

## The Akasha Chronicles

The Akasha Chronicles is the rather portentous sounding, and perhaps misleading title of the latest work I have written for eurhythmy, commissioned by Elizabeth for Stefan Hasler and the Goetheanum. It is a modest, and in many ways a simple piece for piano four hands, but it

brings together several strands in my own thinking - Steiner, Sri Aurobindo, theoretical physics and creative research into the Upanishads. It is in fact a musical study of Steiner's "four ethers": warmth-fire, light-air, tone-water and life-earth. The relevance of the Akasha Chronicles is as a link between the four ethers, Aurobindo and the Upanishads.

Recently a dear friend and colleague, Paul Robertson, musician and anthroposophical fellow traveller, passed away. In fact, like Schoenberg, Paul died twice. His account of near death - the tunnel, the light, "infinite bliss" - was in many ways similar to other accounts. But Paul explored much further, and may have passed, in his coma, from what Steiner describes as the worlds of senses and souls to a world of spirits and higher beings, represented to him in both visions and nightmares. I was struck by Paul's profound sense, in his second death, of moving beyond the Devachan and re-joining the infinite - the universe itself, the ether and the spiritual knowledge of everything. It reminded me very much of Steiner's Akasha Chronicles (Akasha is of course the Sanskrit for "ether"), an Akasha beyond the Devachan, where all knowledge and experience is recorded.

One bright morning in Jodhpur, a few years ago, I met a man at breakfast, started a conversation, then realised I had to cancel all engagements and continue to talk all day. The man was called Vijay, Head of the Sri Aurobindo Society in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu. As a result of the conversation I began to work as a volunteer in Tamil Nadu, in special education development, music therapy and palliative care. I have always found interesting parallels between Steiner and Aurobindo (who, coincidentally, I first heard about through Stockhausen), although of course I have only a humble and naive musician's grasp of Steiner scholarship.

It seems to me that there are resemblances between Steiner's Akasha and Aurobindo's *Sat* (Infinite Being) and *Chit-Tapas* (the

Consciousness Force). In Aurobindo's philosophy the Consciousness Force has many manifestations; human consciousness is just one kind of consciousness, "devolved" from infinite consciousness rather than "evolved" from the adaptive needs of primitive life forms. It is theoretically possible to see the Chronicles as belonging to this space - embracing the totality of infinite consciousness and the Consciousness Force and everything that passes and has passed through it - all materialisation, action, thought and experience.

Then, in Aurobindo's view of the ether, there is *Ananda* ("infinite bliss" - is this what Paul, and others who have experienced near-death, catch sight of?), and a fourth, lowest level which is the *supramental* - the pathway through which human beings may reach this knowledge, and through which higher consciousness may, through the freedom and volition of individuals, descend to human life.

If it is possible to relate Steiner to Aurobindo - and this is work for real scholars and scientists, not musicians and dilettantes - then there is an elegant link to contemporary theoretical physics. Aurobindo's cosmology derives from the Upanishads and the idea of Being coming from Non-Being. This is the point of emergence of Infinite Being (*Sat*) and the Consciousness Force (*Chit-Tapas*) out of or within nothing. It is the conceivable equivalent of Steiner's Akasha, of Heisenberg's domain of "uncertainty" or of the origins of Einstein's particle-wave conundrum - a single force or entity from which material reality emerges (or re-emerges), according to contemporary science, in the Big Bang.

According to contemporary "string theory", up to around  $10^{-43}$  seconds after the Big Bang all four forces of the universe - gravitation, electromagnetism and weak and strong nuclear forces - were a single fundamental force, made up of vibrating strands or strings; different patterns of vibration or resonance became, according to the theory, different forces and particles. By about  $10^{-11}$ , the falling temperature was to allow the basis of elementary particles to be formed; these included particles such as quarks which would become matter and photons which would become the elementary particles or waves of electromagnetic forces. The conditions for Steiner's first level of ethers, in their material as distinct from their etheric manifestation - warmth, light, sound and

life energy - were already present, nanoseconds after the Big Bang - that is to say the moment of emergence of energy and matter from Steiner's Akasha, from the Infinite Being, or from the dark matter of physics (which may, of course, all be the same thing)

As matter coalesced through forces of gravity in galaxies and stars, still pressured by and to some extent riding on sound-like gravitational waves, the conditions emerged for nuclear fusion which generated the elements of the periodic table up to iron and nickel-56. The elements from nickel-56 up to uranium, the heavy elements, require an intake of

energy to fuse, and were generated in the very high temperatures and pressures of supernovae, the catastrophic explosions of dying stars. The conditions for Steiner's second level of ethers were met at this point; together with the elements of the periodic table came the potential for the material manifestation of the four traditional elements: fire, air, water and earth.

The material, as distinct from etheric conditions for Steiner's sun, saturn, moon and earth phases were of course met when the solar system was formed, and life arose on earth.

I have written an opera in collaboration with writer Ariel Dorfman based on the story of Naciketa from the Katha Upanishad. Ariel wrote the libretto as a generous acknowledgement of my work with traumatised children around the world. In Dorfman's version of the story, Naciketa migrates from Ancient India to the modern world, and learns about the problems of children - child soldiers in East Africa, child prostitutes in India, children in South America searching for the bodies of parents who have disappeared. Studying the Katha Upanishad I noticed there was a hidden theme of the four elements - fire (*agni*), air (*vayu*) water (*jal*), earth (*prithvi*) - running as a kind of "underground stream" beneath the narrative. Hovering above the whole story was the fifth Vedic/Sanskritic element - *Akasha*.

I researched the ragas (Indian scales) and tals (rhythmic patterns) from both Hindustani and Carnatic traditions associated with the five elements, and I have used these as musical material in *The Akasha Chronicles*, adapting the Indian intonation to the equal tempered keyboard. I have used the resonances of strings inside the piano to represent or "embody" the first level of the four ethers - life energy, involving the combination of all four fundamental forces, the mechanical

and gravitational energy of sound and tone, and the electromagnetic energy and photons that drive both heat and the ultra-fast, brilliant energy of light.