



VOODOO FIRE

And other works by Derek Strahan

Vibrant live performances of ALTANTIS - CHINA SPRING –
SOLO CELLO SUITE #1 - CLARINET CONCERTO #1 3rd Movement

Featuring the artistry of

**ALAN VIVIAN - MICHAEL ASKILL - SUSANNE POWELL - GEORG PEDERSEN - DAVID
MILLER - BELINDA GOUGH - JOSEPHINE ALLAN - PETER MOORE**

**AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MUSIC SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA**

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REVOLVE

RDS 006

Playing time: 73.55

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"VOODOO FIRE" (1996) for Clarinet, Percussion and Keyboard

The work was commissioned by the Canberra School of Music for performance by clarinetist Alan Vivian and colleagues, as the result of discussions between Alan and myself over a number of years, following from Alan's splendid work recording my Clarinet Quintet No. 1 in D ("The Princess") in 1981. 15 years passed before the opportunity arose for me to write a piece especially for Alan. When he suggested I write a Trio for clarinet, percussion and keyboards, this gave me the opportunity to advance a particular interest of mine - **the fusion of Western melodic counterpoint with African rhythmic counterpoint.**

In an arc stretching from Brazil to the Caribbean, the animist religious beliefs of Africa remain alive in South and Central America and in the deep south of the USA. The Haitian version of this religion is the best known probably because it inspired the only successful slave revolt in the world, and also because of its supposed link with black magic. However, as in most religions, there are two clear paths which can be taken, that of the common good, and that of manipulative individual will.

Central to Voodoo practice is the belief that, through ceremony and ritual the gods will possess participants and speak through them. Music and dance induce a trance state so that possession will occur. Specific dances and rites invoke specific gods. African music is distinguished by its use of polyrhythms in drumming. A complex "engine" of interacting rhythms produces a basis for unison chant. When Western music absorbed African influence to produce "jazz" the following process seems to have occurred.

- 1) The polyrhythmic component was rejected, because it was alien to the Western harmonic system. In this, "harmony" is achieved by vertical alignment of tones in a uni-rhythmic music where the coincidence of tones produces "chords". "Jazz" as it has evolved requires performers to follow a "chord sequence".
- 2) One of the superficial effects of polyrhythm was retained - the displaced accent. Coming before the beat, this was called syncopation. In African drumming much of what sounds like syncopation is a side-effect of the concurrence of different rhythms.

I have attempted in this piece to apply African rhythmic counterpoint to Western melodic counterpoint. The resulting fusion is not "program music", nor is it, of course, true music of the Voodoo. However, in order to compose it, I did study music for which I have the greatest respect, accessed through commercially available recordings of authentic Voodoo ceremonies that took place in Haiti. As these recordings were made with the specific permission of Voodoo houngans (priests), it is right that I acknowledge the source of the musical techniques I have attempted to apply (see below).

Shango is the Voodoo god of thunder and lightning, consequently also of fire. In writing music dedicated to Shango, I, a European Australian, am expressing my appreciation of the Voodoo attitude to a deity embodying this element. Shango is still worshipped as a very powerful spirit not only in Haiti, and in Brazil (as Xango) but also among the Yoruba of Nigeria, from whom Voodoo (or 'Vodun') is thought to originate. The mythology surrounding Shango is complex and colorful and can be quickly accessed in detail by googling his name on the internet. Derived from an historical figure, posthumously deified, Shango is the son of Aganju, a ferryman and

god of fire. He once threw himself into fire to prove his lineage. He also has aspects of a thunder god, and, by analogy, of many Western fire gods, since, through the fire of lightning, Shango reveals "truth that hurts" by illuminating what was hidden.

