

PROGRAM NOTES

This afternoon's program pairs two works that deal with transitions or rites of passage. Gabriel Fauré's beautiful and comforting *Requiem* commemorates that ultimate passage in the Western Christian tradition, from life to death to eternal life. Andrea Clearfield's *Tse Go La* (At the threshold of this life), receiving its world premiere at this concert, derives its inspiration from her experiences studying 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. We are delighted to have been able to enlist the participation of Philadelphia's small but vibrant Tibetan community to present traditional songs and dances. We are especially fortunate to welcome the noted scholar, teacher, artist and former Buddhist monk, the Venerable Losang Samten, spiritual director of the Chenrezig Tibetan Buddhist Center of Philadelphia, to teach us Buddhist chant.

The commissioning of *Tse Go La* began in 2010 with Mark Anderson, then Music Director of the Pennsylvania Girlchoir, an ensemble that had previously collaborated with Mendelssohn Club in presentations of John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. Armed with generous gifts from the Girlchoir's class of 2010 and an individual donor, Anderson approached Artistic Director Alan Harler with the idea of co-commissioning a substantial work to be presented by both ensembles. Together, they approached acclaimed composer Andrea Clearfield, who suggested a cantata drawing on the Tibetan music and culture she experienced in her field work.

Philadelphia native Andrea Clearfield is familiar to Mendelssohn Club audiences as the composer of the immensely popular cantata *The Golem Psalms*, premiered in 2006 and just released this year on a CD entitled *Metamorphosis* on the Innova label. Clearfield is an award-winning composer of music for orchestra, chorus, chamber ensembles, dance, and multimedia collaborations. Her works are performed widely in the U.S. and abroad with recent performances by the St. Louis Symphony and Principal Players in the New York Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Commissions include works for The Philadelphia Orchestra, flutist Carol Wincenc, The Debussy Trio, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Turtle Creek Chorale, Orchestra 2001, and Network for New Music. Clearfield has been awarded many prestigious fellowships and residencies, including Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center and the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Italy, a Fundación Valparaiso residency in Spain and a Lucas Artist Residency at Montalvo in California, and has received grants and awards from numerous organizations including ASCAP, the NEA, American Music Center, American Composers Forum, International Alliance for Women in Music, Independence Foundation and Pennsylva-



Catherine Hennessey

nia Council on the Arts. She received a D.M.A. in Composition from Temple University where she was honored as a distinguished alumna and was the recipient of the prestigious Presidential Fellowship and the John Heller Memorial Award for Excellence in Composition. She received an M.M. from The University of the Arts, where she has served on the music faculty since 1986. She received a B.A. from Muhlenberg College where she studied with her mentor, Margaret Garwood. Clearfield has been pianist for the contemporary music ensemble *Relâche* since 1990 and has performed extensively, including having the honor of performing with the Court of the Dalai Lama in 1995. A strong believer in creating community through music, she is also the founder and host of the renowned Philadelphia Salon concert series, now celebrating its 25th year featuring contemporary, classical, jazz, electronic, world music and dance and winner of Philadelphia Magazine's 2008 "Best of Philadelphia" award.

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 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. 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 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 orchestration, almost magical, 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.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) was one of the most influential composers and teachers in France at the turn of the twentieth century, but he achieved his recognition relatively late in life. As a boy, he studied at Louis Niedermeyer's School for Religious and Classical Music and developed into a virtuoso pianist. He was greatly influenced by Camille Saint-Saëns, his teacher of piano and composition, who became not only a mentor but also a close friend. Fauré held a number of positions as organist and choir director. He was assistant to the virtuoso organist Charles Marie Widor at St. Sulpice, where the two frequently played "dueling organs" on the church's two instruments. In 1877, he succeeded Saint-Saëns as choirmaster and later organist at the Madeleine, Paris's most fashionable church. While it was a prestigious position, it did not pay much and Fauré was forced to supplement his income by teaching, which left him little time for composition. For much of his career, he was able to compose only during the summer.



In 1905, Fauré was named director of the Paris Conservatoire, where he enjoyed the reputation of something of a revolutionary for his reforms to the curriculum and his support of contemporary music. He was an influential teacher, and he founded the Société Musicale Indépendante as an important venue for promoting the music of his students, who included Maurice Ravel, Nadia and Lily Boulanger, and Georges Enescu. Fauré began to develop a serious hearing problem which eventually caused music to sound distorted and unbearable to him. He composed his last works without ever hearing how they would sound. His hearing loss eventually forced him to resign from the Conservatoire in 1920. He died in 1924 and was given a state funeral at the Madeleine, where his own *Requiem* was played.

Fauré began work on the *Requiem* in 1887, while he was at the Madeleine. The original version included the *Introit and Kyrie*, *Sanctus*, *Pie Jesu* and *In Paradisum*. He added the *Offertory* and *Libera Me* in 1893, and provided a full orchestral version in 1900. This afternoon's performance uses a new edition of the score by English composer and choral conductor John Rutter, which restores Fauré's 1893 orchestration, and is more intimate and in keeping with the overall character of the *Requiem*.

While Fauré always maintained that the *Requiem* was not composed to commemorate any specific person, it was begun shortly after his father's death, and before it was completed, his mother had died as well. It is difficult not to believe that it reflects Fauré's own philosophy and beliefs. It is a *Requiem* of hope, comfort and reassurance rather than mourning. Fauré chose his texts carefully, omitting the *Sequence*, which contains the graphic and terrifying descriptions of the Day of Judgment, and appending the *In Paradisum*, whose simple and beautiful text is taken from the burial service. Fauré himself said, "That is how I see death: as a joyful deliverance, an aspiration towards a happiness beyond the grave, rather than as a painful experience."

Fauré conceived the *Requiem* with the resources of his choir at the Madeleine in mind, which consisted of men's voices and boys' voices singing the treble parts. To increase the sonority, he frequently uses divisi in the tenor and bass parts but not in the soprano or alto. He spins out long, beautiful chant-like melodic lines which are given to single voice parts, the tenors in the *Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei* and the sopranos in the *In Paradisum*. The orchestra also gets equally beautiful melodic lines, which are repeated over and over with minor variations, the Romantic equivalent of a ground bass. Fauré also habitually anticipates the musical accent with a word accent, giving something of the feeling of the uneven cadences of Gregorian chant.

The *Requiem* was rather tepidly received by the rector of the Madeleine after its first performance at the funeral of a prominent architect in 1888, but it soon became one of Fauré's most popular works, and remains today one of the most beautiful and moving pieces of music ever written.

– Michael Moore

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