EDGAR WARREN WILLIAMS

WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

for percussion, mezzo-soprano, and violoncello

SCORE

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PROGRAM NOTES

“What the Thunder Said” is based upon the last nine lines of T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land.

Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Pois’ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d’Aquitaine a la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe.
Shantih shantih shantih

Coming at the end of this complex poem, these lines mirror the theme of cultural and psychological fragmentation of the post-World-War-I world. These line in four different languages each allude to themes developed in the body of the poem. The children’s doggerel “London Bridge is falling down” moves directly to a quote from Dante’s Purgatorio in which a doomed poet seeks to redeem himself in the “refining fires” of hell. Following that is a quote from the Pervigilium Veneris, a pre-Christian paean to Venus that alludes to the myth of Philomel. (Philomel and her sisters take vengeance on the man who raped her and tore out her tongue; when the rapist turns the tables and threatens to murder the avenging sisters, the gods take pity and turn all three sisters into swallows, freeing them from their tormentor and giving Philomel back her voice.) “When will I be turned into a swallow?” the line asks. Then a line from the poem “El Desdichado” [The Wretched One] by the proto-Symbolist poet Gérard de Nerval. “[I am] the Prince of Aquitaine of the demolished castle.” Then, at last, Eliot suggests a purpose to this hodgepodge of quotes: “These fragment I have shored against my ruins.” Then, as if in exasperation, a quote from Kidd’s The Spanish Tragedy: “Why Ile fit you. Heironymo’s mad againe.” Heironymo has been driven mad by the murder of his son but, despite this, he swears to take care of (“fit”) the murderers. Then comes what the thunder says. “Charity (datta), compassion ( dayadhvam) and control (damyata)”. “Shantih”, as repeated here, marks the formal end of an Upanishad, meaning “peace be with you” and “amen”.

The composer selected one more fragment from The Waste Land for this composition. The poem has the following epigraph in Greek and Latin:

“Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meisvidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σιβυλλα τι θελεις; respondebat illa: αποθανειν θελω.”

[I have seen with my own eyes the Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her "What do you want?" She answered, "I want to die."]

The Sibyl of Cumae was a prophetess in service to Apollo and a great beauty. Apollo wished to take her as his lover and offered her anything she desired. She asked for eternal life. Apollo granted her wish. She lived for hundreds of years, each year becoming smaller and frailer, having received eternal life but not eternal youth. When Trimalchio speaks of her in the Satyricon, she is little more than a tourist attraction, tiny, ancient, confined, and longing to die. The percussionists asks this question of the mezzo/cellist at the beginning of the work: Sibyl, what do you want? The cellist responds, “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” Again, at the end of the work, the percussionist asks her the same question. This time she answers with an angry outburst in the form of a short, ugly cadenza. Then, calming, she responds, “Shantih.”
PERFORMANCE NOTES:

GENERAL
The cellist/mezz takes on the persona of the Sibyl. She responds to the percussionist operatically. The notion is that there is a progression through the quotes that leads her to a more measured, philosophical request at the end, asking not for death, but for peace. Her cadenza at the end is merely a final outburst of frustration and bitterness before her quiet request for "Shantih."

m. 3: The mezzo’s “Shall I at least set my land in order” should be understood as an exasperated, out-of-patient response to the percussionist’s question—as if he has asked that questions a million times.

m. 80: The outburst of the drums should be performed with enough panache to appear as an incitement to the mezzo—to which she responds, “Why Ile fit you!.” What follows should appear as a duel between the percussionist and cellist (in the persona of the Sibyl).

m.108: The percussionist should be understood to be referring to the cellist/mezzo/Sibyl.

VIOLONCELLO

Indicates saltato/jeté, or a controlled off-the-string staccato on a single bow

Indicates the same—all on one bow.

Indicates ricochet/jeté, a throwing of the bow to create an indefinite number of progressively softer attacks.

PERCUSSION
Most of the percussion instruments use noteheads specific to the instrument. This is simply to aid the percussionist in parsing the score. Vibraphone pedaling is left up to the performer except in certain ambiguous cases where it is explicitly indicated in the score.
Duration: ca. 7 min.

Written for DUOroborus (Dagmar Bathman, cello/mezzo; Omar Cecchi, percussion)

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Duration: ca. 7 min.
VIB

MEZ

VLC

WILLIAMS: What the Thunder Said

accel.

Più veloce $\downarrow = 72$

affrettare... ten.

sim.

Swal low

collé*

Quan do

fi am
eu

che li
don

ord. V
collé

Più veloce $\downarrow = 96$

flaut.

ord. V
collé

Più veloce $\downarrow = 96$

stacc. sempre

motor: off

stacc. sempre

VLC
WILLIAMS: What the Thunder Said

77 (CYM) Più veloce $\dot{=}$ 84

accel.

DRM 42

$\text{ff}$

Più veloce $\dot{=}$ 84

angry, shouting (at percussionist)

shored a gainst my ru in

accel.

83

$\text{ff}$

brutale

83

ff

brutale

83

$\text{ff}$

brutale

90

pizz.

(pizz.)

arco

pizz.

arco

97

mf

97

mf

97

mf
VLC

103

Più lento $\frac{\text{d}}{\text{e}} = 66$

TAM-T

109

Speaking:

Più lento $\frac{\text{d}}{\text{e}} = 66$

Heir on y mo's mad a-gaine!

VLC

109

affrettare, rubato

VIB

115

$\text{[damp]}$

MEZ

VLC

115

Da - ta

Da - yadh - vam

VIB

119

TAM-T

119

$\text{[damp]}$

MEZ

VLC

Da - ta

Da - yadh - vam

Da - ta

*"circular bow": bow moving in a continuous, circular motion between fingerboard and bridge
Vlc. "cadenza"*
[ca. 10 seconds]

* Improvise upon the 3-string fragments given. Perform in any order or configuration -- arco, pizz., col leg., pont. etc.; short motives, double-stops, triple stops, or isolated notes. Should be sempre fortissimo and ben marcato. The effect should be of a virtuosic, angry, fragmentary, and demented outburst -- but no longer than 10 seconds. Percussionist maintains pianissimo tam-tam underneath cadenza. The improvisation leads directly into the repeated quadruple-stops in measure 143, the cellist cuing the percussionist for his cymbal roll. The fermata that ends measure 143 must be long enough to allow the cymbal to decay sufficiently for the singing bwol in m. 144 to be heard. During this long fermata, the cellist should simply stare at the floor, seemingly exhausted. However, the percussionist must show in his attitude that the piece is not over.

[N.B. The composer has provided a possible realization at the end of the score. This may be cut out and pasted over the above graphic if the cellist prefers not to improvise her own cadenza.]
Possible realization of Vlc. cadenza:

Presto (fermati: brève)