Kubla Khan

poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

music by Philip Legge

Vocal score

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http://www.carringbush.net/~pml/music/legge/

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Kubla Khan

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem *Kubla Khan* is an unsettling glimpse of the poet’s unconscious as well as a vivid and evocative set of dreamlike images. The story of how it came to be written is well-known; the visions in a dream inspired by reading a passage of *Purchas’s Pilgrimage* relating the construction of the Khan’s palace (and possibly influenced by laudanum) might have resulted in a poem of two or three hundred lines had not Coleridge been interrupted by the infamous “man from Porlock”. We are left instead with a fleeting spiral of fragmentary images and ideas that never seem to connect. A fragment of Coleridge’s Fragment appears on the cover (Add. MS 50847, f. 1v).

The obvious inspiration for the harp accompaniment is the first line of the final stanza, “A damsel with a dulcimer”, and the instrumental trio of a harp and two flutes is not completely unknown. The keyboard part here is a transcription of the harp and flute parts suitable for rehearsal with piano. A proper orchestral double harp is preferred for performance, however an electronic keyboard with a full set of octaves and capable of producing a decent harp-like timbre may prove adequate (as well as overcoming the harp’s limitations in rapid changes of tuning), especially if the choir is comparatively large.

Programme Notes by the composer:

“The poem ‘*Kubla Khan*’ by Coleridge has been a favourite of mine for many years, but the inspiration to set it to music – originally for female voices with harp accompaniment – came to me on a holiday a couple of years ago, when I scribbled down a fragmentary page or two.

“Coleridge had been in self-imposed retreat at a country farm-house when he wrote the poem, and had been taking opium purportedly as a relief for some illness, so after reading a travel book with an exotic description of KUBLAI Khan’s palace, he had an extremely vivid poetic dream. Unfortunately after he awoke he was interrupted while in the middle of writing it all down, and later on he couldn’t remember the poem or the dream; so what little of the poem that remains is very evocative.

“Unlike Coleridge I can’t claim to have been inspired by an opium-influenced dream, but most of that musical fragment I wrote has found its way into the current composition in one form or another. The poem – and my music as well – consists of a dreamy and kaleidoscopic series of images and motifs, some of which recur and connect overtly or subliminally. The impetus of a performance led me to expand the work to incorporate two flutes as well as full mixed-voice choir, and a small solo for soprano.”

*Kubla Khan* received its première at the Kaleide Theatre, RMIT University, Melbourne, on June 4 2004.

Flutes: Karl Billeter, Nick Adler
Soprano solo: Sarah Chan
Keyboard (*quasi arpa*): Michael Winikoff

The RMIT Occasional Choral Society (ROCS), conducted by Philip Legge

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Kubla Khan
(Or, a vision in a dream. A fragment)

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentally was forced;
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:
And ‘mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And ‘mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves:
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight ‘twould win me
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1798
ri-ver, ran Through cav-erns mea-sure-less to man Down to a sun-less sea.

ri-ver, ran Through cav-erns mea-sure-less to man Down to a sun-less sea.

ri-ver, ran Through cav-erns mea-sure-less to man Down to a sun-less sea.

ri-ver, ran Through cav-erns mea-sure-less to man Down to a sun-less sea.

Sо twice five miles of fer-tile ground With walls and tow’rs were

Sо twice five miles of fer-tile ground With walls and tow’rs were

Sо twice five miles of fer-tile ground With walls and tow’rs were

Sо twice five miles of fer-tile ground With walls and tow’rs were

gird-dled round: And here were gar-den bright with sin-uous rills Where blos-somed

gird-dled round:

Where blos-somed

gird-dled round:

Where blos-somed

gird-dled round:

Where blos-somed

gird-dled round:
ma-ny an in-cense-bear-ing tree;

And here were forests ancient as the

hills,

En-fold-ing sun-ny spots of green-ery.

And here were forests ancient as the

hills

En-fold-ing sun-ny spots of green-ery.

Allegro, broad in feeling, about \( \dot{=} 108 \)

ac-cel-er-ate
do ... al ...

Vivace, about $j = 132$

But o! that

deep romantic chant which slanted Down the green hill a-thwart a

ce-darn-cover! A savage place!

