

who if not I?

PROGRAM NOTES

I've never been comfortable with music as propaganda: it is too noble an art for advertisement, no matter how important the ideas being placarded. And yet I believe music, through its potential for beauty beyond our reckoning, can alter our perception of reality in ways no other form of communication can. I've experienced this and, I hope, caused it now and again through my own work as a composer and performer.

And so when my friend Dr. Jack Shindler, Director of the Office of International Programs at North Central College, asked me to consider creating a musical work for Barbara Schubert's wonderful DuPage Symphony Orchestra on the issue of global environmental change, especially as it relates to local concerns in North America, I was flummoxed. How could I make a piece of music that would comment on this profound and controversial issue and yet not be propagandistic? How could I move beyond endless statistics, beyond well-meaning documentaries by former vice presidents, beyond grand meetings in Copenhagen with dignitaries from around the world, beyond countless environmentally conscience initiatives, and draw attention to what I believe is at the core of this matter, the self and its relationship to the earth? There is, after all, nothing more local.

Since this music was to involve voices as well as orchestra, I spent several months in search of a text that would carry the sentiments I was after and found what I was looking for in a mysterious poem known as *The Song of Amergin*. Though not much is understood about its origin, it is believed *The Song of Amergin* was created by the first conquerors of what is now Ireland, several thousand years before Christ. The author sees himself so integrated into the land he now inhabits that he is one with the wind, the waves, the animals and flowers. His is a self that is defined within and because of the land that he is now steward over and he makes this realization because he believes himself to be at-one with the divine, the genitor of all Creation.

*I am the wind that breathes upon the sea
I am the wave of the ocean
I am the murmur of the billows
I am the ox of the seven combats
I am the hawk upon the cliff
I am a beam of the sun
I am the fairest of flowers
I am a salmon in the water
I am a lake in the plain
I am a word of science
I am the point of the lance in battle
I am the God who created in the head . . . the fire
Who levels the mountain?
Who speaks the ages of the moon?
Who teaches the place where couches the sun?
Who, if not I?*

The music unfolds in a somewhat traditional verse/chorus fashion (more classically referred to as Rondo) with a prelude and postlude incorporating additional text not from *The Song of Amergin*. Here we have the words of St. Thomas Aquinas:

*The Known is the perfection of the Knower
(Cognitum, sit perfectio, cognoscentis)*

To my mind, this bookending text provides further commentary on *The Song of Amergin*, elongating the notion that we are both inhabited and inhabitator . . . known and knower . . . Creation and Creator.

The style of the music is a conflation of influences, always intended to be contemplative, even when assertive, and always about color, like the murmur of the billows. The marimba acts as a sort of conduit, carrying the energy of the piece through the eight sections and the voices, these resplendent ladies from Dr. Ramona Wis' highly regarded Women's Chorale at North Central College, act as prophetesses, summoning us to contemplation and reflection.

If *who if not I?* is not propaganda than what is it? If I had a choice, I'd ask you to think of it as liturgy. It is a thing of aesthetic purpose yet exists not unto itself but to point, to be a form into which meaning is imparted by you as listener. In this way a circle is drawn . . . and we come back to the self.

*James Falzone
9 January 2010*