

## CELLO CONCERTO NO2

*for Robert Cohen*

### **THE SONG GATHERER**

*As in life, I find music is like a journey through purity, complexity, grief, elation, discovery, peace, beauty and enlightenment, reaching for ultimate freedom and strength. There's something I have discovered in me when I am centered; an energy that flies half way between the ground and the sky. It's like the mid-way point, balancing the close with the far. It's the soaring pure energy.'*

*Robert Cohen*

Approaching his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Robert asked me to write him a work that could reflect his personal journey, taking hints from his roots and reflecting on his view of life now at his 'mid-way' point. In our discussions, he fondly told me about his maternal grandfather and how strongly he feels their spiritual and genealogical connection. It even seems to grow through the years. His grandfather was born in Poland and before his compulsory conscription into the Russian army - from which he inevitably would never return - his family arranged to slip away quietly to the USA, a common aim of Poles at that time.

They boarded a ship to England and then immediately took another that they thought was bound for USA. Along with many others, confused and unable to speak English, they discovered at their destination, that they had arrived in Cape Town, South Africa.

Robert's grandfather grew into an adventurous, athletic and creative man. He even dug for diamonds in the diamond rush, where he found the beautiful diamond that was to be set in the engagement ring for his bride to be. (The ring is now worn by Robert's mother). Later, he brought his wife and two daughters to England.

This concerto uses ideas of travelling, following and gathering – the movement of peoples, the itinerant nature of Robert's life as a musician, constantly moving from one culture to another. I have used musical forms and devices that echo these ideas: the scale, the fugue and the canon.

I asked Robert if there were any folk tunes that had been passed down to him. From his early childhood he recalled flavours; the 'pain and passion' of the harmonic minor scale so much heard in Yiddish music – and snatches of a South African song sung to him by his mother.

I found several songs and took phrases and characteristic intervals from them, constructing most of the material of the concerto from these 'half-remembered' fragments.

The cello takes us travelling: The music is often restless, always moving on, but settling also on extended lament, meditation, and joyful reflection.

Robert's 'pure soaring energy', inspired me to look into the flights of birds. Poland is one of the main junctions where a number of bird migration routes meet, traveling from Europe to Siberia, Africa and Asia. I have used their songs to embellish the music. A Polish folksong about the white stork, a symbol of good fortune, begs the bird to stay rather than setting off for Africa. This is the only tune I have used in its entirety, at the end of the second movement.

The first movement takes as its starting point a Yiddish lullaby, *Raisins and Almonds*, by Goldfaden, particularly its haunting refrain, oscillating between two adjacent notes. The concerto opens with an extended fugal introduction which builds through the strings, adding woodwind and brass, until the cello enters in clear space with an extended recitative, before the music launches into a restless toccata. Voice follows voice, building layers of canon. A more gentle central section surrounds the cello with harp and cascading flutes and clarinets, and the high-pitched Eb clarinet utters the haunting refrain of the lullaby, before the toccata returns.

The second movement weaves together tiny fragments of three folk songs: a Chassidic tune from Poland, a South African melody, *Sarie Marais*, which itself has its origins in Europe and has become a national song, and the Polish 'white stork' folk song. The cello mirrors the stuttering vocal articulations from Chassidic singing, and the sounds of migrating birds are heard – black kites, warblers, corncrakes and swallows, and the rattles and whispers of the white stork.

I remember playing quartets with Robert and his sister when he was a small boy, Robert stamping his feet, laughing and almost dancing as he played. This memory was the inspiration of the last movement, which begins with a raucous dance accompanied by drum. The dance draws the orchestra in, leading to a wild climax, out of which emerges the opening fugue from the first movement, this time leading to a high, tranquil plane, with jewel-like flashes on small bells.

THE SONG GATHERER was commissioned by the Minnesota Orchestra; Osmo Vänskä, Music Director, and the Hallé Orchestra; Mark Elder, Music Director. It was first performed on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2009 by Robert Cohen with the Minnesota Orchestra conducted by Osmo Vänskä, at Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis. The UK premiere will be given by Robert Cohen with the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Sir Mark Elder, at the Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2010.

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*Sally Beamish 2009*