

## Ceremony of the seasons

### *In the Shadow's Light* (2004)

For string quartet

Commissioned by the Festival d'Automne à Paris and premiered by the Kairos Quartett

### *The Quickening* (2004-05)

For soprano and qin

Commissioned by the Festival d'Automne à Paris and premiered by Deborah Kayser (soprano) & Yang Chunwei (qin)

29 November 2005, Amphithéâtre, Cité de la Musique, Paris

*Who are you? Look, I blow out the world,  
It will be night, I will no longer see you,  
Do you want only light?  
- But I cannot answer, for I am seized  
By a spell from further off than childhood.*

Yves Bonnefoy: 'L'Agitation du rêve' (part 3) from *Ce Qui fut sans lumière*, 'In the Shadow's Light', transl. John Naughton, Uni of Chicago Press, 1991.

I have thought of this pair of pieces – *In the Shadow's Light* and *The Quickening* – as a 'ceremony of the seasons'. These 'seasons' are aligned to the turning points between autumn-winter and spring-summer, metaphors for journeys into death and into life. Both works inhabit a dream-world where things are not grasped directly, where sensations are filtered through different kinds of veils. These veils might be experienced as a tangle of submerged pathways through which one senses the movement of creatures on the surface above; perhaps as a trance of saturated light coming from a place beyond, or as oscillating interference patterns created by intersecting lines and arising from the coupling and uncoupling of sonic elements.

I am describing a 'shimmer' effect, something that, for me, calls to mind the ecstatic Central Desert art of Aboriginal Australia. This is a culture in which rituals are brought into being by shaman-healers who 'stalk and capture' songs, dances, ceremonial body markings and other designs in dream. It is said that they recognise these forms by the force of their 'shimmer', for instance, songs found in dreams are described in the Kukatja language as 'kalyuyuru' – 'like water shimmering as it falls'.

The 'shimmer' that I seek in my own work is also comprised of physical and visual dimensions as much as being an aural phenomenon. For example, the tactile awareness that the musicians of the string quartet bring to the sounding of their instruments is of key importance in interpreting the music. This kinaesthetic dimension is certainly central to the traditional performance practice of the Chinese zither, the qin, which has a highly refined aesthetics of 'touch' in which qualities of silence are savoured.

Silences – both furious and tender – performed as suspended moments and as breathing gestures – signal metaphorical turning points. They perhaps mark out the 'flinching points' in the radical uncoupling of the senses, of body, memory and spirit in death. And beyond this, the miraculous alchemical quickening of elements as new life is formed.

The term 'the quickening' describes a mother's first sensation of her baby's movement in the womb but also other kinds of 'beginnings of life' whether ideas or the sap running in trees. I have used fragments of Chinese text by Yang Lian whose poems revolve around themes of a dynamic duality that admits a third state 'in-between' and who, like Bonnefoy, finds a light that shines through darkness. The intonation of these words combine with the strokes of the qin's silk strings to sing of the illumination of flesh, of opening to vulnerability, and the awareness of being truly present in the moment when 'cicadas in the body endlessly cry'.

Poems for *The Quickening* are fragments, used with the poet's permission, from the collection *Where the Sea Stands Still* by Yang Lian, transl. Brian Holton, Bloodaxe Books, 1999.

part 1:

*a pair of fleshy wings  
has just touched the moon under the water  
has time to move in  
the radiance that eliminates the ocean  
is finally pointed out when it is past*

part 2:

*one lip has been carved tender as grass  
and a tongue so vulnerable it can't help crying out  
whatever was called      hired flesh from the dead  
shadow dies again      is only then shed to become human skin  
big white bird      tiny baby*

*wings of trees flapping  
from light      slipping terribly towards the light that lays you bare*

part 3:

*a tiny white grain buried in your flesh illuminates you.  
because flesh is the only thing that can be lit up.  
the dead, they like a ceremony for childbirth*

part 4:

*cicadas  
in the body  
endlessly cry*

*In the Shadow's Light* is dedicated to the Kairos Quartett and in memory of Mark Randall Osborn. *The Quickening* is dedicated to Joséphine Markovits.