

The Mystic Ring {1}

« I have seen a vision of the marriage of East and West, and far off down the Halls of Time I heard the echo of a child-like voice. How long, how long ? How I have longed for men of genius to come out of Europe instead of the average man of commerce, of statecraft and of churchcraft. The books which remain to be written, first and foremost, and greatest, *The Bible of East and West* ----- greater than Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and hell* ; a mystic ring on the finger of the world. » {1} [Leach : 'Drawings, Verse and Belief']

String quartet

composed by

Carolyn Sparey

'The Mystic Ring' is a tribute to the great English potter, Bernard Leach, who was probably one of the most significant and influential pioneers of craftsmanship during the twentieth century. Leach spent much of his life moving between Japan and England, reflecting an intense love for both eastern and western cultures and his dream of unity between the two --- « a love union of the two hemispheres; a mystic ring on the finger of the world » {1} Leach's philosophy regarding the role of the potter, or the artist-potter, is best summed up in his own words from his book 'The Potter's Challenge' : « we are searching for a balanced form of self-expression, and potting is one of the few activities today in which a person can use his natural facilities of head, heart and hand in balance. If the potter is making utensils for use – simple bowls, pitchers, mugs and plates – he is doing two things at the same time ; he is making ware that may give pleasure in use, which provides one form of satisfaction to the maker ; and he is travelling in the never-ending search for perfection of form, which gives a different gratification. As these two activities come together and the potter is at one with the clay, the pot will have *life* in it. » {2}

Although Leach was first and foremost a potter, he also expressed himself through poetry, painting and writing; he was a deep thinker and a seeker of spiritual fulfilment, coming to the conclusion during his early years in Japan that the centre of life is spiritual energy ; he later wrote of the « replacement of self at the centre of the circle by 'the Other Power' , God ». {3} Coming initially from a Roman Catholic background, and later considering himself to be agnostic, Leach subsequently found in the teachings of Zen Buddhism a philosophy which began

to make sense of life, art and work ; finally, having encountered the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith through the artist Mark Tobey, he became a Bahá'í : « in becoming a convinced Bahá'í » he wrote, « the only discarding of slowly gathered convictions has been the replacement of self at the centre of the circle by 'The Other Power' – God – and the result has been strange, for the jigsaw pieces begin to fall into place – seemingly by themselves. » {3}

In his book, 'A Potter's portfolio', Leach summed up his conviction relating to the relationship between spirituality and the fashioning of a pot : « A potter on his wheel is doing two things at the same time : he is making hollow wares to stand upon a level surface for the common usage of the home and he is exploring space. His endeavour is determined in one respect by use, but in other ways by a never-ending search for perfection of form. Between the subtle opposition and interplay of centrifugal and gravitational force, between straight and curve [ultimately of sphere and cylinder, the hints of which can be seen between the foot and lip of every pot], are hidden all the potter's experience of beauty. Under his hands the clay responds to emotion and thought from a long past, to his own intuition of the lovely and the true, accurately recording the stages of his own inward development. The pot is the man : his virtues and his vices are shown therein – no disguise is possible. » {4}

'The Mystic Ring' takes the concept of God as its centre, either side of which are two movements which attempt to convey the essence of East [Japan] and West [England] respectively. The work begins with a portrait of Leach the man, and ends with a musical interpretation of the potter's craft in action. There are places in the work where the musicians are invited to make decisions rather than following the set score rigidly, hopefully conveying a sense of producing something new, and in the context of Leach, the inspiration of a new piece of pottery unfolding under his hands; this is used particularly towards the end of the fifth movement, where the score provides a series of boxes which the musicians can repeat or move in to and out of by their own decision.

1/ 'This Clay' {5}

« The pot is the man ; his virtues and his vices are shown therein – no disguise is possible. » {4}

« The pot is the man », Leach wrote. We are all given names by which, as we pass through life, we are recognised, names which conjure up our qualities in the

thoughts of those who remember us. Using this fundamental concept, I have based the movement around the letters of Bernard Leach's name — [B E A D E A C] — which lend themselves to musical notation; in themselves they are merely random notes or alphabetical letters, but within the context of the movement they present a portrait of the man.

