

Hans Huysen

Proteus Variations

or

Proteus' floriferous tempers

A musical representation of South Africa's manifold PROTEACEAE
for symphony orchestra

(commissioned by *Deutsche Welle* Radio for the South African National Youth Orchestra, 2006
and dedicated to the Betty's Bay Hack Group)

According to Greek mythology *Proteus* is a demigod and with the faculty of prophecy. However, tired of constantly being beleaguered by mortals concerned with questions on their future he sports assuming all sorts of different shapes and appearances to hide and escape from the many wishing to consult him.

From this habit the adjective *protean* derives its meaning of *variable, inconsistent, mercurial, volatile, whimsical, capricious*. These kinds of associations apparently struck the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus when he was studying 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 the newly discovered plant family, whose various species would assume such vastly differing forms to the point of concealing their underlying relatedness that he named them PROTEACEAE.

In Africa, most *Proteas*, as they are generally referred to, occur within the Cape Floristic Region, where some 350 species contribute significantly to the strikingly beautiful and characteristic 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 worldwide.

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. They consist of eight variations, each named after one of the *Protea* families endemic to South Africa respectively, and accordingly reflect (depict, illustrate, interpret) certain key features of their family traits. Many instances of circling or spiralling patterns may be perceived, as well as a wide array of different colours; similarly the forms vary from the minute to the elongated, the textures from the filigreed to the sweepingly expressive. Even the fact that some species feature individual male and female plants (AULAX is such a dioecious plant) finds its analogy in the juxtaposition of two opposite themes and moreover momentarily evokes an instance of 'call and response' between the two. But most importantly the *Proteas* inspired a novel approach to the classical form of Theme and Variation: In this case there is no (single) theme – for which one of the species should be the most important to define the norm? There are only variations. In that they all share certain similarities they gradually contribute to a connecting idea or some form of essential expression. Yet this cannot be distilled or pinned down, but will only emerge from the interaction of the varied emanations. The principle to vary and change becomes the objective. The variation itself is the theme.

The music reflects what I have seen in the *Proteas*: their essential identity or structure cannot be summarized in a single manifestation. Only an appreciation of the complexity and the entirety of their manifold appearances will eventually lead to a deeper understanding of their style and manner of expression – with which they contribute significantly to the rich local biodiversity apart from adorning the Cape's mountain slopes.

It is worth noticing that the *King Protea* (*Protea cynaroides*) is South Africa's 'national flower'. Its sheer splendour and impressive size may have been sufficient reason to choose it as a symbol for an aspiring country. However, the symbolism goes much deeper if one perceives the specific flower as member of a botanical family boasting an unparalleled range of diversity. What could more appositely and poetically refer to the country's diverse cultural fabric?

With its subtle but frequent references to musical devices from indigenous African traditions, the *Proteus Variations* naturally embrace the local musical diversity as well – advocating an interpretation of the national symbol in its widest sense. It is my wish that a composition such as this may contribute to a body of work, which – while remaining in a 'classical' sphere – deliberately and immediately engages with what is close at hand, once again linking locution to location, history and nature, and establish a certain resonance with its environment in a responsive and responsible manner.

Hans Huysen