

## **CREEPING BUTTERCUP** - Ellen Southern – City of London Festival, spring 2012

Having grown up in the countryside I was very pleased to be invited to write a composition about a wildflower. This particular flower is one I especially notice in London's green spaces, and it always brings back memories. Inspiration for *Creeping Buttercup* came from a combination of such childhood associations and research from wild plant guides. I wanted to conjure up something of what I see as creeping buttercup's character and presence (physically and through the prism of association and memory) in an evocative sound and visual performance.

Creeping buttercup is found near water, so I decided to use water as an instrument, and as a theme throughout the piece. It has shiny 'lustrous' leaves and glossy, vivid yellow petals, which gave me the related visual theme of 'reflection' and 'illumination', which informed the choice of materials.

In the introductory 'textural section', the poem-performer 'creeps' along a percussive river-bed or 'stream'. Pieces of ceramic and porcelain on metal crack underfoot as the glass-player 'tickles' the sides of the wineglasses to create an additional 'creeping' sound. This originated from imagining a hugely magnified sound of creeping roots, and then became informed by having spent many days as a youngster walking carefully through a stream where creeping buttercup grew, collecting old pieces of decorated cups and plates. I discovered that the latin name for creeping buttercup, *Ranunculus Repens*, means 'little frog' (from 'rana' – frog), and so the glass-player also makes frog-like 'croaks' by rubbing the sides of the glasses.

The melody of the piece is then played on pitched water-filled wineglasses. The luminous colour of the petals is reflected upwards through the water and under the performers chin, evocative of the childhood game where you hold a flower there to see 'if you like butter'. Being based on such memories, these performative elements may convey the slightly otherworldly atmosphere of the imagination or an impish folk tale, which being in a wild place easily evokes.

Being a so-called 'weed', the creeping buttercup is perennial, and I represented this in the cyclical nature of the groups of notes. The flower usually has 5 petals, but it sometimes has 6; I found a six-petalled flower just recently. That gave me the idea of a 5 / 4 cycling rhythm, which sometimes turns into 6 / 4. The irregular cycles and unpredictability in both the rhythm and melody of this piece are my way to demonstrate admiration for the 'wild' aspect of this wildflower, not adhering to the 'regular' plans of humans, our perception of the world being only one reality; a wildflower inhabits a whole other reality in the same space.

The piece has a deliberately small melodic range, made of two related chords which nestle amongst and overlap each other, so that they 'creep' the small distance from one to the other. I was surprised to discover that the plant is actually poisonous to cows if eaten raw, causing blistering to the mouth, so they only eat it if there is little else. So as attractive as it may look to humans, this flower is not benign, and for me the dissonant-sounding note in the melody adds this touch of a warning, like the (apparently) 'acid' taste of the plant. The luminous colour reflected through the wineglasses can also be seen to relate to this, being the 'high-vis' colour of dangerous places or warning signs. The high-luminosity of the colour also made me think about how bees see flowers not in pretty muted colours but in glowing UV.

There is a contrasting middle section to the piece, which changes time signature into 3 / 4, taking the piece from a staccato feel into a smooth 'waltz'- like rhythm. I liked the idea of having part of the piece feel like a dance, like the nodding yellow flower heads in the breeze of a summer's day. Wildflowers, and the changing of the seasons which they signify, have long been part of country traditions and festivals. I wanted to allude to celebratory folk music by including a 'drone' in the lowest pitched glass under this section.

When the first melody returns again, it wheels around even more irregularly than before. The notes slowly begin to vanish, stabilising for a while, but then rapidly disappearing, one by one, until the very last note rings out in uncertainty. For me, this is like the diminishing habitat of the creeping buttercup, and wildflowers in general. Although wildflowers themselves emotionlessly carry on their own cycles, there are less and less safe havens, and one day, will we turn around and notice the last one vanish?