

The River of Light: A New Oratorio
Brian Current, August 2015

The *River of Light* is a multi-movement cycle for soloists, choir and orchestra. Made up of seven movements, it will last just over one hour when complete in 2018. The music is about transcendence and is based on the texts of different traditions (Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Inuit, Sufi, Maori and Chinese) that describe mystical journeys towards an exalted state.

The cycle is modelled on the great religious oratorios of the past while celebrating the diverse languages and spiritual beliefs of most urban communities in North America today. The work is inspired from Dante's vision in his *Paradiso* where the Pilgrim enters the glowing core of heaven and declares: "*And I saw a light in the form of a river, radiant as gold, between banks painted with wondrous springs*". In consultation with specialists at the University of Toronto and elsewhere, texts have been assembled from several traditions that, despite being from very different times and places, bear a striking resemblance to Dante's vision. The goal of the oratorio is not only to create a musical journey through these beautiful texts, but also to show that no matter where we come from, or whom we pray to, a fascination with transcendence into light permeates nearly all of our religious beliefs and unites us. We are all part of the River of Light.

The cycle will be composed in sections over the next two years. I am grateful that The Vancouver Bach Choir, directed by Leslie Dala, has committed to presenting the premiere. The composition is scored for: 2 flutes (both doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubles English Horn), 2 clarinets (2nd doubles on Bass Clarinet), 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, harp, piano, 3 percussion players, strings, full chorus (Sopranos, Altos, Tenors, Basses), mezzo soprano solo and tenor solo. The chorus should be a strong amateur choir and their writing will be easier than the more detailed material of the orchestra. Amplification with a delay pedal is briefly required for the mezzo soprano in one of the shorter movements.

Also, because of the sound and slightly unorthodox context I am hoping for, an amplified Blues singer with guitar is included to sing the *Lux Aeterna* movement. A performer like Canadian Matt Andersen would be perfect.

The *River of Light* culminates a series of pieces exploring textures that are very active and very calm at the same time, like water or like sunlight. These textures have progressively become brighter and denser with high overtones and I have begun to think of them as a metaphor for light, or for a place that is infinitely bright and infinitely dense. I firmly believe that the cycle is the next inevitable step in the evolution of these pieces and I sincerely hope to create a lasting and detailed composition that resonates with listeners from many different backgrounds.

Movements

The proportional timing and instrumentation of each movement are designed to provide both variety and narrative direction through the hour-long experience. The two larger and most detailed movements are based on Jewish and Hindu texts respectively and bookend the cycle:

<u>Tradition</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Minutes</u>	<u>Instrumentation</u>
Western	<i>River of Light (intro)</i>	3	Mezzo, Tenor, Choir, Orchestra
Jewish	<i>The Seven Heavenly Halls</i>	12	Tenor, Choir, Orchestra
Chinese	<i>The Will of Heaven</i>	8	Mezzo, Orchestra
	Interlude I	1	Orchestra
Inuit	<i>Those Who Live in the Sky</i>	6	Choir, Orchestra
Maori	<i>Turn Your Face Towards the Sun</i>	4	Mezzo, Delay Pedal, amplification, choir
	Interlude II	2	Orchestra
Sufi (Islam)	<i>There Comes a Sound</i>	7	Tenor, Orchestra
Christian	<i>Lux Aeterna</i>	7	Blues Singer, Guitar, Choir, Orchestra
	Interlude III	2	Orchestra
Hindu	<i>We Have Drunk the Soma</i>	9	Mezzo, Tenor, Choir, Orchestra
Western	<i>River of Light (coda)</i>	3	Mezzo, Tenor, Blues Singer, Choir, Orchestra

Texts

The texts are included for both their subject matter and inspirational quality. The common thread throughout is the quote from Dante's *Paradiso*, and these lines are intoned at the opening and closing of the cycle.

Introduction: *River of Light*

Tradition: Western, Christian

Text: Dante's *Paradiso*

Approximate date of text: early 14th century

Instrumentation: Orchestra, chorus, mezzo soprano and tenor

Duration: 3 minutes

River of Light

River of Light

River of Light

*I saw a light in the form of a river, radiant as gold,
between banks painted with wondrous springs.*

River of Light

River of Light

River of Light

Movement 1: The Seven Heavenly Halls

Tradition: Judaism

Text: *The Zohar*

Approximate date of text: 12th century AD

Instrumentation: Tenor, choir and orchestra,

Duration: 12 minutes

Reading through the Zohar, I immediately heard turbulent and gestural music full of orchestral colours:

*"When the King conceived ordaining He engraved engravings in the luster on high.
A blinding spark flashed within the Concealed of the Concealed from the mystery of the Infinite,*

a cluster of vapour in formlessness, set in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no colour at all. When a band spanned, it yielded radiant colours. Deep within the spark gushed a flow imbuing colours below, concealed within the concealed of the mystery of the Infinite."

