Programme note

**Night Love Song**

**Concerto for Viola and Chamber Orchestra (2011-12)**

**Douglas Finch**

*Night Love Song* came about at the suggestion of violist Rivka Golani and the Fort McLeod Festival, Alberta.

Première: Rivka Golani, viola/ Tak-Ng Lai, conductor/ Canadian Sinfonietta / Glenn Gould Studio, Toronto, 24 November, 2012.

The piece’smain musical materialisbased on a recording of ‘*Night Love Song’* by Chief Bull (Blackfoot Nation, Montana) in 1909, and takes some of its inspiration from Hugh Dempsey’s account of Charcoal (*Si’k-okskitsis* – literally, “Black Wood Ashes”) of the Blood Tribe near Fort McLeod, Alberta in his book *Charcoal’s World* (University of Nebraska Press, 1978). In 1896, Charcoal‘s wife was having an affair with a womanising young rascal called Medicine Pipe Stem. Charcoal was normally shy and retiring, having lived a law-abiding life on the reserve administered by the Canadian Mounted Police. But when he found the offending couple one night *in flagrante*, he flipped, and murdered Medicine Pipe Stem with one bullet in the eye. Thinking then that, under the Queen’s Law, his life was over, he returned to his warrior roots and, with the fearlessness of a ‘wild coyote’, went on the run with his wife in tow, pursued by the Canadian Mounted Police for several months. The super-human ‘crazy coyote’ energy he found wasn’t just motivated by the desire to evade capture, but also to follow the ancient tradition of his tribe – *iskohtoi-im’ohk’si-ow* –warrior self-sacrifice. He tried to find an important leader to kill before he was put to death, such as a chief or a white official, so that, as Hugh Dempsey explains:

... *when death finally came, he would ride into the shadow world with pride and dignity; the spirits would recognise his name and welcome him. In that ghostly land in the Sand Hills, he would arrive like a great leader, not like some stray dog.*

The piece isn’t so much a dramatization of this story as a depiction of specific aspects of it: the bleak landscape of Charcoal’s country (Porcupine Hills, Pincher Creek) and communion with the ancestral spirit world through ritual, dance and story-telling.

The ‘Night Love Song’ melody as sung by Chief Bull is unusually complex (seven-note scale using both major and minor third) and both movements of this Concerto develop it in many different ways. The subtle shifting syncopation of Blackfoot ‘drumming music’ is also prevalent throughout, mostly restrained and sombre through the first movement but gradually released with more abandon as the second movement progresses. Orchestration is often spare, emulating the lonely, haunting landscape of Charcoal’s country.

I am grateful to Rivka Golani for all her help and support while writing this piece and for her editorial suggestions for the viola part.

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