The movement begins with a slow introduction based on the note sequence [BEADEAC, as explained above, followed by a repeated bell-like section based on the same letters / notes; although not strictly a fugue, the fugal qualities, [each instrument entering with the same pattern of notes, but at differing speeds] of this Allegro passage suggest the various layers of Leach's humanness, at the heart of which was his belief in the unity of the world, the fusing of east and west. The version as played by the first violin is also a musical interpretation of the potter's wheel, returning at the end of the fifth movement.

2/ **'In Japan'** [title taken from a painting on tiles – Leach]

« Earth quivers in Japan, shaken by internal fires . It grows bamboo shoots a foot a day » {5}

Leach's deep love for Japan is the inspiration for this movement, for which I have drawn loosely on two distinct musical genres. The first, which begins the movement, is based on the 'Bunya-ningo' from the island of Sado; this is an offshoot of Bunraku, a theatrical form with a musical element, involving a distinctive singing style accompanied by a shamisen [first heard in the viola part]. Bunraku is somewhat similar to European 'Moritaten' – [songs sung at village fairs], - although the singing style is extraordinarily demanding, requiring a vast compass from soprano to bass; the singer takes the parts of all characters, from timid young girls to terrifying villains, and he also needs to be a great actor. So exhausting is the task that two pairs of musicians always take turns, one gidayu singer and one shamisen player for each half of the play. The shamisen is equally involved in the drama, with solo preludes, interludes and postludes, as well as accompanying passages. The second Japanese genre is the invocation to the Buddha of charity, which in its original purpose is repeated hundreds of times without a break. 'Namu Amida Butsu' suggests an influence of western hymns on the Buddhist service, which in this context is evocative of Leach's desire to unite east and west.

The movement also contains fragments of material from the fourth movement, 'Summer joy', [specifically, fragments of 'Sumer is icumin in'] which in turn features passages from this movement, musically suggesting the unity of east and west which Leach sought so passionately. Beginning with a short violin/cello duet

based on an instrumental introduction to ‘Bunya –ningo’, the movement soon suggests material from the fourth movement [‘Summer Joy’] in the second violin and cello, which repeat a truncated form of the ‘Sumer is icumin in’ accompaniment several times. The second violin plays a major role in the movement, in a voice–like solo inspired by the Bunya–ningo actor/singer; here and there a shamisen solo melody appears [from ‘Bunya–ningo’], often in parallel with passages from ‘Sumer is icumin in’. The central part of the movement, combining ‘Namu Amida Butsu’ with the previous violin 2 solo, leads into the re-appearance of previous material.

3/ ‘Thusness’ {6}

« In becoming a convinced Bahá’í, the only discarding of slowly gathered convictions has been the replacement of self at the centre of the circle by ‘The Other Power’ – God – and the result has been strange, for the jigsaw pieces begin to fall into place – seemingly by themselves. » {3}

Leach’s spiritual quest lay at the centre of his life ; « -----there is nature at work. We call it nature; you call it what you like. The Japanese, the Buddhists call it ‘thusness’. The beginning of the Bible calls God ‘I am that I am’, I ask you what is the difference between ‘thusness’ and ‘I am that I am’ ». {6} Leach abandoned his Jesuit upbringing, and having passed through a period of agnosticism, found enlightenment in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism : « I admire most the art in which there is a power greater than that of the individual, less of the desire to shine, for It shines, not the me. From Yanagi and Hamada, I learned much – the words of Yanagi and the actions of Hamada. There was also a long and memorable meeting with Dr. Daisetsu Susuki in New York. I asked him about Zen and Shin Buddhism – the lonely road of self-discovery and the broad road of humility – ‘Jiriki Do’ and ‘Tariki Do’. He replied that there was no conflict between them – the essence of Buddhism lay behind apparent opposites in a land of nakedness or ‘thusness’, that the path of the individual was hard – that either path could be an imprisonment – but that the more one gave of oneself to the ‘Other power’, the more it saved. I came a step nearer. » {3} Leach finally found the answers to his questionings in the Bahá’í Faith, which he met first of all, briefly, whilst in Japan during the first world war, and adopted finally many years later : « Much of the teachings appealed to me from the first – the marriage of East and West; the inter- relationship of the great religions; the significance of true arts and true crafts as worship ; the equality of men and women; the absence of any prejudice, superstition, priests, great wealth and great poverty. » {3}