In Western culture gods of fire were also illuminators, who offered humans the fire of Enlightenment and Knowledge. According to our various myths, the chief gods guarded Knowledge and kept it hidden from humans. It fell to the rebellious fire god to share it with us, and he was always punished for his disobedience - demoted to being a demi-god (half-human), or demonized. Some of the names of the fire god in Western culture are: Prometheus, Loke (Loge of Wagner's "Ring") and Lucifer, the latter known also as the Light-Bringer and known also as the Fallen Angel, who was expelled from Paradise. By contrast, neither the fire god, nor any Voodoo gods are thought of as being either good or evil. Voodoo gods may at times behave with malice, since "they embrace all aspects inherent in their physical and spiritual existence"(*). It is up to humans to induce the gods to act on their behalf, and this is done through ritual which embodies dance. Significantly, Shango is also god of the drums and dance. His power over the elements equates with the caprice and creative experience of human sexuality.

Generic Voodoo terms for their gods are the "lao", gods of earth and the underworld, and the "Orishas" gods of sky and heaven, among whom Shango is prominent. But all Voodoo gods are offspring of the Creator-God Mawu who is "understood in his entirety" (*). The serpent figures strongly in the Voodoo faith. In its many spellings "Voodoo" means "spirit and also 'the snake under whose auspices gather all who share the faith'". Thus it would seem that the Voodoo attitude to the Creator-God is somewhat similar to the philosophy which underlies the heretical Gnostic version of Christianity. Gnostics view the Wise Serpent of Eden as a benefactor, an intermediary who intercedes to connect humans with the true God, by revealing Hidden Knowledge (Gnosis). No wonder the Gnostics were persecuted as heretics!.

Voodoo, as a religion, was banned during the era of slavery, but survived by syncretism within the slave owners' faith, especially within Catholicism. For example, the gate to the "laos" is protected by a barrier whose guardian is "Papa Legba" and who is also indicative of Saint Peter, since Voodoo "effortlessly incorporates aspects of other religions". Voodoo, Vodoun, Vudu or Vudun dates from the beginning of human civilization, and is estimated to be over 10,000 years old. On Thursday, April 10, 2003, Voodoo was officially sanctioned as a religion by the government of Haiti.

Acknowledgements:

1) Sound recordings collected in Haiti and the island of La Tortue by Maurice Bitter with the agreement of the Houngans (priests) during actual Voodoo ceremonies. As released on LP, "Voodoo Ceremony in Haiti", Olympic records.

2) Book: "Voodoo, Africa's Secret Power" by Gert Chesi, published by Perlinger Verlag, 1979. (In 1964 Gert Chesi spent 8 months in Lambarene as the guest of distinguished author and Christian missionary Albert Schweitzer. It was during that time Chesi developed a deep interest in African tribes and their traditions). (*) Indicates quotations from this book.

“Voodoo Fire” is written in three sections, played continuously, which correspond to a ritual performance, beginning with Offerings to the god, a Dance leading to Possession by the god and culminating in a prayer to Shango, the melody of which is freely adapted from a genuine Voodoo chant sung by the hougan with operatic fervour against energetic inspirational drumming. Within the work’s musical structure there is some mirror imagery, where a passage is later repeated but with its metre and notation played in reverse, leading to a reprise of the opening passage. The technicalities of this and other cyclic structural elements are described in detail in the educational Music Kit available for this work.



Shango

Photo courtesy of Sacred Source.

More notes follow on next page



Dance wand, *oshe shango*, depicting a female devotee with *Shango's* symbol, the double-headed axe, carried in special festivals and processions.
Hamill Gallery of African Art, Boston, USA <http://www.hamillgallery.com>

Solo Cello Suite No.1 was written for Georg Pedersen. This is a frankly frivolous work that also has a serious purpose. The frivolity lies in the nature of the music which takes the form of a set of twentieth century dances of the kind used in dance halls and also used as the basis for performance acts in vaudeville and later in film musicals. The serious purpose derives from the approach to this source material: each movement is at the same time a dance and also a study in metric accuracy, particularly as regards "swing" rhythms. It also aims to adapt features of baroque music to features of "swing" arrangements or perhaps vice versa! There is a resemblance between the sequential use of a melodic figure, retaining its melodic and rhythmic shape through shifts of tonality in, say, a Prelude by J.S. Bach, and, say, the closing "riff" passage of an arrangement by Fletcher Henderson for the Benny Goodman Orchestra. By using this device in a work for solo cello, the composer aims to reconcile the work of well-known composers who lived three centuries apart and to underscore the similarity of thought processes. The work is also written to exploit the capacity of the cello to sing two-part harmony. Needless to say, this effect can only be achieved by a virtuoso performer!

