

# IN THE SHADOWS OF THE FOREST

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

### I. Background

This work was originally commissioned by Mike Mizma and the San Jacinto Community College Central Steelband and Choir in December of 2009. It was completed seven weeks later on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010, and premiered on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010, at San Jacinto Community College in Pasadena, Texas.

This published version was completed in August of 2010, and contains only minor revisions from the original version.

The chosen subject matter for the text was the folklore of Trinidad. Research for the text included existing written literature and multimedia programs on the subject, as well as personal interviews.

Although the piece as a whole has been referred to as a “pan cantata,” the form of the work is more that of a suite than a cantata. There is little shared thematic material between the movements (except for the first and last movements), and the styles of each movement are greatly varied. It does, however, contain passages of solos, duets, etc., in addition to the full chorus with instrumental ensemble, and the overall presentation of the complete work is very much like that of a classical cantata. While it *could* be considered a cantata in the very loosest definition of the term, it has been titled a “suite” to avoid the argument altogether.

The first and last movements serve as an introduction and epilogue, a “frame” around the picture if you will. The inner movements are based on seven different folkloric characters. Here is the background of each movement:

1. *Sleep Well*. With the sun going down, and after relating several of the scarier folkloric tales to his grandchildren, a grandfather tells them it is time for them to run home. He advises them to not even look over their shoulders to see what might be lurking behind them in the shadows. Once safely at home, he advises (somewhat sarcastically), “sleep well.” This story is based upon an interview I did with a Trinidadian friend in my research for this work. I’ve based it on an Afro-12/8 rhythm, as recognition that much of this folklore is rooted in African culture.
2. *Papa Bois*. (Pronounced “Papa Bwah”) Also known as “Daddy Bouchon,” this character lives in the forest and is generally even-tempered. He is perceived by many to be a steward of forest life. If you cross him by killing a forest animal for sport or unnecessarily cutting down a tree, he will cast a spell on you or turn you into a wild hog or other creature. Here we have a casual stroller coming upon Papa Bois in the forest, and extending his utmost courtesies to him. This was written as a slow, relaxed samba, and

- uses several common French phrases as recognition of the partial French origin of the myth.
3. *Duppies*. Basically, duppies are the spirits of ghosts that have not yet moved on into the next world. They dwell in the roots and branches of silk cotton trees by day, and come out at night to cast disease or other misfortune on their victims. Written as a simple cha-cha, this piece is intended to sound very tropical, with a hint of the 1960's Tiki lounge sound.
  4. *Brodder Anansi*. There are many stories about Brother Anansi, the little spider who outwits his much larger prey. Many of them are collected in children's books popular throughout the Caribbean. This movement tells three of the tales, entirely in Trinidadian dialect. There is a soloist (a high, theatrical tenor) taking the role of Brodder Anansi, with the chorus singing the part of his victims. This piece is written as an old-style calypso (more about this style in the performance notes).
  5. *La Diablesse*. (Pronounced "LA jah-BLESS") This is a mysterious woman who appears at parties or in bars and lures men into the forest, where she disappears, leaving them for dead. Some say this is in retaliation for transgressions against women. This is written in 7/4 meter and in a somewhat minimalist style, and is intended to sound mysterious and airy.
  6. *Soucouyant*. (Pronounced "Soo-koo-YAH") By most accounts, this character is a combination of the European "vampire" character with a similar African character. The soucouyant is an old hag, usually living in a dilapidated house on the edge of town. At nighttime, she awakens, sheds her skin, turns into a ball of fire, and flies out of her house to go suck the life force out of her victims. Before sunrise, she must make it back to her house and slip back into her skin (with a little help from the oil of a corpse's liver) or else her haunting days are over. One sociological explanation for the myth holds that since most women outlive their husbands, there are bound to be old widows in every village living in houses that they simply cannot maintain. These widows were often perceived as something of a burden or outcast in their community, which made them easy targets for this myth. This piece is written as a fusion of gospel choral style with three rhythmic styles of Reggae origin.
  7. *Douennes*. (Pronounced "doo-ENS") These are the lost souls of infants who died before they were baptized. Their awful fate is that they float around the forest forever, with no face and with their feet turned backward, and try to lure living children into the forest to perish and join them. This piece is a gentle commentary on the concept of original sin. It is written for a cappella choir.
  8. *Pan Jumbies*. More urban legend than folkloric character, the Pan Jumbie is a modern concoction that combines the enthusiasm of steelband fans (and players) in Trinidad with the general concept of a Jumbie (any malevolent

spirit); so modern, in fact, it remains open to interpretation and its use is varied. But the basic origin of the term as this composer knows it arises from the panyards in the weeks leading up to Trinidad's "Panorama National Steelband Championship," as all of the nation's bands (and their neighborhood supporters) prepare for the competition.

