

## Tongues of Fire

*Tongues of Fire* was written during the summer of 2001 in response to an intriguing commission from David Connell - to write a substantial work for symphonic chorus and percussion quartet for the 140th Anniversary of the Yale Glee Club.

Conscious of the enormous tradition of American university Glee Clubs, and the part that gospel and spiritual music always seems to have played in it, my thoughts for a subject were immediately drawn towards the story of Pentecost. Not only would this story serve as a perfect medium through which to try to ignite the kind of transcendental spirituality which is the very essence of gospel music (and indeed the very act of singing together), but also I saw it as a way to acknowledge, indeed emphasise, America's rich cultural diversity, which is so striking in New York and its environs. The inclusion of a percussion group would not only extend the role that percussion instruments often play in traditional gospel music, but would also help to emphasise this sense of cultural diversity.

My first main decision, therefore, was to set the central text, from the Acts of the Apostles, in Spanish - not Castilian, but Latin-American Spanish with its crisp rhythmic articulations, and possibilities for Salsa-like syncopations. I would then seek out a wide variety of complimentary texts which would serve to expand certain images and ideas within the main text. Furthermore each of these complimentary texts would be in a different language, so that with the line "and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues" this is not only exactly what would happen, but would also trigger a kind of patchwork of singing styles and ethos. This patchwork would continue to be woven around the main Spanish text in ever-increasing detail and intensity throughout the main part of the work.

The final form of *Tongues of Fire* was laid out in four Parts, with a short introduction. The introduction is an invocation to the Holy Spirit, and to Spirits in general - Part I is a rather bizarre setting of the 10th Century Hymn 'Veni Creator Spiritus' - here the text is not really heard, but more 'encoded' beneath ever-changing clouds of sibilants - this is the 'lighting of the fire' which eventually ignites at the beginning of Part II, and the central Spanish narrative begins. As already described, the discourse soon splinters into eight different languages and associated characters - Hebrew, Maori, Jamaican English, Latin, Hungarian, Russian, German and French. After the drunken climax of this section, Part III is more contemplative, and sets the beautiful poem *O ignis Spiritus Paracliti* (*O comforting fire of Spirit*) by Hildegard of Bingen, and finally Part IV completes the story in a whirlwind of dreams, prophecies, signs, blood, fire and vapour, culminating in Joel's prophecy that 'whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved'.

After the initial performances in Yale and New York, the intention would be to take it on tour, possibly to South Africa and Mauritius. Consequently my choice of percussion instrumentation would have to be made with this in mind. As a result I decided to build the percussion instrumentarium around a quartet of oil drums. Oil drums are found in every country of the world, and they are generally identical in size. Only the special cradles, mallets and other lighter or more portable instruments would need to be transported. I had already developed a system of notation for striking oil drums on different parts of their surfaces, and had been astonished by the almost orchestral richness of timbre of these apparently crude instruments. I went on to discover even greater potential in their use as resonators for other instruments such as cowbells, gongs, guiros and metal rods. The fact that oil drums are used in the manufacture of steel pans in the West Indies is no coincidence, nor is their association with fire, one of the many multi-faceted and symbolic images which appear throughout the texts.

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