John Carmody, music critic for the Sun Herald wrote of this performance: *"For me, the most engaging work of the program was Derek Strahan's jazz-influenced Suite for solo cello. Like the baroque suites, this is made up of dance movements and there is real wit in hearing a boogie-woogie, tango and a blues coming from a solo cello. The composer never laboured the jokes and Georg Pedersen handled it with aplomb. I almost expected him to waltz off, partnered by his curvaceous cello; enough! These concerts take place in a Uniting Church where no forms of dangerous spirits are to be found."*

"ATLANTIS" (1990) for Flute/Alto Flute & Piano.

The work was commissioned by Michael Scott and was composed with the assistance of the Australian Council. This was the first work written to develop material intended for inclusion in a proposed cycle of four operas on the subject of Atlantis. It was given its premier performance in 1992 by Belinda Gough with Josephine Allan at Ms. Gough's Masters Degree Recital. This work has since been twice chosen as a senior examination piece at Conservatoria in Adelaide, South Australia, and Newcastle, New South Wales.

The name "Atlantis" is found in writings by the Greek philosopher Plato dated from 4 B.C. The passages describing a former civilization of that name are found in texts which include other verifiable history of the writer's own time. Plato's account of "Atlantis", however, describes an island empire which existed 9,000 years before his own time, and which was destroyed in a cataclysm sent by the gods. It was "swallowed by the sea and vanished in a single dreadful day and in a single dreadful night." Plato's account has always been controversial. It presents figures from Greek mythology as historical people. It seems to imply knowledge of the Americas before they were "discovered". It claims that a high civilization existed during the Ice Age. And it claims that this civilization was destroyed by a cataclysm of such magnitude that it could not have been a local event, but a global one, of universal significance. Plato stated that the information was of Egyptian origin, which raises the possibility that written records about Atlantis did indeed once exist in the great libraries of Alexandria and Pergamum before they were destroyed in successive waves of conquest.

Many cultures have myths of not just one but several global destructions, and many of these accounts, being enshrined in religious belief, have some authenticity as tribal history. Much of what Plato reports about civilization in pre-history has parallels, for example, in the Book of Genesis in Hebrew scripture, which itself is based on earlier Sumerian literature. At the time of composition I was less concerned to build an operatic storyline on the subject, than, as a first step, to devise thematic material and leitmotifs which could be used to evoke images of the place and time of Atlantis as described by Plato, and of the key mythological figures who have ambivalent status as gods, symbols and real people.

Plato states that Poseidon was the first ruler of Atlantis, that he married a native woman, Cleito, who bore him five sets of twin sons, the most important of which was Atlas who became the second ruler of Atlantis. Plato portrays Poseidon, in this context, as both a god and a real person. As a ruler he laid the basis for government of his island empire and also laid down the laws of succession. As a sea god in Greek mythology, Poseidon had the power to raise storms and cause earthquakes, using his trident as a means of controlling the elements. What this might boil down to, in the way mythology works, is that the land Poseidon ruled was subject to seismic disturbances, and that he, as a god, came to embody these forces. Atlas is also associated with seismic disturbances, in his role as a giant supporting the earth on his back. (When Atlas shrugs the earth shakes). In terms of musical expression, I have treated Poseidon and the primal forces he represents as one entity, and I have treated Atlas in the same way. Poseidon's wife, Cleito, exists only as a name and I have had to use my intuition in finding a theme for her, which turned out to have the character of a lament. This is because the age of Atlantis follows the legendary Golden Age which seems to have been the age of matriarchal rule, when humans lived closer to nature (as portrayed in my Scena "Eden In Atlantis" for soprano, flute & piano). Then later Atlantis had its own more material Golden Age.

