

“Don’t Blink”: a Chamber Music America New: Jazz Works Commissioning and Ensemble Development Grant for The Ben Kono Group, with generous funding by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

This suite of ten movements brings together a number of ecological and environment ‘lessons’ I’ve learned along my journey through this changing world that I would like to pass along to my young daughter. The news today concerning our environment and global warming is grim and overwhelming. I chose not to dwell on the hugeness of our current dilemma, but rather on subjects more personal and meaningful that I could more effectively convey through musical exploration. Musically, I wanted to break from traditional jazz structure using simple motifs to spin into larger forms; motifs that would present themselves throughout the entire suite as a binding thread. I also wanted to present some unorthodox use of woodwinds in a jazz setting, and to create some unique environments for the musicians to improvise within the group. The following is a ‘synopsis’ of the movements:

Last Flight of the Dodo

The Dodo resides in our collective consciousness as the symbol of mass extinction caused by humans. We learned early on in childhood of the innocent flightless bird that once populated the island of Mauritius in the seventeenth century, free of natural predators until the arrival of the Dutch and their domesticated pets decimated the species in less than a century. As there are no preserved specimens or photographs, we can only rely on eyewitness accounts of their appearances along with some rather conflicting sketches and paintings. This almost mythical bird seems like an ideal place to begin our journey. “Flight of the Dodo” takes us on a fantasy wherein the utopian society of the Dodo is destroyed by the arrival of man and his feral cats and dogs, and all is lost. Out of the midst of the doomed population arises a hero; an intellectual genius who discovers the secret of flight hundreds of years before the Wright brothers do, and whose bravery rallies the flightless birds together to vanquish their human oppressors. In the end, however, we’ve been dreaming and we are forced to confront the truth: that we are the stewards of the Earth and have the power to preserve or destroy our environment. Much of the melodic and rhythmic material used throughout the suite is presented in this extended movement.

Glacier

A glacier, we learned in grade school, is a great river of ice that moves so slow as to be undetectable by the human eye and may travel but a few inches a year in its journey to the sea. In the 1970’s my family traveled by car to Seattle from Vermont in one of our epic vacations and I photographed some of these awesome parapets of ice creeping down the majestic mountains of Glacier National Park. Forty years later, my daughter and I were perusing the same photographs and discovered, through the magic of an internet search, that the glaciers are all but gone. Of the 150 glaciers that gave the park its namesake, only 25 remain and these will likely disappear within the next two decades. This was the first part of the suite I wrote, almost four years ago, and since then we have seen an alarming increase in polar ice melting, drought, and severe weather caused by global warming. The world has not been left in better shape for our children; we should at least do what we can to save a few glaciers for them to enjoy.

Smoky Madtom Hoedown

Throughout my young adult life I've had the privilege to hike many portions of the Appalachian Trail, although I've never attempted the whole stretch. I was reading Bill Bryson's highly educational and humorous account of his own attempt in "A Walk in the Woods" and came upon his anecdote describing the National Park Service's bungled program to introduce non-native rainbow trout into Abrams Creek in the Great Smoky Mountains. After dumping drums of poison to 'cleanse' the stream, "the Park Service biologists managed the wonderfully unusual accomplishment of discovering and eradicating in the same instant a new species of fish". The Smoky Madtom was an odd looking catfish-like creature, and I thought the English horn in the role of a bluegrass fiddler could strike up the right amount weirdness and irony in a somewhat disjunct Appalachian hoedown.

Simon and the Monk

During a family reunion in the beautiful island of Maui, my brother Simon had a close encounter with a monk seal while taking a morning swim. This seal is endangered having suffered from commercial fishing, human encroachment and climate change and at this time number about a thousand. They are a curious species, and this fellow took to playing a game of 'Simon says' with my brother as they communed quietly in the sea. I used a simple round, hoping to convey a sense of playfulness and respect.

River of Fire

There are many "Rivers of Fire" throughout the world. For my first six years in New York City I resided next to one of the worst. Newtown Creek, a body of water separating the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens and emptying into the East River is the site of one of the largest oil spills in history, spilling up to 30 million gallons of oil into the local harbors and aquifers. A huge subterranean explosion in Greenpoint in the 1950s was the first indication of the disaster, but it took until 1978 before a Coast Guard patrol would discover the massive plume of oil and the issue has remained in litigation ever since. There were times when, if the wind was just right, the smell and whatever was in the air would force tears out of your eyes. For more information you can visit newtowncreekalliance.org or riverkeeper.org. For this movement, nothing says urban industrial wasteland like heavy metal bass clarinet.

Who Cries for Iron Eyes?

Iron Eyes Cody strode into our living rooms on horseback and canoe during the 1970s' "Keep America Beautiful" public service television ad campaign. The commercial seems dated now, but the 'crying Indian' had a profound impact on my generation with his message: "People start pollution, people can stop it!". This movement is based on a melody inspired by my daughter for the endangered tree frogs of South America.

Passenger

2014 marks the centenary of the passing of Martha, the last known living passenger pigeon on Earth who died in the Cincinnati Zoo September 1st, 1914. This extinction was astonishing. The birds numbered between three and five billion and flocks were so thick they darkened the skies and filled the woods with their cries. In just a few decades they all disappeared forever, partly due to deforestation but mostly to rampant hunting by humans. I remember reading of this in grade school, and it defied my imagination. How could this be possible in modern civilization? Let's not forget the lessons of the passenger pigeon. Here I wanted to compose a threnody that would recall the thousands of cries that once echoed through the woods and across the skies of rural America.

General Sherman Meets the President

The largest tree in the world by volume is still the General Sherman tree in Sequoia National Park. My family makes a pilgrimage to the redwood forests of California every year to bathe in its profound silence and majesty. There is nothing comparable to a grove of giant redwoods, and through extensive logging the massive old growth trees have been pushed to the brink of extinction. It takes political will to make actions that save, and President Bill Clinton did so by creating the Giant Sequoia National Monument that preserves over 300,000 acres of this fragile habitat.

Tipping Point

We are definitely reaching the tipping point in worldwide ecological disaster, but it's never too late to educate. Many of us, myself included, had never heard of the Keeling Curve until the release of "An Inconvenient Truth" in 2008, even though Charles Keeling had been collecting data since 1958. In the film, Vice President Al Gore illustrates the stark reality of our global warming due to our use of fossil fuels. I'm hoping the constant use of metric modulation in 'Tipping Point' will serve to mirror what the Keeling Curve so graphically represents.

Renewal

As troubling as "An Inconvenient Truth" is, my favorite quote from Al Gore has an uplifting message: "political will is a renewable resource". During the inception of this project I surreptitiously recorded my daughter humming back a melody I was trying to shape at the piano and this piece, with her help, eventually took form. The children are, indeed, our future, but now is the time to ensure through political will that a future will exist for them.