

Symphony No. 4 - 'Star Chant' (2001)

To William Blake, the stars were coldly and logically Satanic. To the Australian Aboriginal Peoples they have been familiar, meaningful and ultimately benevolent.

And indeed, to most cultures the night sky has always abounded in human drama and symbolism: the striking summertime constellation of Orion, for example, represented an intrepid hunter in many diverse societies. And the Pleiades - which the Greeks mythologised as seven sisters changed first into doves and then stars - have also received startlingly parallel interpretations in various parts of the world.

If anything can reconcile the human inhabitants of this planet, it may well be our eventual recognition that, under the canopy of the night sky we are all equal: how could egos that prance absurdly in the daylight fail to be awed and humbled by the magnificence of the stars - if it were not for the light pollution of our cities? David Malin's poetic and inspiring photographic images, made using Australia's largest telescopes, help compensate our naked eyes for their loss and present us with an embryonic mythology awaiting interpretation.

Australian artists and scientists are showing signs of wanting to reclaim the age-old common ground between their disciplines. In fact, ideas for *Star Chant* began to be seriously discussed when I accompanied a group of scientists - mainly astronomers - on a lecture tour of outback Queensland and New South Wales. I found the most memorable experience to be the night spent in a swag in the Simpson Desert contemplating the glittering display above.

Fred Watson's elegantly-structured text traverses the Australian sky from the northern horizon to the lonely obscurity of the southern polar star. It pays tribute to aboriginal culture by linking the conventional western names of stars and constellations with their equivalents from the Dreamtime stories of many different indigenous peoples.

My original conception of *Star Chant* as a nocturne - a calm, profound meditation - changed into some of the most dramatic music I've written as the text led me through regions profuse with stars and Dreaming. When I arrived at the Southern Cross, my natural response to its symbolism was to try to express in music a hope for creative and harmonious coexistence between the culturally diverse peoples of the south.

The work ends, as it began, in a mysterious glimmer low in the southern sky.

Star Chant is dedicated to my wife, Helen Edwards. It was commissioned jointly by Symphony Australia and the Adelaide Festival of the Arts for the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, with assistance from the Australia Council, the Commonwealth Government's arts funding and advisory body. The first performance was given in the Adelaide Town Hall on March 8 2002. Richard Mills conducted the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, the Adelaide Chamber Singers and the Adelaide Philharmonia Chorus.

Ross Edwards.