

Adrian Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

Blackberry Winter

Conni Ellisor, Composer

When first asked if I would be interested in writing a concerto for dulcimer and strings, I happily agreed because the challenge of juxtaposing and blending musical styles and idioms has always been of interest to me. In this case the peculiar beauty and eccentricities of the mountain dulcimer, with its diatonic tuning and drone strings, and the rich heritage of the classical concerto with string orchestra seemed particularly compelling.

Because my knowledge of the particulars of the dulcimer was limited at best, it was arranged that I met with master dulcimerist and intended artist, David Schnauffer. On the second or third meeting with David, he played a lovely song called Blackberry Blossom, one of many handed down in the Appalachian folk tradition. I could hear immediately how the harmonies underneath could be shifted and changed and that it was a perfect melody to adapt to the “classical” tradition I wanted to bring to the concerto. The title reminded me of a book that had a profound influence on me years earlier, and I asked David if he had heard of Margaret Mead’s autobiography, “Blackberry Winter”. His eyes lit up when he told me that NCO conductor Paul Gambill had called to tell him that the grant was secured on a spring morning a few months earlier, when a late frost had come without warning coating all the new buds with a thin coat of ice- a Blackberry Winter. And so the piece was named.

I felt compelled to work within the folk idiom, utilizing folk and folk-like melodies that are true to the nature and heritage of the dulcimer, yet I wanted the piece to have the basic infrastructure of the classical concerto. So I borrowed from a number of idioms: the Baroque tradition of introducing a theme slowly before moving into an allegro tempo (first movement) a rough interpretation of sonata-allegro form (first and third movements), and the time-tested use of theme and variation (second movement).

Source: <http://ellisormusic.com/compositions/blackberry-winter/>