

## Interview for CMC:

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**Tell me about the piece you've written for the Co-Orchestra.**

*Der Abend (The Evening)* is a setting of extracts from a longer poem of the same name by Friedrich Schiller, whose poetry is also set in the final movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony. I enjoy writing for voices, and wanted to explore possibilities for solo soprano and symphony orchestra using a text from Schiller, whose poetry is full of onward drive and momentum. It's also full of consonants, so I selected extracts which would convey the sentiment of the poem without it inadvertently becoming a lengthy solo cantata! Schiller's poem depicts the ever-shifting colours and light of sunset, as well as a longing for the view on the opposite side of the globe where sunlight is the dawn. In the poem this also becomes an allegory for the sacred presence of the Divine. During Beethoven's lifetime nature was used by artists as a powerful symbol of the emotions, and Schiller's *Der Abend* is typical in this respect, expressing the oneness between the individual and the beauty of the natural world.

**The original brief was to compose a response to one of the movements to Beethoven's 9th Symphony. How did you approach basing your work on such an iconic and well known piece of music?**

I was keen to express the antithesis of the volume and force which is so typical of the climactic parts of the last movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony. In writing a piece which is reflective, focusing on quiet transformation of timbres and harmonies, I wanted also to convey some of the relevance of ideas emanating from the work of Beethoven and his contemporaries. These include unity of the individual with nature, experiencing the Divine within the natural world, and the response of the artist to their own time. Beethoven and composers of his era were working in a context of tremendous political and cultural upheaval, as we are today, albeit in a different way. However, the manner in which this poem draws a picture of the opposite side of the globe (*the sun shows/Her evening view to the deep valley/For others, ah, happy worlds/It is a morning scene*), reminds me of how those living on the opposite side of our globe pay the greater price for our treatment of the environment. So our experience of oneness with nature requires our engagement and response. In this way, I've sought to illustrate that the ideas of universal love expressed in the last movement of Beethoven are as relevant as ever today.

**Was Beethoven a particularly strong influence on your musical development and did his often bold approach to writing for orchestra inform your piece in any way?**

His work continues to influence and amaze me. Particularly striking are the clarity of his chordal voicings using upper woodwinds and light brass to augment the string orchestral sound. His rhythmic freshness and thematic invention, not to mention his contrapuntal prowess are aspects from which I expect to be learning for some time yet. In my own piece, *Der Abend*, Beethoven's influence on me is perhaps most evident in the colouristic nuancing of harmonic progressions.

**It's not everyday that composers get an opportunity to write for orchestra. Are you especially drawn towards the medium as a composer?**

Yes, it's an instrument all its own, because it has so much to offer in its particular combinations of timbres which are not available in any other medium. Being drawn to write for orchestra is one thing, but unless there is the opportunity for a composer to experience the rehearsal and performance of their orchestral work, it's something of a cul-de-sac. Any opportunity to compose for an orchestral performance is a precious one, and this project with the Co-orch is especially valuable as it culminates in a live concert performance which will be recorded. It is particularly satisfying to know at the time of writing who one is writing for, that the work will be publicly performed, and the context in which the new piece will be heard.

**What are some of the challenges you have faced when writing your piece?**

Writing for solo soprano and orchestra, I wanted to ensure that the orchestra would have material which is satisfying to play, while also providing a vehicle for the vocal artistry of the solo soprano, Colette Delahunt. I extracted sections of Schiller's poem which would make sense on their own, rather than phrases containing references requiring further explanation, and which were densely packed with consonants and diphthongs. I'm also conscious of the limits of available rehearsal time, so I believe it is crucial for the composer to be able to provide a score on which their intentions are fully clear. One aspect I found I had to balance carefully was the sense in which I was writing in my own original language, while at the same time being a response to the music of Beethoven. I didn't want my piece to sound like an imitation of anyone else, but I was also aware that of trying to limit the 'gear-shift' between my work and that of Beethoven's, being programmed as they are, closely together. Although some would see this differently, I wanted the change from one to the other to sound like they're both intended to be on the same concert programme, rather than juxtaposing polar opposites. In order to achieve this, I didn't compromise my harmonic or musical language, and focused instead on drawing out the inherent and idiomatic strengths of the orchestral instruments.