

Cages for the Wind (2013)

XI. Words and Roses

XII. Warning to Children

XIII. Gift of Dreams

XIV. Whitey

XV. Roots

One afternoon Margaret Medlyn and I sat down at her kitchen table to discuss poems I might set as the basis of a song cycle for her. At that meeting she produced quite a stack of New Zealand poems for me to consider: among the items in this pile was a slim, rather unassuming little volume by Alistair Campbell titled *Gallipoli & Other Poems* with an evocative, blurry photo of him on the cover. Whilst Gallipoli naturally conjures up powerful socio-historical associations for all New Zealanders, I was almost immediately drawn to the second set of poems in the book titled *Cages for the Wind* and decided to set the last five poems in the collection as a cycle of five songs. What struck me most at the time, and still seems so fresh to me now, was Campbell's talent for evoking deeply powerful images and feelings in poems of incredible delicacy and subtlety. This kind of understated approach is what drew me to a poem like "Whitey" (the penultimate song in the cycle) in which Campbell couches a rumination on death in what appears to be at first an almost whimsical remembered dialogue with a blackbird (the eponymous Whitey) that used to frequent his garden. But perhaps most important for me as a composer was the immediately singable lyricism of the individual poems. I distinctly recall the way, as I began reading it, "Words and Roses" (the first song, and one of Campbell's most famous poems), began to suggest musical atmospheres and vocal lines unfolding in my mind like buds of roses unfurling their petals. When poems begin to sing themselves to me, I know I have found the right material.

Though I have been describing Campbell's poems as lyrical, ethereal, even wistful, I don't mean to give the impression that they are somehow flimsy or insubstantial. Indeed, as I began to turn them into songs, I marvelled at the way he wraps his words in structures of brilliant formal clarity. His poem "Gift of Dreams," for example (the middle song in my cycle), is a gem of formal cohesion with the lines deployed according to the plan 4 + 5 + 2 + 5 + 4. This formal symmetry turned out to be completely in accord with my own current preoccupation with symmetries and a pitch language built on superimposed, symmetrical pentachords (collections of five notes). And whilst the casual listener may not perceive these sort of formal details on the surface, I think they do make themselves felt in the way one experiences the unfolding of the surface as part of a whole musical experience.

Duration: 25:00 minutes