

Composer's Notes on *Trojan Women* by Keith Clouston

As a composer and musician active in 'world' music, I was intrigued to be asked to write and direct the music for *Trojan Women*.

M.L.West's recent book *Ancient Greek Music* has been particularly useful to me in getting to grips with understanding some of the more baffling aspects of ancient musical practice and provided me with some key ideas about setting Euripides' text to music.

The same book also furnished me with clues as to how to create an overall instrumental approach, a sound world, which accorded with styles and ways of working with which I was already familiar. These latter include aspects of Middle Eastern music and of Balkan folk music, with which I had a nodding relationship.

M.L.West writes in his introduction, '...there is a general danger of coming to ancient Greek music with preconceptions formed by Western musical culture...Ancient Greek music is not part of our local, West European, post Renaissance tradition, but it is a part of world music, and it needs to be seen in ethnological perspective...'

So far, so good. All this tied in very neatly with my own interests and pre-conceptions. Earlier I had already noted the similarities between illustrations of ancient Egyptian instruments and those of Ancient Greece. Many of these instruments, or ones very much like them, continue to be played in Egypt and the wider Middle East, as well as Asia Minor, and those parts of Eastern Europe that had been under Ottoman rule or influence. My sound world began to take shape: frame drums from the Greek Islands and Cyprus, bowl lyres from Egypt and the Sudan, kitharas from Ethiopia, arghuls from the Libyan Desert, Albanian klarinos, Bulgarian kavalas, Cretan lautos, Romanian taragotas, long-necked lutes of all descriptions (tars, buzuqs, bouzoukis), short-necked lutes from Syria and Iraq; all these might legitimately be used.

I now had to investigate the melodic possibilities of ancient Greek music. M.L.West's discussion of ancient Greek intervals and their probable use in constructing pentatonic (5 note) scales also tied in with my knowledge of folk or 'world' music (as it is now generally known).

Pentatonic scales are commonly used from the west of Ireland to China, from Finland to South India. Pentatonic scales provided me with a practical melodic direction in approaching the Greek text. Trying to recreate Greek melody for the classical period is problematical, if not impossible. There are only a few fragments extant from the period of mid-late 5th century BC, including extracts from Euripides' own music for his *Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*. It is hard to judge how representative these fragments are. If representative, enormous problems are posed for the modern performer and audience alike.

Music of this period used, apart from pentatonic scales, groups of intervals so small and so close together that even to an ear attuned to Arab and Turkish quarter tones the effect is quite peculiar. Impossible, too, to sing for the non-professional singers of our chorus, and probably intolerable to listen to. The familiar pentatonic scale as starting point then becomes a practical and aesthetic necessity in terms of the actors' ability to learn the melodies and for theatregoers' willingness to listen to them and thereby engage in the action. A note, again, in M. L. West, comparing ancient Greek paeonic rhythm (quintuple time or 5/8) with contemporary Balkan folk music led me to Bulgarian and Albanian folk-song.

Here were epic/lyric traditions, sung pentatonically, from what were once outlying parts of ancient Greece: Macedonia, Thrace, Illyria and Epirus. Passionate, moving, strong melodies with pronounced, accented rhythms contrasted with apparently formless drones with improvised, simple three or four note melodies - intense, stark, akin to the Blues and sung in a voice half-way between a murmur and a sob. This was the sound of the Greek chorus I'd been looking for.

I brought in Belinda Sykes, an early music singer and instrumentalist who had studied singing techniques in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, and knew something of Albanian styles, too. She came up to Cambridge to lead a morning's workshop. After only an hour and a half, a group of slightly

reticent undergraduates had been transformed into a lusty women's choir singing Balkan drinking songs. Then they were sobbing and keening to desperately sad songs about women being walled up alive.

Meanwhile, in discussion with Anthony Bowen, Lector in Greek in the Cambridge Classics Faculty, I was working out ways of resolving the difficulties in setting Greek verse to music: irregular line lengths and the apparently random nature of the metre. The dense verbiage began to separate out into distinct patterns, building blocks of short and long beats. Dance steps. Choriamb, cretics, spondaic anapaests, iambic tetrameters, they were all danced as well as sung. The metre was even described in terms of lifting and placing of the feet. Analogies with Arab music suggested that each type of step might have had a melodic formula associated with it. The citizen farmers of Athens coming together at short notice to perform their civic duty and form a chorus would have been greatly helped in the rapid learning of lines if patterns in the metre were reinforced by both the dance and the melody. I composed my own associated melodic formulae and, using pentatonic scales, wrote the first choral melodies. In rehearsal, the chorus was singing them confidently in less than an hour.

I could now pay attention to the last element in my planned sound world: electronics, sampling and looping techniques, found sound, musique concrète. A combination of all these underpins the sound on stage, creating mood or ambience. The choral drones are part of this and the voices of the actors have been looped to create a solid underpinning for the sung odes.

Writing music for *Trojan Women* has not been an academic reconstruction exercise for me, rather a creative exploration of the possible and the practical - an attempt to underline or underpin the emotional and poetic truth of Euripides' play. Aristotle, in words which could describe perfectly the role of music in theatre, wrote '...there are two objects to aim at, the possible as well as the suitable...!'.