‘Thusness’ is a portrait of search --- primarily Leach’s search, but ultimately universal; The opening bars reflect the various ideas or beliefs which humans in their diversity have adopted, but which ultimately are unable to create true unity. Then follows a similar idea, suggesting a degree of agreement, but which also has no positive conclusion; the sound of church bells, signifying the Sunday church ritual, ultimately disintegrates into conflict and contention, after which the cello speaks softly of peace and reconciliation, eventually silenced by the shouting of voices stating their claim to ultimate truth; at the climax, [bars 87, 88, 89, 90] the cello gently spells out the word ‘Bahá’ [using the notes B-flat, A, B-natural, A*], meaning Glory, and representative of the Bahá’í Faith, after which the final section combines Bahá in the violins with Leach’s name suggested in chords between the viola and cello. **Known as a musical cryptogram, this technique is a sequence of pitches using the relationship between note names and letters of the alphabet in order to spell words.*]

4/ ‘Summer Joy’ {1}

« Deep in my heart there flows a stream of melody ---- » {1}

In this movement Leach’s relationship with England is summed up in one of the oldest of English melodies, ‘Sumer is icumen in’, a medieval English round from the mid-13th century. Forming the basic skeleton of this movement, ‘Sumer is icumen in’ appears variously, initially in a truncated form in the viola and cello, which are joined by the violins ‘toying’ with remnants of the shamisen solo part from Bunta–ningo, first heard in the second movement. Leach’s name is suggested through a series of chords moving between the violins, [B in bar 21, E in bar 24, A in 26 etc] followed by the original form of ‘Sumer is icumen in’. The second violin reasserts the ‘vocal’ solo from Bunya–ningo, whilst the first violin and viola play with the shamisen part and a section from ‘Sumer is icumin in’; the movement finishes with a slightly dislocated form of the ‘sumer’ melody before trailing away to nothing.

5/ ‘Spinning the clay into stars’ {5}

« Clay in man, clay on the wheel, spinning like the earth and the stars, man spinning the clay into stars, life spinning the man – LIFE » {5}

A short slow introduction [BEADEAC] leads into a faster section, inspired by the physical nature of a pot as vacant space acquiring form around it. The passage which follows is a representation in music of the potter’s wheel: the initial slow turning, becoming faster --- the joy of inspiration and creation finally pouring through the music --- « Spinning like the earth and the stars, man spinning the clay into stars --- ». The turning arpeggios finally introduce the fugal theme

initially heard in the first movement, and based on the Leach notes, BEADEAC; at this point the music enters the final, 'free' section, for which the score provides a series of boxes, the musicians being invited to move towards the end of the quartet in their own time.

Notes

All quotes used throughout the quartet, including the title, are taken from Bernard Leach's personal writings and poetry.

{1} 'Drawings, Verse and Belief', Bernard Leach; reproduced by permission of Oneworld Publications.

{2} 'The Potter's Challenge'. [page 17]

{3} 'My Religious Faith'.

{4} 'Potter's Portfolio'.

{5} from Leach's poem, *This Clay* ['Drawings, Verse and Belief'] Bernard Leach; reproduced by permission of Oneworld Publications.

{6} from a public lecture at a meeting organized by Bahá'ís in Dorchester, [1975], and titled 'My life, my work and my belief'. [text printed in the book, *Spinning the Clay into Stars* by Robert Weinberg]