

The Dharma at Big Sur

program notes

The Dharma at Big Sur was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic for the opening concerts at its new Disney Hall, designed by architect Frank Gehry, and was introduced by the orchestra under director Esa-Pekka Salonen on October 23, 2003. The piece takes its inspiration from the California landscape. Adams notes:

For anyone who has come to California from elsewhere, the first encounter with the landscape and with the powerful meeting of sea and rocky coast never fails to make a lasting, deeply moving impression. Big Sur has a kind of magical, numinous power that has entranced generations of people who, like myself, arrived in California and, once here, never wish to leave. The original idea for the piece came from my reading of the Jack Kerouac book *Big Sur*, a meditation on the coast and the psychic effects of the landscape.

When the Los Angeles Philharmonic asked me for a new work to celebrate the opening of Disney Hall, I knew I wanted to write something that reflected our collective experience of being Californians. I especially wanted to reflect the experience of those who, like me, were not born here and for whom the arrival on this side of the continent had both a spiritual and a physical impact. I originally searched for texts from writers who told of their own first impressions of California, and I even went back as far as the Spanish missionaries to locate something appropriate. Then I read *Big Sur* by Jack Kerouac, a book that is both personal (as Kerouac always is), evocative and that oscillates between turbulence and ecstasy. I thought Kerouac's voice was the one that most closely approximated my own feelings.

Although I started with the idea of having an actor speak fragments of his texts, I realized that what I had to "say" was something that could only be expressed in music. Then last year I had the tremendously good fortune to hear at an Oakland jazz club the violinist Tracy Silverman, an extraordinary musician who plays the electric violin. Tracy, it seemed to me, had the Kerouac spirit: he was brought up in the classical tradition, played concertos as a teenager, graduated from Juilliard and then rebelled and left classical music in order to create his own, very unique and intensely expressive style of playing. I was reminded that Kerouac was accepted to Columbia on a football scholarship and then quit school to hit the road.

Although Tracy is a superb improviser, in fact, *The Dharma at Big Sur* is not an improvised piece at all. What I did was to familiarize myself with his playing. We had several very fruitful sessions of brainstorming in my studio in Berkeley. And, before writing a note of the piece, I immersed myself in recordings of string instruments from India, Iran, and Afghanistan. I discovered that, for all the great string writing in the European tradition, there are many many expressive modes that are never utilized. For example, the slide, so typical of Indian *saranghi* playing, is very limited in conventional "Western" playing. So I took great pains to compose for Tracy in a way that reflected not only his own gifts, but also the many other things a string instrument can do which are rarely heard in Western classical music.

There are also other "guardian angels" who hover over the music. One is Lou Harrison, the quintessential "West Coast" spirit. Just before starting this piece I became very involved in studying Lou's use of "just" intonation. "Just" is a musical term that means the tuning of an instrument is based on pure ratios rather than on equal divisions of the octave. It's extremely difficult to make conventional orchestral instruments play in just intonation, but I devised a way to do it by using only brass, strings and specially tuned keyboards and harps. This intonation creates a new world of musical expression—hence the title of the first half of the piece, "A New Day," because it means a very new departure for me.

The title of the second movement, "Sri Moonshine," refers to the other "guardian deity" of the piece, Terry Riley. Terry's ranch in the Sierra foothills is called "Moonshine Ranch." I first heard Terry's music while I was still a student at Harvard in the '60's, and it was in part because of him that I decided to come out here. And there are all sorts of other connections, both musical and personal, not the least of which was that Terry, like Lou, was one of the first American musicians to look to Asia as a source for a new way of experiencing music...and experiencing the world. So, just as Kerouac, Ginsberg and the Beats in the prose and poems first made the Dharma known to a wider American consciousness, so did Lou and Terry do a similar thing in music. My piece is a recognition of that shift in consciousness that my arrival in California brought about.

--John Adams, Berkeley, CA, October 2003