Even more inspiring was its reference to the *Sefer Hekalot* or the Seven Heavenly Halls, a series of ecstatic stages where each vision is marked by a different colour:

"Once, I was plunged in a contemplative ecstasy, and I beheld a sublime ray of a brilliant light which illuminated 325 circles, and amid which something dark was bathing. Then the dark point, becoming bright, began to float toward the deep and sublime sea, where all the splendours were gathering. I then asked the meaning of this vision, and I was answered that it represented the forgiveness of sin."

Titled *The Seven Heavenly Halls*, the first movement is a 12-minute journey for choir, orchestra and solo tenor based on the Zohar that traces a mystical progression where each of the seven ecstatic states is described by an orchestral colour.

The chorus acts as both a myriad voices within the texture of the orchestra and also as a congregation who echo in Hebrew the text of the tenor, who sings in English. Together they sing a call and response as the music moves through the ecstatic stages. The choral text largely consists of single words in contrast to the much more declamatory style of the tenor. I am currently in consultation with Dr. Neil Levin, director of the Milken Archive of Jewish Music, to ensure the language and tone of the text is appropriate and respectful.

Movement II: *The Will of Heaven*

Tradition: Early Chinese

Text: Mozi's *The Will of Heaven*

Approximate date of text: 5th century BC

Instrumentation: Mezzo soprano and orchestra

Duration: 8 minutes

Mozi was a 5th century BC philosopher whose text champions a concept called "universal love" which taught that the light of heaven loves all people equally and that each person should similarly love all human beings without distinguishing between his own relatives and those of others. This is a slower, more gentle movement in contrast to the more turbulent first movement.

*I know Heaven loves men dearly not without reason.
Heaven ordered the sun, the moon, and the stars
to enlighten and guide them.*

Heaven ordained the four seasons, Spring, Autumn, Winter, and Summer, to regulate them.

Heaven sent down snow, frost, rain, and dew

Heaven established the hills and rivers, ravines and valleys, and arranged many things to minister to man's good or bring him evil.

He appointed the dukes and lords to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked, and to gather metal and wood, birds and beasts.

This has been so from antiquity to the present.

Interlude 1 – "River of Light" music – high textures – 1 minute

Movement III: *Those Who Live in the Sky*

Tradition: Inuit

Text: Inuit folktale

Approximate date of text: traditional, transcribed by Earnest W. Hawkes, 1916

Instrumentation: choir and orchestra

Duration: 6 minutes

The third movement is based on the Inuit relationship to the Aurora Borealis, which is seen as a path to the spirit world. Composed for chorus and orchestra, the text will be sung in Inuktitut. I am currently in touch with members of the First Nations House at the University of Toronto, who have been very helpful with this project and I look forward to continuing my relationship with them to ensure that the material is handled respectfully.

The chorus begins in the low register with many overlapping voices and gradually rise in pitch over the course of the movement. The music follows the back-and-forth rhythms of throat-singing and rises in pitch and intensity. Like the throat-singing game, it culminates in a burst of laughter which will actually be performed by the entire chorus and surrounded by a haze of bright orchestration. During the rise to this climax, the music evokes the sounds of whistling, cracking and whispering as described in the text:

The ends of the land and sea are bounded by an immense abyss, over which a narrow and dangerous pathway leads to the heavenly regions. The sky is a great dome arched over the Earth. There is a hole in it through which the spirits pass to the true heavens. The spirits who live there light torches to guide the feet of new arrivals. This is the light of the aurora.

The whistling crackling noise which sometimes accompanies the aurora is the voices of these spirits trying to communicate with the people of the Earth. They should always be answered in a whispering voice. Youths dance to the aurora. The heavenly spirits are called Selamiut, "sky-dwellers," those who live in the sky.

Movement IV: *Turn Your Face Towards the Sun*

Tradition: Maori

Text: traditional

Instrumentation: Solo mezzo soprano, amplified, delay pedal, chorus

Duration: 4 minutes

This short movement is for amplified solo voice and delay pedal, where the singer performs overlapping minimalist patterns with herself. She controls the on and off of the delay effect. Optionally, 3 voices from the chorus can perform the echo parts.

