

## Bob Becker: *Time in the Rock*

*Time in the Rock* was composed between May, 2001 and March, 2004. It is scored for four female voices (two sopranos and two altos), string quartet, piano, marimba and vibraphone. The text used in the piece is from the American author Conrad Aiken's monumental serial poem of the same name. Aiken's work, written between 1932 and 1936, is a grand series of 96 poems, originally titled, then subsequently subtitled, *Preludes to Definition*. It directly followed an earlier (1927 - 1931) series of poems originally titled *Preludes to Attitude*, subsequently retitled *Preludes to Memnon*. As Aiken first intended, both series were later published together as one book in 1966 by Oxford University Press with the simple title *Preludes*. The text for the musical work is drawn from nine individual poems: numbers 1, 2, 3, 5, 24, 26, 31, 33 and 57. The selection, editing and ordering of the poems is my own. The complete text for the piece follows on separate pages.

Aiken's formal architecture, as well as his language, is often musically structured – “mathematically lyrical”, to use his description (the series and the spiral are the most significant mathematical influences on his forms). Both the mathematical and the lyrical aspects of these structures connect directly to the means and techniques with which I have been working in my music for the past fifteen years (see *About the Music* for a description). The piece consists of four movements for voices and instruments and four rather extensive texts spoken by a narrator. The narrated poetry is generally different in character from the texts used in the musical settings. The poem *Time in the Rock* moves freely between symmetrical verses in classic iambic pentameter and verse in a somewhat freer and more irregular style. I felt that the classical metric verses demanded the use of a specific, yet ambiguous rhythmic meter, and I chose to use the odd meter of 7/4 throughout the entire piece. The much denser and discursive free verses, which are nevertheless critical to the central thoughts of the work, contain a great many words that need to be articulated and heard clearly – too many to be presented in a musical setting of less than Wagnerian proportion. The narrated sections then present questions and introduce ideas, which are subsequently elaborated and developed in the musical movements. The entire work lasts approximately 45 minutes.

Aiken's poetry confronts, among other themes, individual and global human transformation – a spiritual, philosophical and ethical dilemma that has fascinated me for many years. Aiken's perspective is that of a person living and writing in the late 1920s/early 1930s. The prevailing question was, as he expressed it: “...where was one to go, or what stand upon, now that Freud, on the one hand, and Einstein on the other, with the shadows of Darwin and Nietzsche behind them, had suddenly turned our neat little religious or philosophic systems into something that looked rather alarmingly like pure mathematics?” Similar concerns had been voiced and addressed before, of course – for example in the aftermath of the discoveries of Descartes, Newton and Leibniz in the 17th century. At the beginning of the 21st century we again face a transformation to a new paradigm, this time in the wake of developments in physics, cosmology, biology and genetics. For the first time, however, humanity now seems to be in a position to control, change and expand not only the environment it inhabits, but its very own physical,

intellectual and emotional make-up. Direct neural connection to artificial forms of intelligence and data storage, bioengineered and genetically transformed physical bodies, and chemically enhanced and controlled emotional states are all in various stages of development. It is the first possibility (and, in my opinion, more a probability if not a certainty) of self-directed non-Darwinian evolution for a species on this planet. What directions humankind should choose for this transformation is an enormously thorny question for the coming century, but there is no question, in my mind at least, that a new form of human being will soon appear to compete with, and eventually replace the present form. Aiken's prescient words continue to address these issues in ways that resonate with an uncanny currency. Aiken considered *Time in the Rock* to be simultaneously abstract and analytic in "...its discussion...of the relationship between being and speaking: of the world and the word." With that in mind, and from a musical perspective, the present work could be considered a discussion of the relationship between being and listening: of the world and the song.

Bob Becker, 2004