

MAHDOOM FOR TROMBONE SOLO AND THE CHILDREN OF IRAQ

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Abstract: *Mahdoom* for trombone solo [1] was composed as a tribute to the thousands of Iraqi children who, according to the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), died at the rate of 5000-6000 every month, as a consequence of the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations' (UN) Security Council, after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 [2]. It was also composed for those surviving Iraqi children whose futures were destroyed by malnutrition, disease, psychological trauma and lack of education, resulting from the embargo and the ongoing military violence (not to mention the devastating effects the hundreds of tonnes of depleted uranium left behind in Iraq, by the US-led coalition during the Gulf Wars [3]. The title "Mahdoom" is an Arabic passive participle which signifies "demolished," "destroyed," and "razed to the ground." [4]

Keywords: *trombone, children, Iraq.*

During the compositional process, my research into the situation of the Iraq's children inspired visions of devastation resembling those encountered in the Biblical Apocalypse [5]. These visions seemed to be substantiated by first hand reports of those who visited Iraq after the first Gulf War: nothing that we had seen or read had quite prepared us for the particular form of devastation which has now befallen the country (Iraq). The recent conflict has wrought near-apocalyptic results.[6]

In *Mahdoom*, I imagined the trombone soloist to be one of the seven angels of the Apocalypse, each of whom blew a trumpet to herald various forms of devastation.

The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burnt up and all of the green grass was burnt up.

The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died and a third of the ships were destroyed..[7]

Analogously, during the pre-compositional phase preceding *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste*, Messiaen also associated the trombone with apocalyptic devastation: for these quotations from the Apocalypse are extraordinary, extravagant, surrealistic, and terrifying. Take this one for example: "And to the star was given the key of the bottomless pit". This made me imagine such effects as the fusion of very low trombone "sound pedals"...The melodic material of *Mahdoom* is based entirely on the following self-composed melody, in the *higaz maqām* (mode).

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Mahdoom Principal Melody

Prime Form

Inversion, Axis 12/0

I decided to use the *higaz maqām* because of its symbolic affiliations with purity and melancholy in the Arab *ethos* [8]. I associate these qualities with the children of Iraq. Unlike other compositions of mine which derive their inspiration from the Near East, *Mahdoom* does not contain specific references to ancient Mesopotamia. Rather, it was my intention,

in this work, to refer to abstract states such as “despair”, “desolation” and “devastation”. In *Mahdoom*, these states are alluded to in my use of multiphonics, whereby the trombonist sings “mah-doom” (demolished) at specific intervals on particular notes, in order to produce the required multiphonics, as illustrated below.

Multiphonics in *Mahdoom*

These states are also consciously symbolised in *Mahdoom* by my use of the inversive axis of twelve, which, in the octave system, is the equivalent of zero (transposed up by twelve semitones). Since zero symbolises annihilation for me, any musical processes connected with the inversive axis of zero, are intended to refer to destruction, devastation and desolation. In *Mahdoom*, the inversive

axis of zero was used to generate mirror forms of the original melody, which, along with various transpositions of the original, gave rise to the composition’s large-scale septenary form, as set out below. Each of the seven divisions of *Mahdoom* is characterised by unique, musical gestures that are not encountered in the others, as illustrated in the following.

Mahdoom Structural Divisions.

Division 1 (mm1 -14) Melody

Mahdoom mm1-4

Trombone $\text{♩} = 48$ *Plurissimo*

Division 2 (mm14-20) Inversion of the melody around the axis of 0 and the transposition of that inversion down 4 semitones

Mahdoom mm13-16

Division 3(mm21-31) Inversion of the melody around the axis of 0

Mahdoom mm21-24

Division 4 (mm32-43) Retrograde of the melody

Mahdoom mm31-34

Division 5 (mm44-50) Inversion of the melody, with a slight variation in m45

Mahdoom mm45-46

Division 6 (mm51-60) Inversion of the melody, transposed down 1 semitone

Mahdoom mm57-58

Division 7 (mm61-71) Melody Mahdoom mm61-64

Like other works of mine inspired by the importance to the number seven—a number
Near East, *Mahdoom* gives structural deeply embedded in the Semitic tradition [9].

Seven was also one of the most important numbers of ancient Babylon, where the earliest development of ancient number symbolism occurred [10].