*Turn your face towards the sun
and the shadows will fall behind you*

Interlude II – “River of Light” music - 2 minutes

Movement V: *There Comes a Sound*

Tradition: Sufi (Islam)

Text: attributed to Maulana Jalal-u-Din Rumi,

Approximate date of text: 13th century (Turkey)

Instrumentation: tenor and orchestra

Duration: 7 minutes

Sufi Whirling is about finding a gateway to the afterlife. The constant turning is believed to create a doorway. The participants wear hats evoking tombstones and robes resembling burial shrouds.

The revered founder of the movement, Maulana Jalal-u-Din Rumi, was said to have spontaneously begun whirling for three days, spurred into religious ecstasy by the percussive sounds of blacksmiths' hammers. In this movement I want to musically depict Rumi's spiralling journey towards an exalted state.

Supporting the tenor soloist, the music depicts an endless "turning" through spinning orchestral gestures. Gradually, over the course of the piece, brighter overtones are added to the orchestration until we arrive at the climax where the music depicts a vision that is infinitely bright and infinitely dense.

I am currently in touch with Dr. Shafique N. Virani at the University of Toronto School of Religious Studies, who has kindly suggested some texts and I look forward to being in further communication with him to ensure that the material is used in an appropriate and respectful way.

*There comes a Sound,
from neither within nor without,
From neither right nor left,
from neither behind nor in front,
From neither below nor above,
from neither East nor West,
Nor is it of the element:
water, air, fire, earth, and the like;
From where then?
It is from that place thou art in search of.*

*Turn ye toward the place where from the Lord makes His appearance.
From where a restless fish out of water gets water to live in,
From the place where the prophet Moses saw the divine Light,
From the place where the fruits get their ripening influence,
From the place where the stones get transmuted to gems,
From the place to which all men turn when they find this world a vale of tears.*

Movement VI: *Lux Aeterna*

Tradition: Christian

Text: Bible, Old Testament

Instrumentation: Male Blues singer, choir and orchestra

Duration: 7 minutes

The Christian contribution to the *River of Light* is the *Lux Aeterna* from the Requiem Mass, sung in English by an amplified Blues singer. Someone like Canadian Matt Andersen would be just right. I am interested in the contrast that a non-classical performer will create with a text normally associated with church oratorios. The movement is created in such a way that the singer can strum to simple chords and sing upon receiving conductor's cues. The orchestra and choir accompany with carefully worked-out overtone patterns that follow the guitar's strumming, and the choir sings fragments of the *Lux Aeterna* in Latin. I think of this movement as a glorious, if slightly unorthodox, climax of the cycle.

*May everlasting light shine upon them, O Lord,
for you are kind.
Grant them eternal rest, O Lord,
and may everlasting light shine upon them.
for you are merciful.*

Interlude III – Orchestra alone – “River of Light” music – 2 minutes - very high, bright textures

Movement VII - Finale: *We Have Drunk the Soma, We Have Gone to the Light*

Tradition: Hindu

Text: The *Rig Veda* translated by Wendy Doniger

Approximate date of text: 1700–1100 B.C.

Instrumentation: mezzo soprano solo, tenor solo, choir and orchestra

Duration: 9 minutes

The *Rig Veda* (Sanskrit for "verses of wisdom") is the oldest translatable scripture in the Hindu religion and the oldest text in the *River of Light*. Through an earlier orchestral work, I discovered the concept of Soma, which is a ritual drink of early Indo-Iranians said to contain celestial properties. By drinking Soma, one becomes divine and filled with light. They called the drink the “Creator of the Gods”, or even the “God of Gods”. The text is fitting for an exciting finale:

*We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods.
What can hatred and the malice of a mortal do to us now?*

When we have drunk you, be good to our heart, kind as a father to his son, thoughtful as a friend to a friend. Stretch out our life-span so that we may live.

Set me free in a wide space. Inflamm me like a fire kindled by frictions; make us see far; make us richer, better. Draw near and make us thrive. Stretch our life-spans as the sun stretches the spring days.

Weaknesses and diseases have gone; the forces of darkness have fled in terror. Soma has climbed up in us, expanding. We have come to the place where they stretch out life-spans.

The drop that we have drunk has entered our hearts, an immortal inside mortals. Give us the force of life on every side. Enter into us, finding the sunlight.

*We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light;
We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light;*

Coda: River of Light

Tradition: Western

Text: Dante's *Paradiso*

Approximate date of text: early 14th century AD

Instrumentation: orchestra, chorus, blues singer, mezzo soprano and tenor

Duration: 3 minutes

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