

# BLACK FIRE

*after Paradise Lost*

## COMPOSER'S NOTE

'**Black Fire**' was written for Gerald Loren Welker, Peter Sheppard Skærved and the Alabama Wind Ensemble. The first performance was given in the Moody Hall of the School of Music at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, USA on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2006.

This is not a straightforward concerto, but rather a symphonic drama for violin and ensemble. It uses the soloist as both protagonist and ensemble player, much as Berlioz treated the viola in his symphony 'Harold in Italy'.

The title '**Black Fire**' comes from Book II of John Milton's epic poem 'Paradise Lost' written in 1667.

*'Black fire and horror shot with equal rage' (BkII.67)*

Books I & II of 'Paradise Lost' provide the framework for '**Black Fire**'. Milton's 'Paradise Lost' is an imaginary prequel to the Old Testament where the first two books begin with Satan's expulsion from Heaven, and his subsequent creation of Hell. Saturn begins to plot with the other fallen angels to capture Heaven and overthrow God. However, his peers decide this course of action is too precarious, having already tasted defeat when they were expelled from heaven. It is decided that Satan will travel alone to Paradise, with the mission of spoiling God's newest creation, 'Mankind' in the shape of Adam and Eve.

'**Black Fire**' is written in one movement though it has three clear sections (slow, fast and slow). The music reflects the various shades of darkness and suffering that dominate the atmosphere of the early part of the poem. The violinist takes the role of Satan, reflecting his moods, from righteous indignation to sorrowful remorse. I have taken a motif from Wagner's opera 'Götterdämmerung' (Twilight of the Gods) which I have used throughout the work to represent Satan's brooding hatred. At the end of the work you find Satan in the form of the solo violin heroically travelling towards Paradise to corrupt 'Mankind'.

'**Black Fire**' starts with Satan and his cohorts, cast down from heaven, contemplating their apparently hopeless predicament:

*'No light, but rather darkness visible  
Serv'd only to discover sights of woe,  
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
That comes to all; but torture without end....' (BkI. 63 – 67)*

Milton was blind when he wrote this epic; his poetic vision is often expressed through music and sound. For example:

*'Of Trumpets loud and Clarions be uprear'd' (BkI. 533)*  
*'Sonorous metal blowing Martial sounds:' (BkI. 540)*  
*'Against the Highest, and fierce with graspèd arms  
Clash'd on their sounding shields the din of war,' (BkI. 667 – 668)*

Milton's description of Satan's creation of hell (*Pandemonium*) is surprisingly, not defiant, but a gently evocative, musical gesture.

*'As in an Organ from one blast of wind  
To many a row of Pipes the sound-board breathes.  
Anon out of the earth a Fabric huge  
Rose like an Exhalation, with the sound  
Of Dulcet Symphonies and voices sweet,' (BkI. 708 – 712)*

Peter Sheppard Skærved was an indispensable collaborator in helping me edit the violin part as well as giving me constant encouragement with this commission.

**NIGEL CLARKE** began his musical career as a trumpeter but a developing interest in composition, stimulated by the New Polish School of composers, took him to the Royal Academy of Music to study with Paul Patterson. Here his striking originality and capacity for hard work were recognised by several significant awards including the Josiah Parker Prize adjudicated by Sir Michael Tippett and the Queen's Commendation for Excellence – the Royal Academy of Music's highest distinction. A British Council Scholarship enabled him to participate in the 8<sup>th</sup> Summer School for Young Composers in Poland, where he studied the works of Penderecki and Lutoslawski. Nigel Clarke was previously Head of Composition at the London College of Music and Media and is currently a guest professor at the Xinjiang Arts Institute in north-west China and Associate Composer to the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall. In recent years Nigel has co-written the soundtracks to a number of major feature films.