

DESCEND TO EARTH

Descend to earth, there place thy throne;
To succour man's afflicted son
Each human heart inspire:

To act in bounties unconfin'd
Enlarge the close contracted mind,
And fill it with thy fire.

Phyllis Wheatley

The three words 'descend to earth' resonated with me, as one of the memorable images of the year 2020 is that of a young man on the ground saying 'I can't breathe'; in the same year a pandemic affected the ability to breathe, sadly resulting in many deaths. Many felt their worlds had descended. The poetry was written in an era where many felt oppressed and downtrodden. Through the piece, the intention is to move from the low to the loftier, from hurt to hope, from ruin to repair. With the work's premier being placed as part of a Christmas concert series, the words instantly define 'advent'.

There are clear influences of the sorrow songs (spirituals) of the African-American tradition. The opening section is based on sorrowful 'weeping' phrases, different voices representing different cries from across the planet, as well as different from within one's own soul. I'm very much drawn to harmonic tension – both within itself, and the release and return to tension, mirroring the unpredictable nature of life itself, and our navigating through uncertainty. Within these opening phrases are cadences which are the brief moments of hope in the pain.

This is followed by the words of the Phyllis Wheatley poem, which are in the form of a prayer for help. The challenges of the year 2020 took a huge toll on many people's mental health, and lyrically the cry is not simply for help to rectify a situation but to 'succour' and 'inspire'. The main melody appears in three forms: a single voice with brief responses from the ensemble voices, and with the ensemble catching the vision, collectively singing the words, representing the idea of the whole world suffering together, and hoping together.

As the piece progresses, that hope is truly ignited, and the whole piece moves from the sorrow, and the supplication, to enthusiasm.

Ken Burton, October 2020

*Commissioned by David, Sheridan and Elizabeth Foster
in loving memory of Edwin and Mary Root.*

*First performed by VOCES8 at the VOCES8 Centre, London, on
5th December, 2020 as part of the LIVE from London – Christmas 2020
festival and live-streamed globally as part of a set of six new works.*

Duration: 3'00"

Descend To Earth

Phyllis Wheatley

Ken Burton

$\text{♩} = 60$

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Piano (for rehearsal only)

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