

OF THE BRILLIANT AND THE DARK - a remix score and song-cycle by Ellen Southern
(composed April 2010 - February 2011)

About the project – the remix score

'Of the Brilliant and the Dark' is a composition by Ellen Southern made in a response to an invitation by artists **Eileen Simpson and Ben White (of the Open Music Archive)** to create a creative commons licensed manuscript remixing the original 1969 score 'The Brilliant and the Dark' for a project at the Women's Library, London, in the summer of 2010. This relatively obscure Women's Institute-commissioned opera by Malcolm Williamson, with libretto by Ursula Vaughan Williams, was rediscovered by Simpson and White in the Women's library archives. Southern's resulting 'remix score' is a collection of musical elements (chord progressions, melodic motifs, scales etc) inspired by the original, and is currently being used by various artists and musicians to create new works for a special 'remix event' in London in October 2012.

About the song - cycle

In parallel to working on the remix score, I created a 20 minute performance in the form of a song-cycle, to be debuted site-specifically at the library. Using my 'remix elements' as the basis, I wove an emotive arc, or collective 'life cycle' to form a continuous vocal work. Combining both traditional and experimental compositional techniques, one song transforms into another through 'transitions', in which a musical motif is heard differently each time. My aim, to explore the original material in the context of a small-scale intimate ensemble, was a deliberate contrast to the huge scale of the original opera, which featured full orchestra and 1000 female singers assembled nationwide from voluntary WI choirs. Some fellow vocal and instrumental students from Morley College agreed to perform my piece, and with amazing dedication, the singers learned it week by week as it was being written, a process I will never forget. Female choir **Gaggle** were also invited to remix the original, and the two distinctive new projects were first showcased for Simpson and White's live event as part of the Women's Library's **Out Of The Archives**.

Since then, I have developed my song cycle and performance further, forming the final 30minute work now performed. I worked increasingly closely with the ensemble to allow their individuality to come through and influence the work. Some of the singers even contributed personal lyrics when I was working on a theme they felt close to. The main themes in the cycle are transformative experiences-in-common, such as youth, grief, defiance, self-assertion and finding inner peace. These are points of connection; they also feature as the core themes in various archetypal characters' sung testimonies in the original opera. So the themes echo through different lifetimes, and resonate anew each time. While writing the work I imagined the singers as the 'embroiderers'; the small choir who sat at the side of the stage in the original opera, sewing a 'bayeux tapestry' of women's history through song. It was this small group that I wanted to give 'centre stage'. It's a poignant metaphor for me, since women as 'makers' in the arts are, and have historically been, under-represented and marginalised.

I feel our performance has its own contemporary character, but is lovingly 'haunted' by the original. I feel it creates an active, experiential shared space where performers, audience and the ghost or spirit of the original opera all interact. The physicality, yet also other-worldliness, of women's voices in harmony is an ancient and powerful shared instrument, which I find endlessly fascinating in its variation and capacity for expression. There is something elemental about women weaving a story together through song.

Special thanks: To Tom Bush for compositional input.

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