

The Hidden Landscape (1973)

The Hidden Landscape is in two sections, fast and slow, framed by a prologue and epilogue. It spans about twenty minutes, playing continuously with no breaks but with clear landmarks.

In the prologue (about 4'), deep distant sounds come from far away in space and time. Only very gradually do they accumulate, gather in stray fragments of higher sounds, and move into the foreground - to the chords (ppp, horns, growing to fff, tutti) which act as 'pillars' for the piece.

The first section is characterised by the unconstrained writing for soloists and groups, by rapid movement, and by constant shifts in perspective which combine to give it a mood of nervous tension. This is gradually directed into forward-moving energy, and finally resolved at the climax (about 10').

The second section is cast in five verses which are continuous expansions of the solo cello opening. Its mood is of a grave serenity, with pools of silence, over which melody gradually blossoms. But the atmosphere becomes increasingly oppressive, and the music moves into the overwhelming climax of the whole work. From this emerges the epilogue, where the music of the prologue is taken up into the skies; there are last flowerings of melody, and memories of the pillar-chords.

It is written for a large orchestra with particular families standing out: clarinets, trumpets, flutes, and in the second half, cellos, oboes and bassoons. Often, too, the instruments emerge to speak on their own (alto flute, horn, alto saxophone, cor anglais, etc.). Throughout, wind instruments tend to carry the main argument, though the whole piece is haunted by string sounds, especially harmonics. I never use virtuosity for its own sake, but each player is written for as an individual: finally, though, the excitement of writing for orchestra is in sensing its mass: many musicians working as one to reveal the Hidden Landscape to the audience.

The title was suggested by a collection of Tamil love-poems, The Inner Landscape; but perhaps the metaphor of natural landscape is more helpful. In looking at a real landscape we keep an unconscious awareness of its overall shape and contour, its fundamental structure, while delighting in all its profusion of detail. It is good if we can do this as listeners, accepting changes in perspective, unexpected proportions and formations, as readily as we do as onlookers. For example, many times in my piece there is a sudden suspension of movement (perhaps in the first section, a quiet string chord or woodwind phrase after activity in the brass) which for me is akin to the shift from foreground to background in watching a landscape; akin to the sensation I have of distant horizons, and unmeasured passage of time, however strongly aware of the 'here and now' of my presence in a living landscape. I emphasise that this is a metaphor: however, discovering a new work has all the excitement for a composer of literal exploration, and thus it should be for the listener.

The Hidden Landscape was commissioned by the BBC, and first performed at the Proms, 7th August 1973, BBCSO conducted by Norman del Mar.

NL