STRUCTURE This work is not concerned with stories, so much as with evocation and with memory. It is divided into 3 parts, and thus corresponds in structure to a traditional classical sonata. The first part evokes memory from the perspective of the present time. In the second part memory becomes reality as the music passes through the time barrier and actually takes us to Atlantis, to experience a lover's idyll in a romantic setting, this corresponding to the slow movement of a sonata. The third and final part seeks to portray the fabulous metropolis and its concentric circular harbours as meticulously described by Plato.

PART 1

15. Dolphin's Ridge - Seismic murmurs 3'05"

16. Evocation of Atlantis 1'39"

PART 2

17. Birds in Search of Atlantis: Fugue for Eels 4'17"

18. Through the veil of time 2'17"

19. Et In Arcadia Ego 4.15"

PART 3

20. Fugue on The Cross of Atlantis 1.52"

21. Atlantis – The Golden Age 2'09"

QUOTES FROM GREEKS

More about “Et In Arcadia Ego...” (Track 19)

Diodorus Siculus (the Sicilian) writing in 1 BC on the myth of the Atlantoi, left this description: ... “For there lies out in the deep off Libya an island of considerable size, and situated as it is in the ocean it is distant from Libya a voyage of a number of days to the west. Its land is fruitful, much of it being mountainous and not a little being a level plain of surpassing beauty. Through it flow navigable rivers which are used for irrigation, and the island contains many parts planted with trees of every variety and gardens of great multitudes which are traversed by streams of sweet water; on it also are private villas of costly construction, and, throughout the gardens, banqueting houses have been constructed in a setting of flowers, and in them the inhabitants pass their time during the summer season ...”

More about “Fugue on The Cross of Atlantis” (Track 20)

The Cross of Atlantis is a very ancient symbol recurring in prehistoric stone circles and on sacrificial altars suggesting, perhaps, a surviving memory or emulation of the Atlantean original. It contains the three circular walls surrounding the island city (as described by Plato) and the canals traversing them. The shaft of the cross is the large entrance canal. Plato writes: “Crossing to the outer harbours, which were three in number, you would come to a wall which began at the sea and went all around: this was everywhere fifty stadia from the largest zone and harbour, and enclosed the whole, meeting at the mouth of the channel toward the sea. The entire area was densely crowded with habitations; and the canal and the largest harbours were full of vessels and merchants coming from all parts, who, from their numbers, kept up a multitudinous sound of human voices and din of all sorts night and day.”

CLARINET CONCERTO No. 1 – 3rd movement (2002) (7.10’’)

Live recording of premier performance at Llewellyn Hall, Australian National University School of Music, 13/04/02, by School of Music theatre staff. First released on JADCD 1108 "Winter Solstice".

Clarinet Concerto No. 1 was commissioned by the Canberra School of Music for performance by Alan Vivian, who is soloist in this performance. It was premiered at the Llewellyn Hall on April 13 2002, programmed with Mozart’s “Impresario” Overture, and Schubert’s Symphony No., 9 in C, to an audience which included several banks of seats reserved for some of the School’s foremost sponsors.

The 35’00’’ work comprises 3 movements of which the 3rd is heard here. In this, three features of dance music are deployed: extended melodic line, “riff” figures, and sustained metric pulse – in this case a 12/8 jazz metre. This allows for accurately notated syncopation and for passages that evoke big band arrangements of the swing era, the style of which soloist Alan Vivian skillfully captures, admirably echoing the mastery of clarinet virtuosos Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw and Woody Herman (pictured below).

It is my view that a synthesis of dance music elements within a contemporary

symphonic structure can result in works which leave audiences feeling as rewarded as similar syntheses do in works of the baroque, classical and romantic eras. As the applause indicates, the audience reception was enthusiastic which, I venture to hope, endorses my compositional intent. My grateful thanks to Alan Vivian and the Australian National University School of Music for supporting this work, in conception, composition and performance, and for permission to release this recording.

Writing in The Canberra Times (17/04/02) W.L.Hoffman commented: "*...the final movement is an aural delight with its jazzy bounce and a sparkling presto coda in which soloist and orchestra are impelled to a brilliant conclusion.*"