

There are many things in life that we don't understand. Sometimes this results in fear, frustration and confusion. But our ignorance and vulnerability can also lead to two different experiences of joy: a sense of the transcendent or 'numinous' (an awe of that which is beyond our grasp), or the excitement of curiosity and discovery (the thrill of understanding something previously unknown). Music, which is simultaneously an intricate science and the most 'mysterious' of the arts, is a perfect vehicle for exploring both these experiences. The first two pieces on today's program tackle the 'unknown' from very different perspectives, each in its own way taking us on a exhilarating flight into boundless skies.

But you won't be left in mid-air! The same intellect capable of debating God and designing planes also sometimes just like to have a bit of fun playing around with words. We finish with our feet firmly grounded (like the feet of 'Nina from Argentina') in the light-hearted joy of some wonderfully clever Noël Coward songs.

Et Misericordia

Clare Maclean (b.1958)

The Old Testament book of Job asks some tough questions. If God is good and omnipotent, why is there suffering and injustice? Job's property and livestock have been destroyed and all his children killed; he is covered from head to foot in loathsome sores; yet he knows that he has done nothing to deserve this. What is God doing? For over thirty chapters, Job and his friends debate the meaning of this suffering, yet Job cannot be satisfied. There is no way around it: it is unfair. Yet how can he, a man, argue his case with God? There is a vast, empty gulf of the 'unknown' between them.

At the end of the book, God responds to Job, and *Et Misericordia* by Clare Maclean is a setting of chapter 38, the first part of God's reply. The music, like the words, is powerfully insistent. Maclean builds up thick, full-voiced chords as God asks a chain of unanswerable questions, declaring himself as the unfathomable, unreachable Creator through the awesome scope of the created universe. Earth, stars, light, darkness, wind and water – all are portrayed with a music that emphasises their mystery and complexity. A big influence on Clare Maclean is the intricate polyphony of Renaissance composers, which she experienced firsthand as a student when she joined the Sydney Chamber Choir in 1980. Maclean takes many Renaissance techniques – the free, chant-like melodic lines, the complex counterpoint – and fuses them in a unique way with modern harmonies. Listen for the scintillating depiction of "light diffused" and the thick, cloudy, misaligned chords of the sea "shut in with doors".

But is this sense of awe and wonder alone a satisfactory answer to the question of human suffering? There is something more. Twice we hear words in Latin, taken from the *Magnificat*: *Et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies timentibus eum* ("And his mercy extends from generation to generation for those who fear him"). This is a signpost, pointing to the very heart of the work. And here, the overwhelming extravagance of creation is momentarily stilled – "the surface of the deep is frozen," sings the choir, as the harmony falls in to a single note. And then, just for a moment, the misty counterpoint is cleared away, the foreign harmonies become familiar, and the divine becomes human. The gulf of the 'unknown' is bridged: "For I know that my Redeemer lives." For Christians, this enigmatic verse points to Jesus as the answer to Job's despair – God redeeming the world through suffering himself as a man.

Looking up into the vast Unknown can inspire more than just passive awe – it stimulates our inquisitive side, the part of us that always wants to know more, to go that little bit further, to find new horizons. Perhaps, like me, you don't just admire Elder Hall's wonderful arched ceiling for being beautiful; maybe the adventurous part of your mind imagines climbing around up there, swinging from beam to beam, flying... Of course, that's impossible. But many things *seem* impossible to begin with. Then you let yourself dream...

Leonardo da Vinci famously sketched several different flying machines during the 15th Century. There is one that looks like a helicopter, and another based on the wings of a bird. None of these 'took off' during his life, but it is inspiring to think that he would actually dare to dream that such things were possible. The American composer Eric Whitacre decided to write a piece of music exploring the creative, inquisitive mind of Leonardo, and the mysterious lure of the empty sky that sparked his ideas. He wanted to "tell the story of Leonardo being tormented by the calling of the air, tortured to such a degree that his only recourse was to solve the riddle and figure out how to fly."

Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine, written in 2001, was conceived as a dramatic piece – an "opera brève." Eric Whitacre collaborated with his friend, the poet Charles Anthony Silvestri, who moulded a libretto combining Whitacre's imagined dream with some words (in Italian) from Leonardo's own sketchbooks.

Like Clare Maclean, Eric Whitacre found it appropriate to take on something of Renaissance musical style in this piece. There are several phrases that carry a distinctive Renaissance lilt and syncopation, and some of the harmonic cadences – set against Whitacre's own signature floating, glimmering chords – also recall the 15th-century. And then there's the detailed word-painting, another characteristic Renaissance practice – "falling," "one by one," and the tolling of the midnight watchtower are evoked in a literal fashion by the music.

The three movements run into each other, as the story carries a surge of creative momentum – from the falling, yearning phrase at the start right up to the climax of the third part, when the dreaming Leonardo takes a deep breath and dares to leap into the unknown.

With the doubts of the unknown cleared away by the exhilaration of flying, we are now in a perfect mood to appreciate the wit and humour of five songs by the English actor, writer, singer and composer Noël Coward. These are *dramatic* songs, and Carl Crossin's arrangements allow for the whole choir to engage in a bit of theatricality – even the 'accompaniment' vocal parts get in on the act (listen carefully!). And then bear in mind that Noël Coward composed much of this music by dictation – he never had formal music lessons and could hardly play the piano, but he possessed an incredible instinctive feel for the mysterious 'unknowns' of music.