

The Making of the Drum

Bob Chilcott (b.1955)

Bob Chilcott is one of the busiest and most popular choral composers and conductors in Britain today. He has been involved in choral music for most of his life. He was a boy chorister and then a tenor choral scholar in the choir of King's College, Cambridge, and later sang with, composed and arranged for the celebrated King's Singers. Since 1997 he has worked as a full-time composer. Today, Bob is in great demand internationally as composer, conductor and choral consultant. He has been invited to appear at many important international festivals, and has worked with some of the world's leading choral ensembles. At home, he is currently Principal Guest Conductor of the BBC Singers.

Bob Chilcott's singing experience has given him an inside knowledge of an exceptionally wide range of music, and this is reflected in the eclectic nature of his own compositions which, whilst remaining within the mainstream English choral tradition, are variously inspired by folksongs, Gregorian chant, Anglican hymns, spirituals, jazz, close-harmony, gospel and African music.

The Making of the Drum is one of Chilcott's most original and striking creations. In his preface he describes the genesis of the piece:

In 1984 I was very fortunate to visit Uganda, where a drum maker made me a beautiful drum with a snakeskin head. I'll never forget sitting in the plane to come home and seeing by chance the baggage handlers loading my drum with incredible respect and care. The drum to them is a living spirit. The poems I set are a celebration of how that spirit is brought to life. The piece enacts the ritual of constructing the drum, whose component parts are drawn from the surrounding nature – a nature that gives of itself almost sacrificially. We hear how the goat is killed for its skin, how the tree, which bleeds cedar-dark when cut, bestows the drum's body, and how the sticks and rattles are taken, all to begin a new life as companions to the gods, music, and the dance.

The author, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, is one of the Caribbean's most distinguished literary figures, noted not only for his poetry but also for his scholarly studies of African history and culture. His evocative words are superbly complemented and enhanced by Chilcott's colourful music. The composer achieves this by a number of techniques; the piece is harmonically much simpler than his other large-scale works, such as the Jubilate and the Little Jazz Mass; by the same token, the textures are frequently quite sparse – sometimes in two parts or simply in unison. In contrast, the rhythms are unusually complex, with a word or phrase often used as an *ostinato* – a continuously reiterated musical phrase. Perhaps the most immediately noticeable features are the inclusion of percussion instruments and the use of unusual vocal effects. The result is a marvellous evocation of the natural world and its creative role in the making of the drum.

programme notes by John Bawden

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