Meanwhile the Babylonian priest-geographer divides the earth into 7 zones, the architect builds Gudea's temple, "the house of the 7 divisions of the world," of 7 steps [11]. Also, in the West, seven is symbolically associated with pain [12]. It is the number of the seven angels of the Apocalypse, whose trumpets heralded untold horrors and devastations on earth [13]. For this reason, I associate the number seven not only with ancient Mesopotamia, but also with the desolation of modern Babylon, as reflected in the following Biblical verses: Alas! Alas! Thou great city, thou mighty city, Babylon. In one hour has thy judgement come and the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls [14].

Notes

[1] *Mahdoom* was performed for the first time by Phil Stucky, who requested the work, at the Llewellyn Hall, Canberra, on 26 October 1998. Tom Burge performed it for the second time at the Canberra School of Music on 15 September 1999. *Mahdoom* received its Bulgarian premiere at the *Musica Nova Festival*, Sofia, (International Society for Contemporary Music, Bulgarian section) on 16 June 2000, performed by Ivailo Khristov. It was given its third Australian performance in July 2000, at the Tuggeranong Arts Centre, played by Tom Burge. *Mahdoom* received its US premiere on 12 October 2000,

performed by Dr James Michael Bicigo, at the Davis Concert Hall, University of Alaska, Fairbanks. This performance was broadcast nationally on ABC Classic FM, on the 1 August 2001, and on South Eastern Public Radio (USA), on 10 February 2002. The US premiere of *Mahdoom* led to requests from Dr Bicigo for the compositions *Wonders of Babylon* (trombone and wind Orchestra) and *Rinascita* (trombone, mezzo soprano, percussion, violin and cello). On 20 April 2002, Dr Bicigo performed *Mahdoom* at the "International Conference for Conflict Resolution", Union Theological Seminary, Broadway, New York City, USA, as part of his presentation, "The Composer and Performer as a Vehicle of Cultural Outreach and Understanding". Dr Bicigo subsequently performed *Mahdoom* as part of a similar presentation my work, at the Hawaii International Conference of the Arts and Humanities, January 12-15, 2003. In May 2005 the live recording of Tom Burge's performance of *Mahdoom* was used for the multi-media theatrical production, *Songs of My Childhood*, (written by Lucy Aponte, directed and produced by Emmit Thrower of Wabi Sabi Productions). On October 31 2005 *Mahdoom* was performed by Michael Seltzer of Manhattan Brass, at Symphony Space, New York City, as part of a concert of Australian compositions, entitled "The Australians", sponsored by the Australian Consulate General of New York City. The score of *Mahdoom* is available for purchase from the Australian Music Centre and is held in several Australian and international libraries. Recordings of *Mahdoom* are included on the compact discs *Night Journey* and *Resurrection*, released by CENART.NET in 2006. *Mahdoom* received its most recent performances, by Dr. Bicigo, during the "Borealis in Australis" tour—the first Australian tour of Dr. Bicigo's quintet, Borealis Brass of the University of Alaska Fairbanks (December 2-9 2009); at the

- Fairbanks New Music Festival (February 5 2010) and at Eastern Washington University, Cheney, on April 2 2010.
- [2] UNICEF: *Research and Evaluation*. <http://www.unicef.org/reseval/iraqr.html>
- [3] Simons, Geoff. *The Scourging of Iraq: Sanctions, Law and Natural Justice*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. pp 20-23, 122-127.
- [4] Wehr, Hans. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980.
- [5] *The Holy Bible* [Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition]. Revelations.
- [6] Report of mission (10-17 March 1991) led by Martti Ahtisaari. Cited in: *Ibid*.
- [7] *The Holy Bible* [Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition]. Revelations 8:6-10.
- [8] Sachs, Curt. *The Rise and Fall of Music in the Ancient World East and West*. New York: Norton & Company, 1943, p. 286.
- [9] Mclain, Ernest G. *Meditations through the Quran: Tonal Images in an Oral Culture*. Maine: Nicolas Hays, Inc., 1981, p.81.
- [10] Hopper, Vincent Foster. *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1938, p.12, 17-19.
- [11] *Ibid*. p.17.
- [12] Hsu, Madeline. *Olivier Messiaen: The Musical Mediator*. London: Associated University Press, 1996, p. 92.
- [13] *The Holy Bible* [Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition]. Revelations 8: 6-10.
- [14] *Ibid*. Revelations 18:11-14.