

March 30, 2007 Interview with Sibylle Kayser from the Bavarian Radio

SK: Why did you choose these poems? What do they mean to you?

CLW: I chose these poems because of their universal nature and symbolic spiritualism. They depict the physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges of life. The first poem begins with the sorrow over the loss of hair. However, when the narrator realizes that the hair could represent preconceived notions and old ideas growing from the head, the loss symbolizes the freeing of her spirit from the limitations of her mind. The second poem is more dark and introspective as the narrator laments her loss of health and youth. In the last poem, the mood is carefree and bold on a deceptively beautiful spring day. Despite the sadness in each of the poems, there is a touch of humor and irony, especially in the last poem which contains lines from American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. These poems embrace a wide variety of emotions and allow for great musical flexibility.

SK: What does Chinese literature mean to you? Do you also read it in Chinese? How would you describe your relationship to China and Chinese arts?

CLW: I was born in the United States. My parents and grandparents were also born in America. My educational background is Western, and I have not been exposed to Chinese literature or its arts. What I know about China would be the values passed down from generation to generation. I've been asked many times if I speak another language other than English – and the answer is yes, though the other language is French! Meanwhile, I'm starting to learn German...

SK: Did you paint the picture in front of the score? Would you describe it to me?

CLW: Yes, I drew the picture on the cover page. The image captures the hidden emotions and distorted perceptions in the poetry and music. There is a sense of imbalance, with people standing on one foot and holding onto each other, because life is sometimes unstable, mysterious, and unpredictable. At the same time, people are reaching out to nature to bring peace and joy into their lives.

SK: In the first two poems the mood to me seems very “lost”, with a little bit of sadness about the loss of something (hair or younger days). How does this mood correlate in your music? The third poem is different – a little more “without fear” – but with a strange ending... please, tell me how did you set this in music?

CLW: Yes, the mood does reflect loss, but the poetry also includes ironic humor, which is heard in the music. The first song integrates quirky leaps to represent the falling of hair. While these leaps are sorrowful sighs in the soprano line, they are a playful spiritual liberation in the orchestra. This contrasts with the second song, which features darker harmonies and longer phrases. The third song captures the activity of spring as experienced by the inebriated soprano. All the liveliness of the season is exaggerated into wildly fast orchestral whirls. Toward the end, the soprano and orchestra come together to reveal her true feelings.

SK: The score is very “widespread”...there are most of the time only a few instruments playing – which might be good for the voice to be heard and understood – but is there another reason for setting the music as you did?

CLW: Yes, part of the reason was for the soloist to be heard and understood. In addition, to express the contrasting interpretations of the soprano's situation and to bring out the unique colors of each instrument, I chose to create a transparent, heterogeneous texture.