

Suite Talk

Notes by Ron Holleman on the Shambhala Suite

Although I am not a Buddhist, my wife Sue is, and I have lots of Buddhist friends. When I decided to apply for one of the artistic fellowships offered by Arts Alive, I had the idea of composing a suite of dances inspired by Buddhist concepts and personalities. I would write it for jazz quintet and strings, incorporating both classical compositional techniques and the spontaneity of jazz improvisation, a genre known as third stream.



I started with *Dharma Bums*, a piece I had written “for all my Buddhist friends.” (A jazz version of it appears on the “Straight Ahead” CD by the Just Jazz Quintet.) Using that as a springboard, I formulated a five-movement work which I would call the Shambhala Suite. It follows the model of the classical suite, with each movement being a different dance form:

- With apologies to Jack Kerouac, I called the first movement ***Dharma Bums***. It is a medium-tempo blues, a foxtrot. A blues doesn’t take itself too seriously, and this movement is dedicated to the good-humored, tolerant, genuinely nice people I know in the Buddhist community.
- The second movement, ***The Road to Enlightenment***, is a slow tango that chronicles one Dharma Bum’s search for enlightenment. In writing it, I kept in mind a favorite saying: “The road to Enlightenment is long and difficult, so bring snacks and a magazine.”
- Next I added ***Waltz for Sue*** in place of the traditional third-movement minuet. The tune is one I had originally written as a birthday gift for my wife Sue, my favorite Buddhist. What started out to be a ballad ended up a waltz when the tune took on a life of its own.
- The fourth movement, ***Skydance***, is a musical portrait of Buddhist teacher Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche. Although diminutive in physical stature, she is a giant among Rinpoches, with a fierce, dedicated approach to the Dharma. *Skydance* is a rondo in which the two parts of the theme – a lilting pixielike melody and a hard-driving 4/4 swing – converge and alternate.
- The final movement is dedicated to Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, the dynamic young leader of the Shambhala branch of Tibetan Buddhism. Upbeat and playful, it is intended to appeal to the Sakyong’s sense of humor and is called the ***Sakyong Samba***.

My thanks to Arts Alive for giving me the impetus to write this suite.

– Ron Holleman
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