

Program Notes for The Fable of Old Turtle

Old Turtle, written by Douglas Wood with watercolors by Cheng-Khee Chee, published in 1992, is a fable. It begins long ago with different animals and elements of nature arguing that God is like themselves. Old Turtle interrupts the argument and helps them all to realize that the essence of God is greater than their own personal characteristics. She foretells the arrival of human beings in the world: “they will come in many colors and shapes, with different faces and different ways of speaking.” The people come and soon begin to argue about God. They kill each other and harm the earth. Finally, the mountain, the ocean, stone, breeze and star, who argued earlier, speak to the people. Echoing Old Turtle’s words, they cause the people to understand their relationship to each other and to all of nature. The book powerfully teaches peace, tolerance, and stewardship of the earth.

The musical setting “The Fable of Old Turtle” by composer Linda Tutas Haugen portrays the drama found in the book. It begins by depicting each animal or element of the earth with its own musical theme or motive. After each of these creatures gives its own statement of who or what they think God is, they begin to argue. The music reflects this with increasing dissonance and tension. This is interrupted by the solo cello, representing “Old Turtle” who insists they stop. The cello continues with cadenza-like material interspersed with instrumental accompaniment. During this section previous musical themes and motives are re-introduced as “Old Turtle” describes the arrival of people in the world. The Native American flute begins with a Hidatsa friendship song, echoed in duet with solo cello. This song develops into a joyful, gigue-like dance.

As the people forget about who they are and begin to argue, kill and hurt the earth, the music continues to grow in intensity reaching a climax of destruction and death. But it is the creatures of the earth who plead for the people to stop. They echo musical ideas previously stated by “Old Turtle” and the people listen. The final coda section represents the hope and understanding the people eventually realize between each other and the earth. The composition closes with a prayerful improvised Native American flute

solo, reflecting calm and peace.