9. *Finale: What to Believe / Sleep Well Reprise*. Like the opening, this final movement is another reaction to the personal interpretations encountered in researching the folklore. While many modern Trinidadians do not openly heed superstition or regard the characters of Trinidad's folklore as real tangible beings, there is among many a feeling that odd coincidences are worth noting, and some recognize a sense of evil energy in certain surroundings. A balanced appreciation of reality and superstition is advised, therefore. After settling on this, the performers now take the role of the grandfather in the first movement, and tell the audience to run on home to "sleep well."

## 2. Program Notes & Narration

Since most audience members are not familiar with the characters of Trinidadian folklore, some explanation of them will add greatly to their appreciation of the music. This piece was originally performed in a concert hall, with a printed program containing the full libretto and descriptions of the characters. The piece was later performed at an outdoor concert without the benefit of a printed program, and so narrative descriptions were written to precede each movement (except the first movement). These are included along with the libretto.

The libretto and narrative descriptions are available in digital format (for copying and pasting into programs), by contacting the composer at [twotreesmusic@comcast.net](mailto:twotreesmusic@comcast.net) or via the publishing website: [www.twotreesmusic.com](http://www.twotreesmusic.com).

## 3. General Performance Notes

This music was written with learnability and playability in mind. The commissioning body was a community college steelband (with beginners among them) and choir, with just seven weeks to prepare the music for the premier (which they did successfully).

To achieve the above goals, many of the accompaniment parts use repetition of form. These are most commonly found in the backline steel pan parts (double seconds, guitar/cello pan, bass pan). Since written repeats can cause page turn issues, and since lyrical changes sometimes necessitate changes to the phrasing, the parts have generally been written out at full length. A quick analysis of some of the lengthier steel pan parts will reveal that often the player is simply repeating the same sections one or more times. Players are urged to take note of this fact at the onset of learning in order to streamline the effort.

It is anticipated that the choir and steelband will work independently of each other for a time before joining forces prior to the concert. **The piano part is included for choral rehearsal only** and should not be included in the performance. Some of what the steelband is doing is simply not playable on piano, and so an attempt has been made to adapt the part so as to capture the general essence of what the steelband is doing. The end result is that while there are differences between the piano and steelband parts, the piano part will be useful in teaching the choir the music. In some cases, the piano part is simply a condensed version of the steelband parts, and in these cases the pianist may make his or her own judgments on which of the cued parts to play.

One balanced “unit” of the steel pan ensemble consists of 2 (low-C optional but preferable) tenor pans, 1 double tenor (which can be played on double seconds), 1 double seconds (low F-sharp), 1 triple guitar or cello pan (low B), and 1 six-bass pan (low B-flat), plus engine room. (See below for information about balancing with the choir.)

The bass part was written for the common six-bass pattern (from left to right, B & E, D & A, C & G, B-flat & F, E-flat & A-flat, and C# & F#), and the triple pan part was written for the common guitar pan pattern (low B on the left, C in the center, and C# on the right). Other configurations may prove problematic on some passages.

Of the steel pan parts, the inner voice players (double seconds and guitar/cello) will be the busiest, so these parts are the ones most reliant on repetition. The “frontline” pans (tenor pan, double tenor, and, sometimes, double seconds) frequently have a more sporadic role to play in this music, often playing around and between choral passages.

The choir is asked at times to snap fingers, clap, or slap thighs. This presents the challenge of having at least part of the choir memorize portions of the music. In the end, the effort to have at least some hands free in the choir will be greatly rewarded by the significant lift in energy this element brings to the sections where it is indicated.

Balancing the steelband and choir:

The premier of this piece was with an 18-piece steel band (15 steel pan players plus three percussionist in the “engine room”) and a 45-voice choir. It was determined early on that the choir would need to be mic’ed and amplified for this combination. Although vocal soloists and duets will probably still need mic’ing, the steelband and choir *can* balance out acoustically *if* the correct proportions are achieved. Here is a rough idea of workable acoustic proportions (all configurations assume just one drummer and two percussionists):

One player per steel pan part (two tenor pans) : 50 – 80 voices

Two players per steel pan part (four or more tenor pans) : 80 – 120 voices

Three players per steel pan part (six or more tenor pans) : 120+ voices

Of course, these ratios depend very much upon the strength and projection of the instruments and on the strength of the choir.