

## **NIGHT SONGS** – Ellen Southern (Autumn 2011)

This work, for four voices and percussion (the striking of matches), evolved from a lost video work I made 12 years ago, which was stolen in a camera bag. In that video, *Match Piece*, I had used a physics book to calculate that a person's active presence in 1 minute is the same energy in KJ (kilojoules) as 6 lit matches, which I filmed myself lighting as I sat still and counted silently in my head. I liked the idea of combining of a scientific fact and the subjective inner counting, and the way the autofocus on the camera kept having to find the figure each time the match was lit. In autumn 2011 I re-made this lost work, and thought about how I could develop it into a vocal composition. The working title of the piece was 'Vespers', and from the start I wanted to explore atmosphere of plainchant and sacred prayers sung through the night, as a way to survive times of separation, fragmentation; of feeling lost and needing to be found. I wondered if I could create a kind of secular 'prayer' from those feelings.

I structured the work around the singers' striking of multiples of 6 matches and the counting of minutes, thinking of the energy of an absence haunting the work. Melodic lines of contrary motion are sung to these irregular durations, layered in static harmony, always moving yet suspended, cycling and phasing, creating glimmers of chance poly-harmony. This was an experiment with taking the idea of counterpoint, with its 'independence of equal parts' (as opposed to melody and accompaniment) deliberately literally, as if the singers shared a space but were singing alone, with a kind of remote 'sense' of each other. Inspired by pre-tonal sound-worlds, I created my own altered modal scales, and kept the lyrics minimal, to be sung without affectation or deliberate styling, like a 'secret singing'. The piece has a spatial aspect too; the singers physically change formation between the songs, or 4 'movements' of the piece, each formation a manifestation of that phase of the narrative arc. The changing positions of the voices means that the audience each hear the sound differently.

Vocally, this is an exploration of the sound of the voice at its most vulnerable. It is performed in the dark or near dark, and yet the voices are more exposed than usual. The main things that can unite choirs and guard against vocal 'divergence' are deliberately removed; a visible conductor, a shared regular tempo, and harmonic accompaniment. Here, in a literal enactment of the themes embedded in the composition, the voices are lost and revealed in the dark, the 'conducting' done by sense or touch, giving the audience a rare chance to hear truly naked voices. The idiosyncrasies of the voice are given expressive space; you can hear them trying to 'find each other', to tune one off the other with no grounding, trying to maintain their parts yet naturally varying in pitch over distance.

Offering an opportunity for listening is part of the work, hopefully creating a uniquely present shared moment. Degrees of presence and absence are an ongoing theme in my work, and for me in this piece, the presence of the singers and the audience together, the presence of the shared darkness, and the absent 'human presence' represented by the energy of the matches, all share a three-way dialogue within the framework of the composition.