

Scholarship Music 2008 submission essay

Star Maker: A choral work for SSA choir, Semi Chorus SSA, Treble Solo and Organ

“Star Maker” is a choral setting of the poem “Emmanuel” by New Zealand poet Joy Cowley. Cowley, a devout Catholic, wrote the poem to celebrate the birth of Jesus. I have taken her poem as inspiration for a choral work that captures the essence of the religious celebration and promise of hope that comes with Christmas. However, it was also my challenge to make the composition as accessible to non-Christians as it is to those who believe in the Christian God. For this reason, I have combined a range of traditional religious music methods with the more secular experimental music techniques to create a truly original work that can be viewed by both audiences as a celebration of creation – be it evolutionary or divine.

Religious elements and influences

There is an aspect of the western religious service that has been a part of Christianity for centuries, and I have always had a personal fascination with it. I am referring to the ringing of church bells. Whether tolled in respect for the dead, or rung in celebration of life and marriage, in past eras the church bells were a big part of communicating with the local community. In “Star Maker” I have taken a section of the ‘wedding peal’ that is familiar to a great deal of people; the major, descending scale, and manipulated it into a natural minor descending scale (as seen below).

The Original ‘Wedding Peal’ – played on Church Bells.



The Original descending scale developed into an F natural minor scale.



The new scale beginning on D, the 6th degree of the F natural minor scale.



As shown above, I have developed the scale further, choosing to run from D to D. This pattern becomes an Ostinato, which is a starting point and initial melodic structure allowing for harmonic development. The use of the wedding peal allows a religious audience to reminisce the celebration that usually accompanies this peal. This sets the tone for the work as a reflection and celebration of life and God's creation.

The text of the poem "Emmanuel" is very short and straightforward.

Star Maker
Earth Shaker
Power of the hurricane
It comes to earth
In a blaze of angels
Called by compassion
Formed by love

While it uses the simplest of language, the ideas and energy in Cowley's words are extraordinary. The text, while not specifically mentioning Christ, or the nativity, is clearly of a religious nature and I have tried to capture the essence of Cowley's strength of belief in the choral writing. The opening phrase "Star maker/ Earth shaker" is written to convey the "great" and "terrible" (Psalm 47:2) God from the Bible – the Creator of the Universe. I achieved this through the growth of harmony, from a single unison note F which evolves into the diminished chord Bdim7 (Bars 5-7) and the use of dynamic contrast, for example (at Bars 5-8) the note is *piano*, however the strength of a whole choir singing the same note (despite its quiet dynamic) should be felt. From the quiet but intense opening the SSA chorus immediately grows into a swelling crescendo that then diminishes as suddenly as it grew, back to *piano*. This idea is reaffirmed from bars 13-16, although the dynamic contrast is not so vast, the strength is maintained through the chromatic shifts into cluster chords that resolve into a minor chord. However, it is the same God who is gentle, meek and mild and as human as the child in the stable who is "Called by compassion/ Formed by love". This contrast between descriptions of God as almighty and God as gentle formed the inspiration for the choice of a female choir, structure, and harmonic development in "Star Maker".

The use of cluster chords, while a technique used in relatively modern music, is no stranger to religious works. American composer Eric Whitacre uses a combination of cluster chords, combined with a solo voice soaring above, to achieve "unearthly beauty" (as described by the Los Angeles Times) in his Christmas work "Lux Arumque" (meaning Golden light). Whitacre has managed to capture the beauty and the mystery of the nativity in this piece, and I modelled some areas of "Star Maker" on his voicing. New Zealand up-and-coming composer Andrew Baldwin (of Wellington) uses similar technique in his Christmas work "Lux Venit" and setting of "Set Me as a Seal". In both pieces, Baldwin has carefully spaced the voicing of the

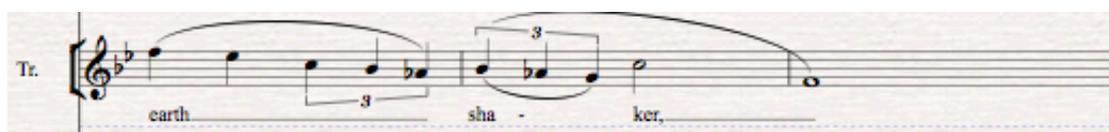
cluster chords to avoid dissonance and the higher melody sung by a solo soprano adds a new colour and warmth to the music. I have tried to achieve similar warmth from Bars 48-50 and 51-57 where the combination of suspension and the introduction of low alto notes add a rich tone to the chords and allow the treble melody to soar above.

