

Light Passing and its genesis

I was drawn to the 'Light Passing' project for two reasons. In the first place, I was attracted by the character of Clement: Clement VI, Pope in Avignon from 1342 to his death in 1352. The more I learnt about him, the more striking he seemed. He stood for tolerance in the face of religious bigotry: what could be more apt for our own time? Secondly, the possibility of integrating fourteenth century music with my own musical language was a challenge that set my ideas buzzing.

John Edmonds sent me his libretto, at the suggestion of John Potter, in February 2002. In preparation for composing the score, I immersed myself in the music that Clement and his contemporaries at Avignon would have known. I re-learnt plainsong notation, and spent summer 2002 with plainchant melodies in my head, along with journeys of discovery in the polyphonic repertoire. I marvelled at the sophistication of Philippe de Vitry, the leading composer in fourteenth century Avignon, and I sang Machaut with friends. Meanwhile, I was re-reading Petrarch and Boccaccio; the late mediaeval era was coming alive for me in all its vividness and paradox.

Since Clement's Papal coronation took place at Whitsun, and he identified his papacy with light - with the descent of the spirit at Pentecost - I decided that the two best -known of the Whitsun hymns would run through my score: *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and *Veni Creator*. Beautiful, easily memorable tunes, they are well suited to a chorus of untrained voices and provided endlessly fruitful material which I could transform in my own score.

In choosing polyphony, I was guided both by my musical instinct and by historical fact. The motet which de Vitry composed for Clement's coronation has survived; it is too long to use complete in an hour-long dramatic work, but I have preserved its proportions, making cuts in the original to allow glimpses of Clement's imagined thoughts. Similarly, I chose the initial Kyrie because I was fascinated by its perfect 'golden mean' proportions. Its metric structure is fashioned according to the Fibonacci series (I don't think any musicologists have noticed this!) and I kept to it as I composed Clement's opening soliloquy which runs through it. References to Clement in the texts of these pieces, puns on his name, helped me identify them: the Gloria '*Clemens Deus artifex, tota clemencia*', for example. Fourteenth century motets combine different texts, sometimes French and Latin simultaneously - a useful precedent for our opera, in which John Edmonds draws on a number of languages to create the context of the characters.

At the crux of the opera, when Clement, despairing, even doubts his faith, I placed de Vitry's motet '*Adesto sancta trinitas, musice modulantibus*'. Its music made it particularly suited, but even more so its text, with its musical references and its plea: '*Firmissime fidem teneamus*' - 'let us hold firmly to faith...'

The brilliant colours of mediaeval stained glass and the clearly etched lines of polyphony were in my mind as I chose the instrumental colours for the opera: flute, bassoon and trumpet, 'cello and harp, and an array of struck or bowed percussion. I needed an ensemble of soloists, whose music could be intimate, in dialogue with the vocal soloists, or could combine in splendid sonority as an analogue to Clement's opulent court. I needed, too, instruments whose

characters would belong with my own music, while also suggesting trace-memories of mediaeval music (even through occasional doubling instruments) or creating deliberate anachronisms, as the text does.

Choosing voices for an opera is part of discovering the characters I am going to create. I never doubted that Clement would be a bass-baritone, balancing the high male voices I needed for the polyphony. Thus Petrarch became a tenor - eloquent and forceful - and using countertenor for the flagellant leader meant I could create the necessary incisive line above the clamour of his vigilante followers. John Edmonds' marvellous words for St Brigid gave me the opportunity to create a substantial contralto part, while Cecile came into the opera at my behest. I wanted the chance to show Clement's vulnerability, not in a conventional love scene, but in a context where two intelligent people strive to keep their vows.

In summer 2003, when the opera was partly composed, I revisited Avignon, and was able to spend time in Clement's own room. It is a study-bedchamber decorated with the pastoral scenes he loved: falconry, the chase, young people picnicking, fishing, a Provencal Papageno in a tree. As the outside world is brought within, through these gorgeous greens and blues, I discovered a new quality in this brilliant man: restlessness. I knew Clement to be an intellectual, a scholar-theologian and an extraordinary patron of the arts. (These were reasons, too, why I wanted to make an opera about him, for I find 21st century Britain anti-intellectual, with serious contemporary arts often swept aside by the pursuit of populism.) But when I perceived the restlessness of his spirit, I felt the dominating aspect of his character to be his questing intelligence.

John Edmonds' poetic libretto originally focussed on Clement as a rational, contemplative man. Together we reshaped the text so as to embody the dramatic struggles he went through. The Papal schism, the accusations of nepotism, luxury and pride - all these had to be faced, but they pale beside the horror of the plague. The Black Death decimated the people and unleashed waves of anti-semitism and violence; Clement's beloved city, Avignon, was filled with 'the stink of death'. Cecile de Beaufort, rumoured to be his lover, was among those who died. These crises, private and public, lead Clement to his own ultimate horror: doubt. Doubt is the familiar of post-renaissance people, not for their mediaeval counterparts, let alone for a Pope. As Clement questions the tenets of his faith, so my music fragments and destroys the plainchant materials that have underpinned it.

The issues that plague Clement are still those that we seek answers for today: why the bigotry? why the violence? why the inhumanity? Like him, we live in turbulent and uncertain times: like him, we need to stand up for tolerance and justice. For me, the over-riding reason to conjure up Clement and his distant era in *Light Passing* was so as to illuminate our new century.