

# O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

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## McClellan's This Ravelled Dust

Our friend Marilyn Richardson, who among other things produces the [Art + History blog](#) (which I've recommended to you several times\*), has kindly pointed out a world premier of a new cantata by composer Robinson McClellan. I'll quote what she says of him:

Robinson McClellan's music is commissioned and performed widely. He has done residencies at the MacDowell Colony and Yaddo, where he completed this cantata in March 2010. His published scholarly writing is on piobaireachd, a type of Gaelic bagpipe music; this rarely heard music has also been a major inspiration in his creative work. Robin teaches music history, theory, and world music at St. Francis College, Rutgers University, and the Lucy Moses School. In May he will receive his doctorate in composition from the Yale School of Music and Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

The cantata is entitled "This Ravelled Dust," and it concerns mankind's fateful relationship with nuclear energy. It is decidedly a religious (or perhaps "spiritual" would be a better term) cantata, although the main text is the poem, entitled "Morning Glory: Radiant Night" by Australian poet Robin Muir-Miller. The poem (which you can read for yourself in the pages linked below) is a full-throated post-modernist poem with idiosyncratic diction and surrealist imagery describing vaguely Adam's fall from (or destruction of) the garden. Word choices seem to have been made for their evocative capacity and not for their lexical meaning (spores gusting awry, for example). In some cases the word choices make impossible metaphors. In others the metaphors morph into "reality" (in part IV it is the "aroma" which invades the glade "like an alien fungus"; in the next part "Its" must refer to the fungus because its spores gust) and then surreality (in VII the fungus explodes; in VIII an "accolade of mushrooms plunders"). Such welding of words with incompatible meanings reminds me a bit of Dylan Thomas. Perhaps even more so do the unusual word choices with big open vowels perfect for declamations or arias. (You will probably not hear the word "sufflate," for example, used frequently in art music.)

Regardless of meaning at a sentence level, each word conveys sufficient "content" to allow the singer to dwell on it and infuse (suffuse?) it with another degree of meaning. The two soloists sing the poem;

the tenor seems to be plaintively describing the catastrophe and the bass seems to sing reprovingly. They frequently linger and repeat the words that most convey the emotion behind the image.

The mixed choir and the boys' choir sing to texts from the Psalms, the Hebrew prophets and the antiphons. The juxtaposition of ancient texts with a modern one (one in fact that uses modern technical terms that remind us of our "materialist" age — terms like fungus, spores, arable, irradiant, arson — with the closing lines evoking a modern iconic fear: "grief . . . and a mushroom") shows how ancient myths define our response to current threats despite our different vocabulary. In this case the choral texts not only amplify the soloists' story, they in fact make it comprehensible. By firmly fixing it in the universe of the Genesis origins story, the texts help us understand the ultimate source of the present threat (man's hubris) as well as the solution: wisdom in the form of humility before God/nature.

The boys' choir keeps reminding us of this singular way to wisdom by repeating: "His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord." The mixed choir also quotes from Isaiah's reference to the "root of Jesse" (and other late prophets). Interestingly, despite the allusions to Handel's *Messiah* in several places and the quotes from Isaiah, the cantata does not offer hope of divine intervention and direct salvation. (This concept of a personal "Messiah" from Isaiah is behind the shelter under a "red rock" in the "Burial of the Dead" section of *The Waste Land* as well as in numerous other works.) The only thing the choir here seeks from on high is the teaching of wisdom or "the way of prudence." It looks like the choir has concluded that it's up to us.

The music is scored as follows: Mixed chorus (5 S, 5 A, 3 T, 4 B), boy soprano choir (3), solo Tenor and solo Bass; harp, French horn, flute, viola, double bass and percussion (vibraphone and trap set). McClellan explains that the instruments have a particular programmatic function (the viola, for instance, represents grief-filled humanity; the flute depicts the "wise" serpent who brings the plague of nuclear knowledge to us). I suggest that you skip the programmatic explanation the first couple of times you listen, otherwise you risk missing some very affecting instrumental writing. The viola part behind the very first tenor solo is quite melodic and haunting. The bass rendering of the *Messiah* melody (the "Behold and See" (No. 30) of Part II) behind the tenor singing "Adam has grafted . . ." in the 6th Part is also very affecting.

There are several brief, but highly interesting, instrumental passages. The combinations on paper seem unusual (double bass, harp, viola; double bass, French horn; French horn, pizzicato viola, double bass) but they provide the exact texture called for by the context. (The function, after all, of the instruments in a cantata are to provide the color to illustrate the text.) There are solos by harp and double bass that are also worth noting.

But, let's face it, the principal reason for listening to choral music is for the writing for the chorus. And in this respect there are three arresting pieces of choral writing. Very early in Part 2 first the bass (with harp and viola obbligato) then tenor then bass again sings solos on "lustre infuses his rising." This lead directly into a very lush "Rapturous singing" by the choir with vibraphone accents. The second memorable section of choir writing comes at the beginning of Part 4, a highly melodic and plaintive "O Key of David," a plea to lead the prisoners from the prison house. The third piece I'm fond of comes in the last section, Part 7, where the choir behind the tenor soloists calls for Emmanuel's return. The chorus continues as the bass soloist sings that at the trumpets sound, we shall

be changed. The overlap of “the hope of the nations” and “we shall be changed” is quite clever. And once again the “Rapturous singing” choral part is repeated before the final prayer for salvation. All join in conclusion to sing:

Our delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.  
and we shall be changed.  
We shall fear the Lord.

The entire piece contains a number of highly memorable melodic passages, and despite my looking at it in parts, forms a unified musical whole. While it doesn't tell a story in even an abstract sense, the emotional journey leading to the realization of the need for humility provides the structure for musical development. The musical language of the cantata is decidedly “English”; McClellan notes that it “draws from Benjamin Britten’s church opera *Curlew River*, and includes quotes from Handel’s *Messiah* . . .” And while the piece opens with a chromatic modern plainchant the chorus soon settles into a warmer, Tallis-like tonality. Like all good church music, it is uplifting and ends with a rousing choral affirmation. The music is readily accessible so you needn't “prepare yourself.”

If you've gotten this far, it means that I haven't utterly ruined the thing by over-analysis. Or maybe you just jumped down to see if there is any picture. Either way, here is an excerpt McClellan put on YouTube. You can listen to the entire world premier on the page of McClellan's site [devoted to this cantata](#). The piece was performed on April 30, 2010 by the Toronto Choral Artists directed by Mark Vuorinen. A complete list of the performers is found on McClellan's page. The page has the poem as well as the complete libretto with instrumentation of each part noted and with (video) times also noted. There are other comments by the composer about the song. [McClellan's website](#) has samples of other compositions and upcoming performances as well as brief biographical notes.

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\* For those of you slow to click, let me recommend you start with [this intriguing Japanese wood-cut](#).

You will also be relieved to find that she doesn't weary everyone's patience with interminably long posts, like some sites I could mention.

**Update:** As the fates always decree, after discussing someone else's word choices I end up misspelling one of the very words in the title to this post and the link. I've corrected it, but there's nothing I can do about the link without risking the wrath of Google's web crawler, and nearly anything is better than that.

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