

*Thousands of Bundled Straw*  
**Floating, elusiveness and the ecstatic**

At the beginning, middle, and end of the foundation myth of Ichibata Yakushi Temple there are images of floating. There is the statue of the Healing Buddha found floating at the water's edge by Yoichi, the fisherman, a statue conceivably drawn west from Korea by the current along the coastline of the Sea of Japan. There is the floating through the air of the fisherman himself, when, at the bidding of the Buddha in a dream, he wraps himself in straw and flings himself from a cliff. Rewarding such earnest faith, the Buddha in turn cures Yoichi's mother of her blindness. To honour and protect the miracle-working statue, there follows the building of the Temple of the Healing Eyes on the summit of Mount Ichibata, where it still appears to float, hovering 300 metres above sea level; above Lake Shinji and the surrounding plains; above 1,265 ancient stone steps.

The textual sources for David Young's song cycle *Thousands of Bundled Straw* are several, but include the legend of Ichibata Yakushi Temple. The word 'floating' is repeated in each of the movements that involve soprano: in the third movement it is spoken, accompanied by short, high notes from the oboe and pianoforte; in the fifth, sixth and seventh movements it is sung *legato*, delicately punctuated by chords. 'Floating' suggests instability and precariousness, as well as a stillness. As such, it recollects several distinguishing features of *Thousands of Bundled Straw*, not least its shimmering quality—on the pages of the score, in performance, in the mind afterward—which proposes that any attempt to 'secure' an adequate outline of the work is more than usually hazardous.

The soprano voice is present in just four of the seven movements of *Thousands of Bundled Straw*, first heard whispering in the third movement. And though supposedly the bearer of explicit meaning, the voice offers just fragments for the ear to grasp at, a flotsam of utterances, stray syllables, and wordless vocalisations: hoarse sighs and stuttering, tongue slaps, groaning. As acknowledged in the performance notes, 'the language [...] fluctuates between English, Italian and Japanese'; it glides and skips between interjection, counting, poetry and commentary.

Such commentary includes a sudden, hasty mention, early in the third movement, of ‘our traditional antipathy to all notions of obscurity, incongruity, approximation and intangibility’. Barely apprehensible in performance, this self-reflexive remark—quoting from Georges Perec’s novel *A Void*—exemplifies the playful treatment of language throughout the song cycle. As with the repetitions of ‘floating’, it proposes elusiveness as conceptual theme of the work. With regard to narrative, the vocal part offers, at best, intermittent words and phrases from the story of Yoichi as an array of archaeological remnants, or ‘found objects’, which are actively organised by the ensemble writing.

The performance notes for the vocal part also acknowledge that ‘the wide *tessitura* [range of pitch] presumes changes in colour and not a uniform quality of production’—an indication that can stand for the instrumental writing as well. Every page of the score is finely patterned with instructions, additional markings calculated to produce nearly constant variation in the audibility, purity, and timbre of the instrumental voices. Quarter tones are combined with wavering and microtonal *glissandi*; trills; melismatic grace notes; muted, breathy and percussive effects to produce impressions of harmonic uncertainty, even groundlessness. This fascination with subtle sonic gestures demands virtuosic skill from each player; there is an emphasis on fleeting but treacherously exposed effects. The texture, then, is utterly distinctive: resonant, not without fluidity, often dispersed, as though in a process of returning to a vast, natural landscape. In the second and seventh movements, the woodblock and sandpaper of the percussion part promote this visceral feeling.

While textual and melodic ‘lines’ are so often fractured and deferred, *Thousands of Bundled Straw* is an immersive work: the score declares that ‘all movements and songs of the cycle are to be performed [...] with as little break as possible’, placing importance on continuity of performance. And it fulfils the desire for musical coherence, or interrelationship, possibly to excess. This desire has been associated with the genre of the song cycle in Western art music at least since the early nineteenth century.

Seven songs for soprano and guitar are situated ‘at the heart’ of *Thousands of Bundled Straw*; at the mid-point of its duration, the fifth movement. So in one sense the surrounding movements form a frame for this quietly elegant ‘cycle in miniature’, the fourth movement serving as a prelude. Yet like the statue that explains the origins of the Ichibata Yakushi Temple, the seven songs also contain the logic for the entire work—in

spite of their self-sufficiency, their atmosphere of austerity. They form the basis for the seven-part structure of each movement, and, in terms of duration, for the proportional relationships between the movements. More literally, the seven songs are also presaged and reiterated. For instance, the first movement of the work, for clarinet and violoncello, comprises a setting of the fifth song; the sixth movement of the work, for soprano, oboe, clarinet, trombone, strings and pianoforte, also includes a setting of the fifth song; a reiteration of ‘song 1’ closes the final movement of the work, as a hushed coda. The intricate writing for soprano and guitar proves remarkably supple and resilient when reworked for the different or larger ensembles.

‘Song 4’ in the ‘cycle in miniature’ calls for ‘five eggs’: over 16 bars these are dropped by the soprano, one at a time, abruptly, as she sings. Amongst the seemingly inexhaustible inflections given to the vocal part, the eggs represent an especially playful addition. Yet their role is not only comical. By dainty analogy they refer forwards to the fifth song, at once the nourishing ‘centre’ of the entire composition, and its structural ‘vanishing point’. And to drop the eggs is to demonstrate the irresistible force of gravity—that which Yoichi ingeniously or miraculously survives. With reference to the myth of the Healing Buddha, to drop the eggs is to enact a contradictory, unsettling imagery.

Transient, destabilising detail may pervade *Thousands of Bundled Straw*; nonetheless its seven movements create a steady intensification of feeling, which is met in the final movement with a rhapsodic interlude of repose. The coda in the final movement is preceded by over three minutes of chords held softly beneath an undulating vocal line. Here the score dispenses with the strictures of precise rhythmic notation. All at once, the space of the work simplifies and opens out—the harmony becoming consonant, the texture luxuriously sustained. All at once, the ear is re-enchanted. The music and musicians acquire a strangely euphoric quality of stillness—the quality, no less, of floating. In the words of the soprano part, floating briefly ‘beyond time’.

*Thousands of Bundled Straw* asks for an intensification of aural perception—as might be associated with a loss of sight. Indeed, *Thousands of Bundled Straw* could be understood as an expansive argument for the practice of acute listening, or ‘taking the

straw out of our ears’ and, undistracted by spectacle, becoming more closely attuned to the hearing that lies within and just beyond our range. After all, the eggs in the fifth movement are to be heard as musical events; their breaking is swift, capricious, and hardly visible at best.

Of course aural perception is not unconnected with auditory memory and imagination. Is it possible, then, that *Thousands of Bundled Straw* describes Yoichi’s experience of flinging himself from the cliff—his act of ‘blind’ faith—separated into seven epic moments? Each of these moments, in turn, has been aurally magnified, atomised, into the sounds that surface and subsist through the dry layers of straw. Yoichi’s improvised sheath brings slivers of song, speech, silence and reverberation into extreme proximity with the accents of his breathing body, a body temporarily suspended above the world.

Cynthia Troup  
Melbourne, February 2009

*Note: An abridged version of this essay was printed by the Melbourne Recital Centre for the performance of Thousands of Bundled Straw by Libra Ensemble and soprano Deborah Kayser, conducted by Mark Knoop, on 12 February 2009 at 10.30pm in the Salon. This performance was part of the festival that marked the opening of the Melbourne Recital Centre.*