

Mandala 4

for
string quartet

*Commissioned by the BBC and first performed by
the Arditti String Quartet, London, 1991.*

Notes:

The up and down arrow signs indicate a slight sharpening or flattening of the note.
The violist also requires a 12" Chinese gong and soft beater.

I've yet to find a comprehensive definition of the Sanskrit word 'mandala'. It's not that the word is vague; on the contrary, from its ambiguities grow a cluster of rich, specific meanings. In English, it usually refers to a picture, a combination of a square and a circle, divided and re-divided, at its centre an image (usually a Buddha) which proliferates symmetrically and transforms asymmetrically. As a picture it may be painted on paper or cloth, or drawn with devoted precision on the sand. It may be a spiral dance through the four quarters of a squared space; the spiral may be in-turning or outward turning. It may be any combination of these things. Whatever its context, the word remains precise in its function: to express and explore wholeness - unity in diversity, diversity in unity.

One summer evening in 1967, I was watching the play of light on the patterns of sand banks and water sculptured by the receding tide on the Kent coast; the play became a dance, and over the next few days the dance became a mandala for wind quintet. I've never set out to compose a mandala. Each of the works bearing this name has taken its place in the set after it was composed. What links the Mandalas is the single-minded way each has grown from a brief, central musical image into a diversity of transformed song-shapes.

The essential unity of most bird songs within a particular area has long been a source of study and inspiration for me. The unity is expressed in terms of harmony as much as in colour and texture. References to particular birdsongs often arise in my music, growing out of a more general musical context, but in the case of the present work, it is the songs themselves which create the musical context.

Though it doesn't sound very much like the music of Messiaen, Mandala 4 is closer than any other work of mine to his aesthetic. Every musical idea derives from the birdsongs, in particular those of Spirey Creek as I heard them one dawn in the spring of 1984. There is no attempt to imitate the original songs, but their gestures, contours and harmony are the heart and the taking off point for all the music.

The work begins with an introduction in the spirit of a formal dance. The dance is interrupted by a gong (played by the violist) which leads into the main body of the work, an extended viola solo based on the dawn song of a Pied Butcherbird. A mosaic of counterpoints (a kind of anti-development) derived from the song of the Butcherbird's neighbours grows out of the heterophonic accompaniment. After a reprise of the opening dance, which has been re-shaped by the songs of Currawongs and Little Friarbirds, the essential harmony of the piece gradually dissolves and the sound of the gong leads to a gentle close, a closure without cadence.

Mandala 4 is a single movement and lasts around twenty minutes.

DL

A soundscape composition, The Pied Butcherbirds of Spirey Creek containing the dawn song which is the inspiration for the viola solo in this quartet, is available on the Tall Poppies CD, Mutawinji, TP091.