

Dreaming a World

For narrator, children's chorus, mixed chorus, percussion, and orchestra, by

Peter Boyer

Commissioned by the Battle Creek Symphony Orchestra through the American Composers Forum's *Continental Harmony* program; commission funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Continental Harmony links communities with composers through the creation of original musical works. The program is a partnership of the American Composers Forum and the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional funds provided by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Premiere performances:

March 9 & 10, 2007, W.K. Kellogg Auditorium, Battle Creek, Michigan

Performers:

Battle Creek Symphony Orchestra, Anne Harrigan, Music Director
Battle Creek Community Chorus, Brian Clissold, Director
Echoes of Grace, Wyhomme Matthews, Director
Kellogg Community College Choral Union, Gerald Blanchard, Director
Battle Creek Girls' Chorus, Brian Clissold, Director
Battle Creek Boychoir, Brooks Grantier, Director
Sojourner Truth Youth Chorus, Pauline Norris, Director

Percussionists from:

Battle Creek Central High School, Brian Bucec, Director
Climax Scotts High School, Matt Watson, Director
Harper Creek High School, Allman Todd, Director
Lakeview High School, Darin Schmidt, Director
Pennfield High School, Jerry Rose, Director
Carolyn Koebel, Percussion Coordinator/Coach

Premiere performances conducted by Anne Harrigan

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and Carey Nadeau, National Program Manager, American Composers Forum.

Propulsive Music

Composer's Note

I was very pleased to be chosen as the composer for the *Continental Harmony* project in Battle Creek, Michigan, having been well acquainted with the American Composers Forum's innovative and successful program which pairs composers and communities around the United States. I knew that the Battle Creek project would be one of the more ambitious and challenging of the *Continental Harmony* projects, as it would call for a very large and diverse assemblage of musical performers.

The initial "theme" of the project was a celebration of multiculturalism in Battle Creek. After my initial visit to Battle Creek to meet with many of those involved with the project, Anne Harrigan, Music Director of the Battle Creek Symphony Orchestra, and I agreed to seek a broader view of this theme. The goal became the creation of a work that would celebrate multiculturalism not only in Battle Creek, but in a more general, universal sense. In today's increasingly multicultural world, this seemed an appropriate, if challenging, theme for a large work created for concert performance.

I believed that the key to the structure of the work would be found in the texts to be spoken or sung, and the task of identifying and assembling an appropriate group of texts became the first challenge of the project. This proved to be a much more daunting task than I had imagined, and the process of researching and seeking out texts took several months—nearly as long as the process of composition itself. I sought texts that addressed the concept of the unity of all people, regardless of diverse backgrounds. More importantly, I sought texts that were poetic and which I thought would be compelling in the context of a musical presentation. This led to some interesting discoveries. I certainly had never previously set such an eclectic group of texts as are represented in this work, *Dreaming a World*, which is in five movements, each of which sets a text from a different source or sources.

During my visits to Battle Creek, I visited the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi Indians, and these visits led me to seek out Native American texts. I came upon an English translation of a Native American prayer which had the quality of an invocation, and the setting of this text became the basis of the first movement, "Prelude, Invocation, and Dance." In this movement, the choir sings without text, in a way that is almost chant-like, and the colors of the wordless choir join with the colors of the orchestra, with the percussion instruments playing a prominent role.

The second movement, "Voices of Unity," is the section of the work which addresses the theme of multiculturalism most directly. In my search for texts which celebrated unity, I came upon various quotes by great leaders which I found inspiring, both for the moral power of their message, and the poetic qualities of their words. Wishing to employ a number of short quotes from a diverse group of leaders, I included brief statements from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Maya Angelou, César Chávez, John F. Kennedy, and Mahatma Gandhi, and I wrote a few lines to frame these quotes and put them in context for "us," the listeners to these voices. In my visits to Battle Creek, I had met with various members of its African-American musical community, and observed some of the styles of Gospel music performance which are a vital expression of that community. I was struck by the passion with which this Gospel music is performed, and wished to incorporate some Gospel-style music into my work. I decided to close the "Voices of Unity" movement with the famous and powerful Gandhi quote, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world," and to attempt to set that quote in Gospel style. Though on the surface, "Gospel Gandhi" might seem an odd combination, I believe this actually worked well, and I think that Gospel music, with its passion and energy, suits Gandhi's message of personal and social change quite naturally.

The third movement, a setting of the Langston Hughes poem "I Dream a World" for children's chorus, joined by mixed chorus and orchestra, is central to the work both in placement and in spirit, and it suggested to me the title for the larger work, *Dreaming a World*. In my search for texts, this was the first one I found that I immediately knew was "right" for the project, and this was the first music I composed. Hughes was one of the great American poets of the twentieth century, and I have been drawn to many of his poems which poignantly evoke the blues, and which have been set effectively by many composers. "I Dream a World" clearly and simply hopes for a reality in which people of all cultures peacefully coexist. As I read the words, I immediately imagined them sung by children's voices, and I set this text as a simple, "anthem"-type melody for children. Knowing that in Battle

Creek these words would be sung by children of various cultural backgrounds made the text seem particularly appropriate.

