

# Composing the Heart Sutra

As a Zen monk and a composer, the idea of writing a vocal work on the Heart Sutra had occurred to me often, but there had never been any concrete plans, and anyway I hadn't really found the right performers. The situation changed when in the beginning of 2009 I discovered Ensemble Polyfoon, an a cappella group of some 30 people who by that time had produced a series of remarkable projects in which an unseen and unheard mix of renaissance and contemporary music was combined with visual and dramatic art forms. I sent an email to their founder and artistic director Johan Geerts, suggesting that I would write music for them based on classical Zen Buddhist texts in English translation, and received his answer within minutes: "Sounds great!".

Ensemble Polyfoon commissioned an hour of music, so I had to choose both texts and translations. Of course the *Heart Sutra* should be included, the *Sandokai*, *The Four Vows*, *the Sutra of the Kesa (Takkesa Ge)*,... I studied many translations but was struck by the English versions by Kazuaki Tanahashi and Joan Halifax, for they were not only profound but also accessible for a larger public – and they were extremely beautiful and inspiring to me as a composer.

It came to a collaboration. Kaz and Joan translated the *Sandokai* especially for the project, and Kaz suggested me the *Emmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*, *the Sutra on Avalokitesvara's Boundless Life*, which is not familiar to European Soto Zen Buddhism. This short sutra in fact became a seminal work in the project, creating out of an almost minimalistic, mediaeval sounding recitation of the text, by a gradual amount of complexity, its own language, preparing the sound world of the other compositions.<sup>1</sup>

After completing the *Ten Line Sutra*, I started immediately working on the *Heart Sutra*. As in the previous work, I wanted to interfere as little as possible with the beautiful and timeless text, only expressing its meaning with the aid of the music. I learned the translation by heart, and recited it often until it became part of me. After that, the music gradually came to me intuitively; so the next paragraphs are only a way of describing a bit the logic behind it, trying to explain afterwards what happened in the writing process.

The composition<sup>2</sup> begins with the title, sung by the full choir, as if it were a line in bold characters. The word *heart* was already one of the keywords in the *Ten Line Sutra*; there I intuitively chose to express this word by what appeared to me as a joyful and intimate melodic gesture, as the opening of the heart<sup>3</sup>. In the title of the *Sutra on the Heart*... now, this same motive is sounded in the bass on the word *heart*, sustaining a surprising and sensitive melodic inflexion in the soprano, causing an (open, joyful, radiant) major chord where we would have expected a (closed, more introvert) minor one. The word *Wisdom* is sung by the sopranos on the highest note of the line, while the altos add some extra color and drive, singing for the first time a *dissonant* note, "rubbing" against the other tones. Its tension resolves in a gentle movement, causing the music to shift to a higher gear as it were, preparing the faster motion of the following lines. Is it not characteristic of real wisdom to put things in motion, to lead to the right action, to compassion?

"*Beyond*" is rendered by a so far unheard tone (*b flat*) and a so far lowest note (*g*) in the basses, both going musically in different senses beyond what was heard before; at the same time the music expresses the going beyond with what connoisseurs will recognize as *an ascending series of fifth relations*, an element that will play an important role on all levels of the piece, expressing never ending transcendence. Maybe you could understand this as the musical equivalent of an enchainment of questions, every new question questioning the previous one.

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<sup>1</sup> For this reason, during the live concerts as on the CD recording, it was placed as a prelude to the textually and musically more complex *Sutra on the Heart*... which is followed, at his turn, by the *Four Vows* as a conclusion, thus forming a triptych of over 20 minutes.

<sup>2</sup> Dedicated to Sensei Kazuaki Tanahashi

<sup>3</sup> To be more precise: a whole tone step up from the *tonic* (the tone on which the whole composition is built, and by which it begins and ends – you can compare it with the ground floor on which you enter and leave a building, the other notes of the scale being the different floors).

The basses alone sing the introduction: “*Avalokitesvara, who helps all to awaken...*” Then they keep humming their last note, as a most basic accompaniment over which Avalokitesvara unfolds his famous and often cited lines, translated here as “*O, Sariputra, form is not separate from boundlessness, boundlessness not separate from form*”. The long bass note lends a special atmosphere of serenity and worthiness to the words, but there is more. Such held bass tones are used for example in medieval European Catholic music, also in the Russian Orthodox tradition, and they are certainly related to the droning accompaniment of the *tanpura* in Indian classical music.<sup>4</sup> These tones represent, as sheer sound, devoid of any syntactical music, the absolute dimension, the realm of direct experience of which Avalokitesvara’s words are the reflection in language.

In the second phrase beginning with “*O, Shariputra*”, Avalokitesvara is speaking through the voices of altos and tenors, instead of sopranos and basses, as in the first phrase. This mixing of male and female voices appeared logical to me, stressing the gender transcending nature of this bodhisattva. At the same time, the music starts to *modulate*<sup>5</sup> here gradually, replacing the long bass d by an alto a, the first step in a series of ascending fifth relations, already announced in the title music.

The movement keeps increasing through the series of phrases starting with “*it is free of...*”; the music grows more complex in an organic way, until suddenly it breaks of on the word “death”. Follows a slow and more intimate passage on the words “*It is free of suffering, arising, cessation and path; and free of wisdom and attainment*”. This is the quiet culmination point of the movement built up in the preceding phrases.

After a short pause, the piece continues in a slightly higher tempo with “*Being free of attainment, ...*” building up gradually from two to three voices, in a serene joy. Ascending tone steps and fifths abound, as much on note to note level as between phrases. From “*Know that realizing Wisdom beyond Wisdom is no other than this great mantra...*” on, all four voices participate - the alto’s singing now the melody the basses had in the introduction.

Starting with “*So set forth this mantra...*”, the music leads (again and for the last time by ever ascending fifth relations) to the enthusiastic and dynamic climax of “*Gya tei, Gya tei...*”.

The composition as a whole expresses how transcendent wisdom leads to a serene joy and above all to the right action of compassion; as a composer, it is my sincerest and humble hope that this music will not only help you as a listener to understand this magnificent text, but will inspire you to actualize it in your everyday life.

Luc De Winter

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Luc Nyushin De Winter (°Antwerp, Belgium, 1966) is a zen monk and teacher, as well as a professional composer. Recent works include the cycle ***Sandokai – Zen & Polyphony***, commissioned, performed and recorded by Ensemble Polyfoon directed by Lieven Deroo; ***Aigo – a ceremony for consort***, an hour-long string quartet for viola da gamba inspired by Dogen, first performed on November 11, 2011; ***Kannon’s Pillow***, a 70 minute cycle of 7 piano pieces, performed and recorded by Veerle Peeters (creation on February 12, 2012). Luc is now working on ***Songs from Five Scoop Hut***, a cycle of 16 songs for mezzosoprano and piano on poems by Ryokan, in new translation by Kazuaki Tanahashi.

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<sup>4</sup> not to mention the long held bass tone in the opening chorus of Bach’s Saint Matthew’s Passion.

<sup>5</sup> This means that the tone, that was felt from the beginning as the center, the ground floor, is replaced (temporarily) by other tones, creating a tension, a sense of movement on a higher level. The musical equivalent of moving for some time to another house before returning to your own home; in this time you are “home” but not really “home”...