

## Songs from Five Scoop Hut

***Cycle of 16 songs opus 43 (written 2011/12, première Antwerp, October 19 2013)***

*Els Mondelaers, mezzo*

*Veerle Peeters, piano*

*Ryōkan Taigu, lyrics*

*Kazuaki Tanahashi, English translation*

*Luc De Winter, music*

At the end of November 2010, at the time of the first SANDOKAI concerts, Kaz Tanahashi stayed with me for a week; one evening I showed him a Japanese poem in English translation, that I wanted to use for a composition. He read it, but didn't say much for a while. Suddenly, he left the room, and came back with a memory stick. "Maybe you want to read this" he said. It was the unpublished, new translation of Ryokan's poetry. I was thrilled from the first page I read: for many years I had been a fan of Ryokan, but this version was just more alive, more musical than any other I had seen....

SONGS FROM FIVE SCOOP HUT is a song cycle based on poems of the Japanese Zen teacher, mendicant monk, calligrapher and poet ***Ryōkan Taigu*** (良寛大愚) who lived 1758 - 1831. Ryokan was very popular among the ordinary people of the countryside, because of his extraordinary friendliness, modesty, and wisdom – but also because of his (feigned?) naivety and his absurd and eccentric behavior. After his death he soon became a legend, and still now, Japanese parents tell their children stories of Ryokan: they are part of the repertoire of folk tales. At the same time, his poetry and calligraphy, both of an astounding honesty and profundity, are cherished as great treasures of Japanese culture.

The new English translation, realized by Kazuaki Tanahashi (°1933) is completely in harmony with the spirit of the poet. It was published (spring 2013) by *Shambhala Publications, Boston*, as *Sky Above, Great Wind* – the four characters Ryokan once wrote on a child's kite. The poems date from different periods, but the ones selected for the cycle are all – save one – from the mature period (1796-1816), when Ryokan lived at the "Five Scoop Hut" on Mount Kugami; this modest hut was named after the five scoops of rice that the owner gave daily to the monk who lived there before Ryokan.

Still in December, I started working on a musical language that was able to render the world of Ryokan; a number of drafts for string quartet were written – one of them survives in the piano part of "I Lodge In An Abandoned Temple". The following months, however, an impossible but irresistible image established itself in my mind: "What if Ryokan had had an old upright piano in his hut? How would he have accompanied himself, singing his own poems?" It was clear to me that there was a need for great simplicity, not one note too much... but there had to be room for his playfulness, his absurd sense of humor, his meditation, his doubts, on which he writes in an open way, and of course, his insomnia....

Ryokan's poems are inspired by his simple life: meditation in his hut; begging; playing ball with the children of the village; observation of nature; philosophical, but always down-to-earth thoughts on life; he also writes in an open way on his own shortcomings, often with self-mockery; there is the freezing cold in the winter; the insomnia; but also his wonder and his profound joy.

A typical feature of Japanese *shakuhachi* music, of Ryokan's (and other Zen teacher's) poetry, and of my music in general, is the fact that the experience of the here and now comes in first place, and that the narrative shifts to the background – it's still there, but almost on an unconscious level. This way, I felt I needed a structure, that would respect the experience of the present moment, but at the same time would allow me to present the texts in a meaningful sequence.

Four poems are explicitly based on the meditation practice: they became the four pillars, spread over the whole length of the cycle, rooted clearly in the one note (d), as a beacon that guides as back each time to the direct experience of the moment. Also the short prelude works this way. The other songs, each with their own character, are centered around these pillars forming larger unities...

The songs offer a representative view of the different atmospheres and subjects of Ryokan's poetry: in 1: *Since I Left The Household* Ryokan presents himself; four of them are explicitly meditative (*nrs 4: In The Evening Of A Thousand Peaks 7: Out Breath And In Breath 9: On A Quiet Evening 15: Renouncing The World*); the important theme of night is elaborated in a number of nocturnes, sometimes in connection with philosophical thoughts, (*5: All Four Seasons Have The Moon*), sometimes with feelings of loneliness, existential angst and insomnia (*8: I Lodge In An Abandoned Temple*), there is also an almost ecstatic nightly walk (*11: Under The Clear Sky Around Midnight*); in 14: *After Staying At Koju Temple* the initial image of a temple at night is transformed into awakening activity of man and nature... In 2: *Takuhatsu* we walk with Ryokan on his begging tour through the early morning landscape; *10 Although From The Beginning* is an emotional lament on impermanence; *12 My Hands Hold A Cane* and *13: What Was Right Yesterday (Is Wrong Today)* are profound reflections on existence, on good and bad.

The total duration of the cycle is approximately 75 minutes.

Luc De Winter, 2013