

Tse Go La

Andrea Clearfield's *Tse Go La* (At the threshold of this life) was co-commissioned by the Pennsylvania Girlchoir and Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, and received its premiere in April, 2012. The cantata derives its inspiration from Clearfield's experiences studying Buddhist ritual music, chant and folk music in the Tibetan community of Lo Monthang, located in a remote and restricted Himalayan region of Nepal. She weaves together traditional melodies and texts, original poetry from the respected cultural anthropologist and writer Sienna Craig, and elements of Tibetan culture and Buddhist philosophy into a musical tapestry that follows the great arc of birth, life, death and re-creation.

Clearfield has written, "Composing music can transport one to the far reaches of one's imagination. Commissions often inspire me to explore places, subjects, sounds, and spaces that I might never have imagined, musical and otherwise. However, I had no way of knowing that my life would change as a result of a collaborative commission that would lead me to the top of the world." Her journey began when she was commissioned in 2008 by Network for New Music, Linda Reichert, Artistic Director, to collaborate with painter Maureen Drdak as part of a program pairing music and the visual arts. Drdak's art is inspired by Buddhist iconography, and to gather research, Drdak and Clearfield trekked to Lo Monthang along with noted cultural anthropologist Sienna Craig, an expert in Tibetan folk medicine who had lived for a number of years in Nepal and spoke fluent Nepalese and Tibetan.

Lo Monthang is the capital of the historic kingdom of Lo, or Upper Mustang, founded in the mid-14th century. It was annexed by the kingdom of Nepal in the late 18th century, but its people, language and culture are Tibetan. It is remote, even by Nepali standards, and accessible only on foot or horseback along steep mountain trails. Its annexation by Nepal has ironically proved a blessing in disguise. With the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Lo Monthang is now one of the few places on earth where the Tibetan culture and its Buddhist traditions remain intact.

At the suggestion of John Sanday, one of the leading archeological conservators in Asia, Clearfield sought out Tashi Tsering, the last of the royal court singers of Lo Monthang. Without willing heirs to pass on his songs, his repertoire was threatened, and she conceived a project to record and document his entire repertoire before it was lost forever. Returning in 2010 with anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Katey Blumenthal, she and Blumenthal completed the project, recording over 130 *gar glu* (court songs) as well as *tro glu* (traditional folk songs). While her time in Lo Monthang has provided Clearfield with a wealth of source material (she has now completed three works based on Tibetan music), it has also brought her a true compassion for the Tibetan people and their efforts to preserve their cultural heritage. She has become involved in a number of initiatives to raise not only money but also awareness. She and Blumenthal sent the first copies of their edited recordings on cassette tape, along with boom boxes, batteries and headphones, to a newly created community library in Lo Monthang so that they would be available for future

generations. They are currently seeking funding to transcribe and translate (into both Nepali and English) all the *gar glu* songs that they recorded into a songbook. *Lung-Ta* (The Windhorse), the critically acclaimed collaborative work that Clearfield created with Drdak and Group Motion Dance Company, was offered as a gift to the Dalai Lama as an initiative for world peace.

Tse Go La is set for chorus, treble chorus, electronic sound and chamber orchestra, including a large battery of percussion instruments, some of which are traditional Tibetan instruments used in Buddhist ritual music that Clearfield brought back from Lo Monthang: *damaru* (two-sided hand drums), *rolmo* (cymbals), *drilbu* (hand bells), *dungkar* (conch shells) and singing bowls. She sets several traditional *gar glu* and *tro glu* songs as well as original poetry by Sienna Craig. Clearfield uses or adapts the traditional song melodies and their characteristic ornamentations of the vocal lines. Lines inspired by Buddhist chant sometimes end with a bend, the pitch falling and the sound seeming to disappear, as if the note has moved to some place where it still exists, unheard. Tibetan chant is notated with long, undulating, cursive lines that trace the contours of the chant melody, and Clearfield creates melodic lines reflecting that sinuous, undulating shape. The electronic music is taken from sounds she recorded in Lo Monthang: ritual music, folk songs, and the sounds of the elements – wind, water, earth, fire – these last transformed electronically into something both dramatic and mysterious.

