

O Death

Oscar Bettison (2005-7)

O Death that was written for Ensemble Klang and premiered in New York in March 2007. The idea for *O Death* started when I heard the folk-song of the same name. In it, a young person pleads with the character of death not to take them away so soon. I was immediately struck with the parallels between this and parts of the Requiem Mass and so I started to think about grafting on popular music elements (particularly from blues and other American folk music) onto a kind-of Requiem structure. Thus I call *O Death* a *Requiem-Masque*. The piece is scored for 2 saxophones, trombone, percussion, piano, electric guitar and electronic samples. Apart from playing their regular instruments, each of the players also have to play recorders, jew's harps, harmonicas, as well as banjo and melodica.

O Death is around 70 minutes long and is in seven movements:

I) Chorus I The two chorus movements are the only movements not to feature the entire ensemble. *Chorus I* is scored for 2 tenor saxophones, trombone, slide-guitar and taped samples.

II) Bone Chapel is a *memento mori*. The title comes from the Bone Chapel in Evora, Portugal –an 18th Century chapel literally made from human bones. Above the door of the chapel is an inscription that reads: “We bones that are here, for your bones we wait.”

Bone Chapel is based on the idea of a one-note solo, a common feature of many blues solos.

III) *Take Leave of Carnal Vain Delight* is a kind of banjo-lead scherzo-macabre. The title comes from a 17th century English broadside, in which the character of death speaks to a young woman:

"...throw those costly robes aside,
No longer may you glory in your pride;
Take leave of carnal vain delight,
I'm come to summon you away this night."

IV) *O Death* is loosely based on the American folk-song of the same name. If the third movement was an invitation from the figure of death, this movement is the young person's response, a few centuries later and several thousand miles away:

"O, Death!
How you're treating me!
You're closin' my eyes so I can't see.
Well, you're hurtin' my body,
You make me cold,
You run my life
Right out of my soul.

O Death! O Death!
Won't you spare me over 'til another year?"

V) Chorus II is scored for 2 tenor saxophones, trombone, slide-guitar and flower pots.

VI) *I Believe I'm Sinking Down* deals with memory. Alternating furious and serene sections coalesce with the use of a dictaphone playing back the previous loud section's material during the moments of repose. Gradually both types of material are filtered out

by a kind of half-remembered clockwork. The title comes from Robert Johnson's
Crossroad Blues:

"You can run, tell my friend, poor Willie Brown,
Lord, that I'm standing at the crossroad, babe,
I believe I'm sinking down."

VII) *Lights in Ashes* begins with Jew's Harps. This section gives way to a different type of clockwork a slowly moving resonant unison. The movement owes its title to Sir Thomas Browne: "Since our longest Sunne sets at right descensions, and makes but winter arches, and therefore it cannot be long before we lay down in darknesse, and have our lights in ashes."