But o! that

down that

ce-darn-cover! A savage place!

But o! that

ce-darn-cover! A savage place!
holly and enchanted

warning moon was haunted

by woe!

demon lover!

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil

By woman wailing for her

By woman wailing for her

By woman wailing for her

As e'er beneath a

As e'er beneath a

As e'er beneath a

By woman wailing for her
seeth'g, As if this earth in fast thick pants were bre'ath'g, A mighty foun'tain mo-ment-

ly was forced; Amid whose swift half-termit'ed burst huge frag-ments

vault-ed like re-bond-ing hail, And 'mid these dance-ing

or chaff'g grain be-neath the thresh'er's flail:
rocks at once and e-\text{-}ver \text{t}t \text{flung up} \text{mo-}\text{\-cent-ly the sa-cred ri-ver.}

rocks at once and e-\text{-}ver \text{t}t \text{flung up} \text{mo-}\text{\-cent-ly the sa-cred ri-ver.}

It \text{flung up} \text{mo-}\text{\-cent-ly the sa-cred ri-ver.}

It \text{flung up} \text{mo-}\text{\-cent-ly the sa-cred ri-ver.}

Five \text{miles me-}\text{\-an-der-ing} \text{with a ma-zy mo-tion} \text{Through} \text{p}

Through \text{p}

Through \text{p}

Through \text{p}

wood and dale the sa-cred ri-ver ran, \text{Then}

wood and dale the sa-cred ri-ver ran, \text{Then}

wood and dale the sa-cred ri-ver ran, \text{Then}

wood and dale the sa-cred ri-ver ran, \text{Then}
reached the caverns measure less to man,

And sunk in

And ‘mid this tumult Kubla

tumult to a lifeless ocean: And ‘mid this tumult Kubla

And ‘mid this tumult Kubla

tumult to a lifeless ocean: And ‘mid this tumult Kubla

And ‘mid this tumult Kubla

tumult to a lifeless ocean: And ‘mid this tumult Kubla

And ‘mid this tumult Kubla

tumult to a lifeless ocean: And ‘mid this tumult Kubla

And ‘mid this tumult Kubla
heard from far Ancestral voices prophesying war!

Wild

then... Alla marcia (metronomic and slower)

Losing momentum
Slower, languid, about $\breve{d} = 80$

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Float ed midway on the waves;
Where was heard the ming led measure
From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,
A sun-ny pleas-ure dome with caves of
Moderate, about $d = 120$

157 hemiola: $d = \frac{3}{4}$ poco rit. 16 Tempo

A bys-si- ni-an maid, And on her dul-ci-mer she played

Sing ing of Mount A - bo - ra.

170 A little slower, $d = 100$

Could I re vive with in me Her sym pho ny and song,

To such a deep de light 'twould

T.

B.

A little slower, $d = 100$

Slower again, $d = 80$

Could I re vive with in me Her sym-

Slower again, $d = 80$

Could I re vive

* Abora: the composer suggests the first syllable is sung with a long “A”, as in “arbor” (but with as little or no hint of an “r” before the next syllable).
light, to such a deep delight, to such a deep delight 'twould win

such a deep delight, to such a deep delight, to such a deep delight 'twould win

light, to such a deep delight, to such a deep delight 'twould win

That with music loud and long,

That with music loud and long,

That with music loud and long,

That with music loud and long.

190

me

Allegro, about $j = 108$

accelerando
I would build that dome in air, That sunny dome! those
caves of ice! And all who heard should see them there, And
caves of ice! And all who heard should see them there, And
caves of ice! And all who heard should see them there, And
ran...do ... al...  Vivace, about $\mathbf{j} = 132^*$

*Do not give in to the illusory appearance of the choir singing in $\frac{6}{4}$
Weave a circle round him thrice, And close your eyes with holy dread, For he
Weave a circle round him thrice, And close your eyes with holy dread, For he
Weave a circle round him thrice... with holy dread, For he
Weave a circle round... with dread, For he
Honey dew hath fed, and drunk the milk of Paradise.

Niente

Poco rit.

Camberwell

27 May 2004