Tse Go La is composed of a prologue and six movements that flow into each other without pause. The movements, and sometimes sections within a movement, are bridged by transitions, musical thresholds in which the sound hovers, briefly suspended in time and space, as you enter a new musical landscape. The opening *Prologue* introduces a motif which will recur throughout the work, a rapid, almost bell-like repetition of the word *do*, Tibetan for stone. Clearfield's treks into Lo Monthang took her along the Kali Gandaki river gorge, where *saligrams*, 150-million year old ammonite fossils, can be found, uncovered by the action of the water. It was a moment of wonder and awe for Clearfield to hold these incredibly ancient fossils in her hand with the realization that the tallest mountains on earth were once the bottom of the sea. The *saligrams* can be a metaphor for many things: change (Buddhism teaches that nothing is permanent); a sense of both time and timelessness; the unexpected wonder that you can experience when you cross a threshold.

Kye (birth) is the first of two poems by Sienna Craig. As it opens, one hears the electronic sounds derived from the elements, digitally transformed and abstracted, as if they somehow inhabit a larger space. The five elements (earth, water, fire, wind and space) are very important in Buddhist tradition. They shape the world and each new life that comes into it. Their names are chanted quietly and rhythmically underneath the music, first in English and then in Tibetan. The soft rhythmic chanting begins again after the music climaxes in the moment of birth, almost like a new heartbeat. There is another transition, a new threshold, with a delicate, almost magical, orchestration, music that spins endlessly like a prayer wheel.

Shar Ki Ri, set for the treble choir alone, is based on a *tro glu* folksong. Traditionally, it would have been sung with dancing, and Clearfield has added footwork with light slaps that reflect the sound of the dance. A beautifully harmonized melody is punctuated with highly rhythmic, sibilant whispering, the singers counting time. Craig notes that the Tibetan language makes extensive use of metaphor and allusion, so it is difficult to achieve word for word translations. The text for *Shar Ki Ri* contains a strong sense of Tibet's unique cultural and geographic identity. Looking to the west also signifies looking to the future: in the east, the sun has already risen, but in the west, the sun is yet to rise, the future has not yet been born, and all things are still possible.

Apart from providing a simple yet hauntingly beautiful accompaniment, Clearfield sets *Tse Go La* almost exactly as Tashi Tsering sang it, with its highly ornamented vocal line and unusual harmonic structure, moving from minor to major to minor at each successive line. It is a song of an as yet unrealized love, with tenor and soprano solos alternating with each other. *Kusum* is a long, strophic song. The translation of the full text is given in the program, although Clearfield sets only the first verse. The text is set in unison octaves, creating a sense of weight and somberness as Kusum says farewell to all that was familiar in her life. Like many of the Tibetan melodies, *Kusum* is built on a pentatonic (five note) scale. At the end of the refrain, the combined choruses swell to a climax on a thick chord built from five adjacent pitches. Out of this sea of voices comes the ritual sound of the conch shells, calling us to the next threshold. Crossing a threshold is sometimes also about what is left behind, but more importantly, is about the willingness to let go and to move forward. It is a jumping off point, a transition as significant as birth and death, for it leads to maturity and wisdom and understanding. Perhaps it is even more significant, for it requires an act of volition while birth and death come unbidden. During the transition, strings join the conch shells, alternating between two pitches, slightly out of synchrony and with microtonal undulations. Women's voices join, moving ever faster until transforming into a kind of keening lament, which overflows into the opening phrase of *Re Chung Tso*. This movement can be understood from the point of view of the elderly listener, who feels young again when he hears the music.

Shi (death) is the emotional climax of the work. It is both a summation of life, and a continuation of the journey. There are several internal musical transitions, each with its own sound landscape - in Buddhist thought even death has its stages. The music becomes increasingly ethereal at each transition, as the words fall away and we are left with only the *do* motif. Even that becomes more internalized and introspective as the singers choose their own rhythms and tempos. Underneath, basses chant the Heart Sutra mantra, whose words speak of passage and transcendence, "gone, gone beyond, gone far beyond to the other shore," as the music softly fades, leaving only the resonant, otherworldly sound of the singing bowls, hanging, suspended somewhere between time and space.

– Michael Moore