

Beneath the African Sky, Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory
Composers' Notes

Commissioned by the Cincinnati Children's Choir, Robyn Reeves Lana, Managing Artistic Director, *Beneath the African Sky* is the second choral piece to result from our acquaintance with Clemantine Wamariya. Like our earlier work, *Witness*, this is designed to call awareness to recent episodes of genocide, particularly as they have impacted the lives of children. It is a chance for the singers, the children of fortune, to make a promise to the children of war.

Clemantine escaped from her home two weeks after the Rwandan genocide began. Only six years old, she was smuggled beneath piles of luggage in the back of a car. The road was littered with bodies. Clemantine remembers the smell of death filling the air during that long drive to her grandparents' house, a place they believed to be out of the reach of danger.

But the insanity followed them. A death squad appeared at the door in the middle of the night. Clemantine was awakened by her grandmother's screams. She and her sister crawled through a bedroom window and ran into the forest. From there, they watched the house burn. They smelled death again. Now alone, the girls wandered through the countryside, eventually finding a church where they sought refuge. But inside, they saw that the church had been the scene of a massacre. Filled with bodies, it looked more like a morgue than a safe-house. The two children hid among the dead to avoid being caught.

Years after Rwanda, Clemantine made her way into a sponsorship and immigration program which landed her in the United States. As a high school student in a Chicago suburb, Elie Wiesel's Holocaust remembrance, *Night*, was required reading. In a subsequent essay, she wrote that the book changed her life. Wiesel was brave enough to tell his story. She had never told hers. Now inspired, she recounted her experiences as a child of genocide and (worse, she says) as a child living without parents in refugee camps.

Clemantine's essay was submitted to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and selected for broadcast. Clemantine met Elie Wiesel face to face. More importantly, Oprah Winfrey orchestrated Clemantine's reunion with her parents, who had survived the Rwandan genocide.

As the Cincinnati Children's Choir prepares for the premiere of *Beneath the African Sky*, Clemantine is preparing for her freshman year at Yale.

In the summer of 2008, Clemantine sat in a coffee shop in Chicago and reflected on life after the genocide.

She said: "*Children see everything and they do not forget. But when they get out of it, out of the trouble, they SHUT. They try to cover the memories up because they are too painful. So the whole story is lost. But who am I to be quiet? I must tell people what it feels like to be a child and think the world hates you. And my voice is not enough. YOU are a witness, too.*"

Beneath the African Sky is actually more influenced by Clemantine's experience living in refugee camps than by the Rwandan genocide. She recalls this as the most horrific of her experiences, even worse than the genocide itself.

"*You don't belong anywhere. What do you do when you do not belong in the world? In Rwanda, I had pretty shoes and a bed. Then the genocide happened and I knew I was going to be killed if caught. In the camp, it was a different death, death by food and death by drink and death by depression. Every time tick, you feel like you are dying. Imagine a kid thinking there is no world out there for you.*"

"*I wanted to be the foreign kids who came to the camp to help. I felt so special when they helped. One told me I had a beautiful smile. I never forgot it.*"

The oboe melody which appears in the song is loosely based on a tune Clemantine sang to herself in the refugee camps.

"*When I sing that song, I feel like someone heard me. My sister was working and I was all alone. All I had was invisible God. That song was a shield.*"

We thank Clemantine for sharing her story. It has changed us all. If any chorus preparing *Beneath the African Sky* wishes to contact her or arrange for her to attend a performance, reach out to paulcaldwell@gmail.com. It is well within the realm of possibility.

Additionally, we want to thank Elizabeth Thomas, Clemantine's American mother. She arranged our meeting. Also, thanks go to Mary Alice Miller, who brought Clemantine's story to us in the first place. Finally, deep appreciation goes to Dr. Marian Dolan. She has championed our work and kept reminding us that the stories of Rwanda and Darfur awaited our attention.

~Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory, April 5, 2009