

What has happened to all that Beauty?

Sleeve notes by Ornette D Clennon

What has happened to all that Beauty? (Written in 1996, premiered at the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh by the Emperor Quartet, Frances M Lynch and BEAST)

What has happened to all that Beauty? was commissioned by ECAT (Edinburgh Contemporary Arts Trust). The title alludes to a line from a collection of essays called "the Fire Next Time" by the black American writer James Baldwin. In the second of the essays, Baldwin chronicles the racism taking place against the black community in sixties America. From his personal experience of racism Baldwin eloquently describes a cultural ethos pervading at that time and the future implications if such an ethos were to persist. In an essay that essentially mirrors the "I Have a Dream" speech by Dr Martin Luther King in 1963, Baldwin asks, "What will happen to all that Beauty?" He refers, of course, to the countless individuals, whose souls have been eroded to a state of hopelessness.

I wrote this piece in response to the One Million Man March, held in Washington in 1996. For me, it was of huge significance that this march had to take place, as the problems that Baldwin spoke of in his essays have not really been resolved. Even though the largely southern state apartheid of the pre-civil rights movement has been vanquished, there still remains a socio-political divide, as illustrated by the Rodney King-Los Angeles riots and more recently the much publicised court case against OJ Simpson.

Much of the beauty Baldwin talks of has by and large vanished as we look into the nineties where black on black violence is being left to fester in the community, whose poverty is firmly connected to economic factors, by the larger, richer, white community at large in both the United States and here in the United Kingdom. The title of his work bemoans this sentiment.

The work itself is divided into two seamless sections, the first of which is a sort of contemplation of the issues outlined above. The voice takes over in an attempt to unravel some of the questions posed by the strings. This section leads to the second, whose material is based on the Tanzanian liberation song, "Tetsuswela" which is more upbeat in character than the first section. There is an ever present drone that begins somewhere near the start of the second section. The drone is triggered, by the instrumentalists, to suddenly leap in and out of the general texture whilst it is being subtly manipulated through different temperings – the major third is minutely expanded and contracted, creating an almost subliminal drama as the tension, brought about by some of the more dissonant temperings interacting with the more consonant, forms a substructure for the second section.

Hidden Song (Written in 1991, premiered at the Royal Botanical Gardens, Edinburgh by members of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra)

This is a protest piece. The quartet was prompted by a community project, run by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, focusing on the global decimation of the rainforests. As part of the preparation for the project, we listened to a recording of the natural sounds of a rainforest. I found it quite difficult to "tune" into the recording at first until my ears grew accustomed to the complexity of sound. The quartet evokes this sporadic and fleeting texture that I heard on the recording. As on the recording there is an emergence of a strange type of order in amongst all of that sound, the quartet mirrors the natural sounds using large cycles of material underpinning the song in the middle section. The word "Hidden" in the title refers to the mysterious hidden beauties of nature, which must be preserved at all costs.

The Listeners (Written in 2000, premiered at the Brunton Theatre, Musselburgh by the Edinburgh String Quartet)

Commissioned by the Tabula Rasa Dance Company and the Scottish Arts Council, the theme of both the dance and music was taken from Ted Hugh's poem, The Wind. The dance explored the relationship between a couple using the wind as a metaphor for the dynamics of their relationship.

The first movement is blustery and evokes an imagined scene of standing in a strong wind or storm. Musically, the thematic seeds for the entire work are sown in this movement including the ever-present drone, which is more apparent at times than others.

The second movement is contemplative and derives its musical inspiration from a traditional Mongolian throat song. The overtone singing that is implied in this movement becomes dislocated from the melody, reminding us of the wind outside.

The third movement opens with a conversation continued from the second movement. However, the movement soon develops into an easy promenade, deriving its thematic inspiration from Phyllis Hymen's rendition of "Betcha by Golly Wow". Later on, the glitches in the theme force it to gently fragment to a slightly ambiguous ending.