

Sumi Tonooka | Out from the Silence

This piece was conceived from my desire to express through music my outraged reaction to the experience of my mother and 110,000 others, who because of their Japanese ancestry were put behind barbed wire and imprisoned in concentration camps during World War II. My mother was 16 at the time and an American citizen. The idea for this piece came after I attended the reparation hearings. I accompanied my mom who testified along with other Nisei, Issei and Sansei (second, first and third generation). I was struck that day by having heard many different and moving recountings of the devastating effects of the camps on so many lives. This was probably the first time many people shared their stories, and in such a public and formal venue. Yet it was strangely intimate, sad and liberating all at once. I was pleased there were people from my generation who talked about how experiences like these can be transferred down through the generations, sometimes in not the most positive ways. My mother never really shared her story until we were adults. When she did, it put many things in place, especially in understanding her character more. My mother had a breakdown in the camps. She went on to write about this in the form of "Letters from Manzanar," told through first-person narrative in the voice of a 17-year-old girl writing to her best friend, whom she had to leave behind on Bainbridge Island. I had several problems in composing this piece. One was that the experience did not happen to me. So in order to get into it from a closer view, I decided to research poetry and prose written by people who had been in the camps or people who were expressing their views about it. I found a lot of illuminating literature and settled on a tanka poem composed by an Issei. I also used my mother's prose, which she recited during the opening of the second movement (Nisei), and a poem by a third-generation poet, Russell Endo, called "Susumu". I was interested in exploring each generation's differences in expression and reaction to the internment. (I have never really liked the term "internment;" it somehow softens the whole thing.) So I structured the piece around each generation and composed the music accordingly. For example, the instrumentation for the Issei piece was Koto and shakuhachi. This piece was much more Japanese in its structure and had a more formal feel. I wanted the music to be more philosophical and Buddhist like. This, too, presented a problem. I had never composed for these instruments before and had to have private instruction with my players about the aesthetics of these instruments and what they were capable of doing. Also, the fact that each instrument had its own notation proved challenging. I had to work out a way of notating the music that was workable for me and understandable to the musicians. The piece premiered December 17th, 1993 at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center in New York City. It featured Fusako Yoshida on koto, Ronnie "Nyogetsu" Seldin on Shakuhachi, Stanton Davis on trumpet, Robin Eubanks on trombone, Bob Kenmotsu on tenor sax, John Blake on violin, Kyoshi Kitagawa on bass, Akira Tana on drums, and Yukio Tsugi on percussion.

First Movement: The Arrest

(shakuhachi, koto, voice)

based on The Arrest by Sojin Takei

The time has come
For my arrest,
This dark rainy night
I calm myself and listen
To the sound of the shoes

Second Movement: Out From The Silence

(all instruments)

Prose taken from an autobiographical work by my mother, Emiko Tonooka.

I looked around me; the army had not forgotten any of us Japanese. An unexpected audience gathered to witness the involuntary exodus. My head pounded, my stomach churned, my sense of reality slipped and shifted like a kaleidoscope. I thought about the rumours of the Jews in Hitler's Germany. In desperation I told myself to pray. If I were a Christian, a God might listen, if I were a Buddhist like my parents this upheaval could be faced with calm. The only belief that might possibly sustain me was the dream of a mystical democracy, nurtured by the patriotic fervor of World War II, and a life long yearning for reconciliation of my two worlds. But moment to moment, unbeknownst to me than, the actual events of my life were stripping away the illusions I cherished. When mother said we were going to a concentration camp, I argued with her until that day when I saw Seattle for the last time.

Interlude: Ancient Feathers

(shakuhachi, koto, bass drums and percussion)

Third Movement: Susumu

(all instruments)

Susumu, by Russell Endo

You are entitled to overhear —

Susumu, my name means prosperity in Japanese,

The progress of prosperity and good fortune.

The dust that seeped through makeshift barracks in Arizona

Wet my parents' taste for the American Dream.

But my luck will have to be different

I want my wheels to skim like the blades of the wind

Across all ruts.

I want my wheels to spin so fast

That we stand still.

Are you with me?

Then we can say in the summer breeze,

Susumu.