certain moment when the exact length of rope is wound up, the four men leap headfirst off the top of the pole and begin to spin around it. With each rotation the ropes unwind and become longer and longer, and the four voladores gradually descend to ground level in ever increasing spirals. At the precise moment when their heads almost touch the ground all four men simultaneously turn themselves right way up and land on the ground running. Traditionally, the sound of the flute represents the singing of a bird, and the four voladores are dressed as different kinds of birds, such as parrots, macaws, quetzals and eagles.

The instrumentation of my *Danza* was also arrived at before the similarity to the Mexican ritual had occurred to me, but once I had made the connection it was clear that I had had in my ear not only the sound of the little flute and drum, but also that of certain Mexican and South American folk instruments. Thus my instrumentation of muted violin, mandolin, guitar and piano represents in turn the Mariachi fiddle, the Bolivian charango and the Mexican guitar and guitarone; the dancer's flute is represented by flute and piccolo and his drum by a single high F-sharp on the piano, muted with a rubber wedge.

James Wood