

Four Songs

For mezzo-soprano and piano

Ben Hoadley

The four poems that form this song cycle have their origins in traditional oral poetry of West and Central Africa.

Three of the poems, *Three Friends*, *Lament* and *Death*, are taken from the book *African Poems – an Anthology of Traditional African Poems*, compiled and translated by Ulli Beier [Cambridge University Press, 1966].

The fourth poem, *The Little Bird*, is a folk song from Gabon translated by Rolf Italiaander, from the collection *Poems from Black Africa* [Indiana University Press, 1963].

Ulli Beier writes in the introduction to his collection:

“All of the poems are of course translations, and the rhythms of African songs are often too complex for English to render them properly. Many African languages are tonal languages and the rhythms and sound patterns based on these tonal languages simply have no equivalent in any European language.

One of the most important elements of poetry, however, does survive translation relatively well: the imagery. The originality of the metaphors and images in these poems is a source of constant delight.”

I have never heard these poems in their original language. They may have originally been sung. While I have heard and enjoyed West African traditional music, it is a vast area of huge depth and range, and my knowledge doesn't extend past a surface familiarity with several styles. In my settings of these poems, it is the imagery that Beier presents that I have responded to. My musical ideas are based on my reaction to and inspiration from what Beier's translations evoked and suggested to me. I haven't tried to recreate their original sound world or evoke African languages or music in any way; the settings are my own interpretation of the translations.

1. Three Friends

I had three friends
One asked me to sleep on the ground
One asked me to sleep on the mat
One asked me to sleep on his breast
I saw myself carried on a river
I saw the king of the river and the king of the sun
There in that country I saw palm trees
So laden with fruit
That the trees bent under the fruit
And the fruit killed it

YORUBA

Notes:

This poem is from the Yoruba tribe of present-day Nigeria and Benin. The river is a metaphor for death. My score is impressionistic and the accompaniment has a rippling feel, suggesting the river.

2. Lament

Your death has taken me by surprise
What were your wares
That they sold out so quickly?
When I meet my father, he'll hardly recognise me
He'll find me carrying all I've got
A torn old sleeping mat and a horde of flies
The night is fast approaching
Somewhere a child is crying out for its mother

AKAN

Notes:

The Akan tribe is from Ghana and adjacent parts of the Ivory Coast.

A slow melody, reminiscent of a low flute and evoking pathos, is interwoven between the recitative-like vocal line. A delicate ostinato of three two-note chords, high in the piano, adds punctuation.

3. The Little Bird

Early one morning I got up
To pick oranges in the garden
And I saw this
I saw the rising Sun
And the little bird
Singing his morning song
The little bird cried "cui, cui, cui"
"Please leave my little ones in their nest"
And I said this:
First I cried "cui, cui, cui"
And then I said:
"Don't be afraid, I am your friend"
And what was asked I did.
Since that day, the little bird is my friend
And his song gives me great pleasure.
And that is my story.

FOLK SONG FROM GABON

Notes:

I originally composed *The Little Bird* as a separate work, for flute, voice and piano. Subsequently I arranged it for voice and piano and inserted it into the song-cycle to create a light-hearted moment in the cycle, and so that the transition from the *Lament* to the final song of the cycle would not feel abrupt. This song has the role of a scherzo movement in a symphony or sonata. It is the only song in the cycle not concerned with the subject of death. The fast motives in the right hand of the piano were originally written for flute and are obviously bird-like. The song has an improvised, recitative-like character.

4. Death

There is no needle without piercing point

There is no razor without trenchant blade

Death comes in many forms

With our feet we walk the goat's earth

With our hands we touch God's sky

One day in the heat of noon

I will be carried shoulder high

Through the town of the dead

Don't bury me under the forest trees

I fear their thorns

Don't bury me under the forest trees

I fear the dripping water

Bury me under the great shade trees in the market

I want to feel the dancers' feet

I want to hear the beating of the drums

KUBA

Notes:

The Kuba Kingdom was a pre-colonial kingdom in Central Africa.

I have used harmonic and rhythmic jazz elements in this song. Some of the rhythms suggest drums. The poet describes impending death as an ongoing conscious state of being by using verbs usually reserved for living senses: "I want to *feel* the dancers feet.... I want to *hear* the beating of the drums".

