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# Proteus Variations

or

## Proteus' floriferous tempers

*A musical representation of South Africa's manifold PROTEACEAE*

for symphony orchestra

(2006)

*(commissioned by Deutsche Welle Radio for the South African National Youth Orchestra, 2006)*

- Dedicated to the Betty's Bay Hack Group -

According to Greek mythology *Proteus* is a sea god, an immortal seer living on the island Pharos, off the Egyptian coast, where he herds Poseidon's seals. He has the faculty to prophesy but – in order to avoid being questioned – would assume all sorts of different shapes and appearances to hide from those wishing to consult him.

From this latter custom the adjective protean derives its meaning of variable, changeable, inconsistent, mercurial, volatile. And it was with this association in mind that the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus found a name for some very unusual plant specimens sent to him from the Cape in the 18th century. Linnaeus (1707–1778), who is regarded as the founder of the modern systematic botany and zoology, as he devised an authoritative taxonomy, was intrigued by this newly discovered plant family, whose individual species would assume such vastly differing forms to the point of concealing their underlying relationship that he called them PROTEACEAE.

In Africa most *Proteas*, as they are generally called, occur within the Cape floristic region, where some 350 species contribute significantly to the strikingly beautiful appearance of the Fynbos vegetation. However, PROTEACEAE are even far more widespread and occur throughout the Southern hemisphere with no less than 1600 different species. The Proteus Variations - composed amidst the Cape's flowering manifestations of the ancient prophet's

mischievousness - were once again inspired by the extreme diversity of forms and shapes found within the PROTEACEAE. This set of 8 orchestral variations, each named after one of the families endemic to South Africa, are accordingly not built on a single theme (for which one of the species would be the most important to set the norm?) but rather refer to a number of recurring motifs and musical traits, which are reassembled in ever different ways. Thus the principle to vary and change becomes the objective or theme itself.

The music reflects what I have seen in the *Proteas*: their essential identity or structure cannot be pinned down or summarized in any single manifestation. Only an understanding of the complexity and the entirety of their manifold appearances will eventually lead to an appreciation of their style and the great contribution they make to the diversity and beauty of the Cape's vegetation.

It is worth noticing that the Protea is South Africa's 'national flower'. What could be more appropriate in providing a key to an apposite perception and understanding of the country's diverse cultural expressions? In this regard it is my hope that the Proteus Variations may contribute a little to the wide scope of cultural responses necessary to begin to do justice to the extremely rich tapestry of our immediate cultural and natural surroundings.