While I wanted to depict God as strong, yet mild I also wanted to convey the angelic dimension of Cowley's poetry. I decided that to achieve a celestial presence I would need to separate sections of the melody to achieve a call and answer effect – a technique commonly used in religious music. Thus, I decided to use a semi-chorus. Whilst the semi-chorus portrays the contrast and merging of human and divine beings, it also gives the music a refreshing element of change. The blend of voices in the semi-chorus should be different to the sound of the main body of the choir. The semi-chorus, because of the nature of having fewer voices, should have a more piercing, controlled sound, that hints towards un-earthly qualities. While it is a feature of the whole piece, this should be most prominent from bars 43-46. The contrast between hearing the combined choir, then each choir separately (semi-chorus then main body) should reinforce the call and answer aspect, which alludes to the angels coming down to earth to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Religious music that is written to be included in a church service setting is usually composed to bible passages or psalms. Because these texts can be very long it is not uncommon for a composer to structure their music so that there is no need for repetition of text. For example, English composer and church organist Herbert Howells uses the traditional text for his "Collegium Regale: Te Deum and Jubilate". He writes each phrase of text into the music only once and achieves a sense of wholeness not by repetition of phrases, but by repetition of melody with different text. For example, the "Jubilate" opens with the words "O be joyful in the Lord all ye lands" the same melody is then repeated later in the work (at the beginning of the Gloria) with the words "Glory be to the Father". I have taken the essence of this structure and developed it further. While I have deliberately repeated musical ideas as little as possible, there are some phrases that I felt needed small amounts of repetition in order to sustain the piece. For example, if I was to follow the religious structure strictly I would not have repeated the words "star maker, earth shaker", however I felt that due to the limited amount of text in the poem I would have to repeat some areas of text or else the entire work would not be much more than twenty seconds long. I did try to include the idea of repeating a melody with different words in the Treble Solo part. While the melody is not always exactly the same throughout the piece, it is similar enough to be recognisable as repetition or development of the previous time it was heard.

For example:

Bar 9



Bar 25



Bar 54



These three sections of the music all use the same (or very similar) melodic lines but the words have changed. This creates a sense of coherency throughout the piece, linking the different musical ideas in the other parts together.

Secular Elements and Influences

While “Star Maker” has definitely been composed to feature in a religious context, I have tried to change small elements of the music to make it just as accessible to a non Christian audience. This is very important if I want the piece to be accepted into today’s society as there are fewer people attending church services than ever before and for many families religion is of no interest. It is my aim that by such small alterations this composition will be able to be viewed as an ‘art piece’ or ‘experimental music’ and that it can stand-alone from religion. The first change that I decided to make was the title of the work. Joy Cowley’s original poem is titled “Emmanuel” (meaning ‘God is with us’). This title has strong Christian affiliations so I titled my work by the first line of the poem “Star Maker”, which maintains the theme of celebrating creation, but targets the religious aspect in a far more subtle manner.

The next change that I made was to put the wedding peal ostinato into a minor key. While this still alludes to the ringing of church bells, to many people it will simply be a natural minor descending scale. While aurally this ostinato sounds like the F natural minor scale beginning on D, I discovered later (when analysing the chords and harmony) that it is alternatively in the Eb Locrian mode (the seventh mode – supposedly an “unworkable scale” that is used very seldom by composers). As in Rachmaninov’s “Prelude in B minor” (which can be interpreted as in the Locrian Mode but is more likely to be written in a closely related minor key), “Star Maker” was not intentionally written in the Locrian Mode.

Practicality and Performability

When writing “Star Maker” I envisioned it as being performed in a church (preferably cathedral) as part of the Christmas celebrations, such as a carol service. However, in order for “Star Maker” to be sung in the community I recognise that only a minority of people attend these services and so I would be content with it being performed in another setting. Nevertheless, I must insist that the semi-chorus part is sung at a distance from the main body of the choir. I composed the semi-chorus to be sung from the minstrels gallery in a cathedral (a balcony overlooking the nave of the church – usually located near the organ) while the main body sings from the choir stalls. I am, however, aware that only a choir who is familiar with the space and acoustic of such a building would be able to maximise this layout, and so for an amateur group it is not such a practical suggestion in this situation. As such, I would be content with the semi-chorus singing at a small distance from the main choir. This will still have the call-and-answer effect and is much simpler to co-ordinate.

In terms of performability the entire ensemble needs to be fairly certain of their notes before singing in public. The nature of the music (particularly when singing against the organ part) makes it difficult to sight-read. The conductor also needs to be very familiar with the work as there is a tendency to slow down in areas such as the 5/4 section at Bar 43. By learning “Star Maker” in my school choir for our carol service I realise that some of the entries can be difficult to pitch (such as the semi-chorus Soprano 2 entry at Bar 27). In the future when editing “Star Maker” I would try to make these difficult entries a bit easier by providing supporting notes in the organ part. I would also be interested in extending the entire work as I think it is currently a little bit too short.

When composing “Star Maker” I tried to combine the two aspects of my personal musical passions – both traditional religious settings (particularly Christian) and the more contemporary experimental music. Challenges included capturing the religious intensity of Joy Cowley’s words, to fusing the two contrasting musical styles and traditions. I believe that “Star Maker” is an accessible piece to all variety’s of audience and is interesting for both listener and singer alike. The combination of the styles of composition drawn from a wide range of other composers and techniques has enabled me to create a distinct and innovative choral work, celebrating intricate creation of the world.