Programme note

**Chorale–Threnody for Erhu and Piano (2013-14)**

**Douglas Finch**

“*Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin... Tod ist mein Schlaf worden”*

(“With peace and joy I travel there... death has become my sleep”)

- Martin Luther, from the first collection of Funeral Chorales (1542)

“The heavens are now revolving and circulating steadily so that one (body) now goes up but in another time it changes again and comes down…We also have this mirror of heaven and nature in musical harmony, because a certain voice can be the highest voice, but can become the lowest or middle voice, and the lowest and middle can again become the highest. One voice can become all other voices…”

- Andreas Werckmeister,  *Harmonologia musica* (1707)

*Chorale-Threnody for Erhu and Piano* was premièred by Nicole Li, Erhu, and Corey Hamm, piano at the *Sound of Dragon* festival at the Roundhouse in Vancouver, May 11, 2014. The piece is a kind of fantasy-transcription on J.S. Bach’s D-sharp minor Fugue from the 1st book of the ‘Well-Tempered Clavier’. It explores the concept of the German Baroque Death Chorale which Bach inherited from Buxtehude and others, and which used complex contrapuntal procedures to symbolise the elevation of the soul in its approach to God at the point of death. Bach dictated the final revisions for such a chorale – *Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit* (I come before your throne) – from his deathbed (see *Bach and the meanings of counterpoint* by David Yearsley, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

In this piece, Bach’s Fugue subject has been ‘deconstructed’ and used in various ways both contrapuntally and harmonically, with basic elements taking on a wider significance. For example, the E flat triad which is held in the piano’s sostenuto pedal for an extended period not only serves as an underlying drone, but also as a fixed memory of the Fugue’s original key. The third of the chord is major rather than minor, though this optimism is most of the time drowned out by the other layers of music heard over top of it, which move in various directions away from the original stylistic context – through Chinese folk music, North American Aboriginal music and ‘Blues’. And of course, the unique sound of the Erhu adds to this sense of cultural defamiliarization. The mood of the piece moves between calm acceptance, playful exploration and anguished lamentation.

© Douglas Finch 2014

*Shorter version of this programme note:*

*Chorale-Threnody for Erhu and Piano* was premièred by Nicole Li, Erhu, and Corey Hamm, piano at the *Sound of Dragon* festival at the Roundhouse in Vancouver, May 11, 2014. The piece is a kind of fantasy-transcription on J.S. Bach’s D sharp minor Fugue from the 1st book of the ‘Well-Tempered Clavier’. It explores the concept of the German Baroque Death Chorale which Bach inherited from Buxtehude and others, and which uses complex counterpoint to symbolise the elevation of the soul in its approach to God at the point of death. (Bach dictated the final revisions for such a chorale from his deathbed). In this piece, Bach’s Fugue subject has been ‘deconstructed’, with basic elements taking on a wider significance. The plaintive and expressive sound of the Erhu helps to transport these musical elements into new areas - not only Chinese folk music, but also North American Aboriginal music and ‘Blues’. The mood moves between calm acceptance, playful exploration and lamentation. © Douglas Finch 2014