

## Program Notes

### Song in a Strange Land

*Song in a Strange Land* was composed for a large ensemble comprised of string orchestra, four saxophones, three trumpets, three trombones, percussion, rhythm section, choir and soloist. Mr. Atwater has provided the following notes about his work:

We now sit in the fertile soil of a new millennium. This provides not only an opportunity to explore new horizons, but also the challenge of maintaining the legacy and traditions that have given birth to this millennium. One such legacy is the Spiritual. It has been nearly 400 years since the arrival of the first slaves from Africa. Stripped of their dignity and worldly possessions, their captors, whose assessment of them was based solely on what was seen, failed to see into the soul of a people who retained a wealth of cultural and spiritual customs in the face of stark realities. From these unknown bards came America's most significant contribution to the world: America's folk music, the Spiritual.

The acculturation of the slave allowed him to merge seminal elements of his new surroundings with those of his past. This convergence of language, religion and art created a song that would become the cornerstone of his survival. The Spiritual encapsulated the entire life of the slave: It cried out for him politically, socially and economically. Furthermore, it provided a parasol under which the slave found refuge from life's contradictions.

The Israelites posed the question, "How can we sing the songs of Zion in a strange land?" I suggest that the slave's sentiment was the antithesis of that query – for his existence depended on his song. Through song, he expressed himself in ways that appeared primitive and sophomoric, but were veritably profound and ultimately redemptive.

*Song in a Strange Land: Spirituals for a New Generation* is an attempt to utilize the Spiritual as a canvas to create diverse compositional statements. It is my belief that no other form of music lends itself better to this endeavor, for in the Spiritual, one can experience the full spectrum of human emotions - joy and sorrow, hope and despair, suffering and jubilation. In all, the Spiritual represents a people possessing optimism in the face of adversity.

The Spiritual was a result of the syncretization of Puritan Hymnology with African work songs and field hollers. This fusion generates a massive texture of close-position chords that is unlike any other sound. Spontaneous improvisation reformulated this cultural collision into a whole new way of hearing and conceiving music in America. With this in mind, it was my desire to integrate the Spiritual with America's greatest virtuoso genres: the Euro-American string tradition – associated with Western classical music; the Big Band – featuring the most technically versatile instrumentalists in America; the Gospel choir – the wellspring of all American vocal music; and the rhythm section - the motor in contemporary popular music.

*Song in a Strange Land* is structured in the form of 17 movements, constituting spirituals and interludes. It was my intention to preserve the rich melodic content while providing an orchestration that not only offers aesthetic ornamentation, but also serves as an extension of a crystallized vocal tradition. Each movement conveys a certain mood and feeling. This sensibility is expressed harmonically, melodically and rhythmically, and is marked with a strong sense of celebration. The orchestra provides the musical landscape; the choir is the voice of the community; and the soloist makes a declaration of the "gospel truth." In addition, *Song in a Strange Land* is the juxtaposition of composition and improvisation, a quest for common ground.

The amalgamation of the Spiritual and the drum is another major component of *Song in a Strange Land*. The first generation of slaves retained the ability to communicate with drums. They used drums to signal secret meetings, both sacred and secular. These "talking drums," or Ntumpane, were prohibited due to uprisings that took place, one famous being the Stono Rebellion (Stono River, South Carolina, 1740). In areas where it did not result in insurrections, the beating of the drums was still considered barbarous, and consequently the drums were banned. As a result, the Spiritual evolved in the *a capella* tradition. The "free drum" is a characteristic of all African music and its derivatives. This work hopes to reintroduce the Spiritual to a plethora of rhythmic possibilities.

Like all African American sacred music, The Spiritual has the unique ability to take on various forms while maintaining its theological position. Throughout the history of this music its progenitors have been influenced by the overarching musical milieu. Creators of the Spiritual were influenced by camp meeting revival hymns - Thomas Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson; by the Blues – Andrae Crouch and Edwin Haskins; by Rhythm and Blues – Kirk Franklin and Fred Hammond; and by Hip Hop. *Song in a Strange Land* draws upon all these idioms while extending them to include African clave, Afro-Cuban dance rhythms, Caribbean Reggae, and Bluegrass fiddle music, all within a symphonic framework.

Finally, *Song in a Strange Land* is about the preservation of the Spiritual encased in contemporary forms. I pray that this music will serve as a bridge to our past as well as a springboard to our future. The power that this music possesses sufficiently sustained a generation of slaves through the most difficult era in the history of this nation. That same power is available today to give us strength as we strive for a better tomorrow. – Darin Atwater