The original concept for a musical point of focus for this project had been drumming as a multicultural phenomenon. As the project evolved, this idea became but one component of the project, rather than its central theme, and this concept gave rise to the fourth movement. In seeking texts which might provide a verbal context to connect the idea of drumming with the rest of the work, I came upon “The Great Drum,” an English translation (or perhaps “re-imagining”) of a Native American “myth poem,” published in 1922 by Hartley Alexander, who seems to have been one of the more sensitive Anglo voices translating Native American languages at that time. This is surely the most unusual movement of the piece from the point of view of performing forces, as it employs only narrator and non-pitched percussion instruments, both onstage and offstage. The offstage percussion parts are to be played by high school players, and the parts they play arise from transcriptions of traditional West African/Ghanaian drumming patterns. This requires the coaching of a percussionist experienced in multicultural drumming styles; in the case of the premiere performances, Carolyn Koebel ably fulfills this role.

For the fifth movement finale of the work, I turned to the American poet who may be the favorite of American composers (certainly of mine): Walt Whitman. I have set Whitman on several occasions, and I never cease to find his unique voice compelling. To close *Dreaming a World*, I chose a famous passage from the end of “The Mystic Trumpeter,” a passage which has inspired settings by a number of composers. Here Whitman ecstatically imagines “a reborn race” and “a perfect world” with “war, sorrow, suffering gone.” His utopian vision, in which all humankind is united (I particularly admire the notion of “universal man”) repeats the word “joy” no less than thirteen times in its dozen lines. After a brief fanfare-like opening, the narrator breathlessly exclaims these lines, supported by the orchestra and initially wordless choruses (children and adults); then the choruses take over the final ecstatic line “Joy! joy! all over joy!”, and repeat it with increasing fervor to the work’s conclusion.

—Peter Boyer
Altadena, California, January 2007

Dreaming a World

Texts

I. Prelude, Invocation and Dance

Narrator, mixed (wordless) chorus and orchestra

Oh our Mother the earth, Oh our Father the sky,
Your children are we, and with tired backs
We bring you the gifts you love.

Then weave for us a garment of brightness;

May the warp be the white light of the morning,
May the weft be the red light of the evening,
May the fringes be the falling rain,
May the border be the standing rainbow.

Thus weave for us a garment of brightness,
That we may walk fittingly where birds sing,
That we may walk fittingly where grass is green,
Oh our Mother Earth, Oh our Father Sky.

—traditional Native American (Tewa Pueblo) prayer

II. Voices of Unity

Narrator, mixed chorus and orchestra

Narrator:

We have heard them. We have heard the voices. The voices which have called out to remind us of the oneness of all people; the strength of the human family. We have heard the voices of unity.

We have heard the voice of Martin Luther King, who said: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, clothed in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

And the voice of Maya Angelou, who reminded us: “We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color.”

And the voice of César Chávez, who said: “We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.”

And the voice of John F. Kennedy, who said: “If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”

And we have heard the voice of Mahatma Gandhi, who taught us: “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Yes, we have heard them all. We have heard the voices. Can we have the courage to listen?

Chorus repeats:

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

III. "I Dream a World"

Children's chorus, mixed chorus and orchestra

I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn.
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind—
Of such I dream, my world!

—"I Dream a World," Lyrics by Langston Hughes (1902-1967). Copyright © 1941, 1976 Southern Music Pub. Co. Inc.
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IV. "The Great Drum"

Narrator, orchestral percussion, and additional percussion ensemble

The circle of the Earth is the head of a great drum;
With the day, it moves upward—booming;
With the night, it moves downward—booming;
The day and the night are its song.

I am very small, as I dance upon the drum-head;
I am like a particle of dust, as I dance upon the drum-head;
Above me in the sky is the shining ball of the drumstick.

I dance upward with the day;
I dance downward with the night;
Some day I shall dance afar into space like a particle of dust.

Who is the Drummer who beats upon the earth-drum?
Who is the Drummer who makes me to dance his song?

—"The Great Drum," from *American Indian Myth Poems* by Hartley Alexander (Scribner's, 1922)
University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center

V. Finale

Narrator, children's chorus, mixed chorus, and orchestra

O glad, exulting, culminating song!
A vigor more than earth's is in thy notes,
Marches of victory—man disenthral'd—the conqueror at last,
Hymns to the universal God from universal man—all joy!
A reborn race appears—a perfect world, all joy!
Women and men in wisdom innocence and health—all joy!
Riotous laughing bacchanals fill'd with joy!
War, sorrow, suffering gone—the rank earth purged—nothing but joy left!
The ocean fill'd with joy—the atmosphere all joy!
Joy! joy! in freedom, worship, love! joy in the ecstasy of life!
Enough to merely be! enough to breathe!
Joy! joy! all over joy!

—Walt Whitman (1819-1892), from "The Mystic Trumpeter," in *Leaves of Grass* (1891-92)