Notes on the Program

Kanashibari

Hannah Kendall

Anyone who has experienced difficulties with sleep over the past couple of years (and, quite frankly, who hasn’t?), may relate to the inspiration behind Hannah Kendall’s Kanashibari. The title refers to the Japanese term for sleep paralysis, a state between dreaming and wakefulness in which individuals can be aware of sounds and their surroundings while being unable to move or speak in response — they may even be gripped by terrifying hallucinations or physical sensations. In cultures around the world, sleep paralysis has long been attributed to demonic possession or encounters with supernatural beings; in more contemporary contexts, it has fueled many a horror-film scenario.

Kendall’s single-movement dreamscape traces the arc of a kanashibari episode. A lulling flute introduction is followed by increasingly anxious strings and winds, intruded upon by insistent bursts of trumpet. (Kanashibari translates as “bound up in metal.”) Kendall has written of her “musical cells that run away from each other, but eventually snap back together at the end.” The dreamer is back to full consciousness.

Kanashibari is among the earlier orchestral works by this London native who resides in New York City as she pursues doctoral studies at Columbia University. Born to immigrants from Guyana, she was surrounded by music from an early age. Her grandfather, a jazz saxophonist, encouraged family members to play instruments, and one of Kendall’s earliest memories is being signed up for violin lessons at age four, before she even knew what that meant. As a child she immersed herself in classical studies, spending Saturdays happily poring over Bach and Beethoven scores at the library and attending the BBC Proms; then in her teens she detoured to grittier sounds of the London club scene. She studied music and vocal performance at the University of Exeter, where she began exploring composition seriously and melding all those musical influences into her work. Pragmatically, she also studied arts management at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. “I’m a millennial composer. I have to make money to survive!” she has said.

Kendall’s larger works have drawn upon social/political issues and her own cultural heritage. Her 2016 chamber opera, The Knife of Dawn, revolves around the 1953 incarceration of the Guyanese poet and political activist Martin Carter for speaking out against the abuses of foreign rule in his country, then known as British Guiana. Her 2017 orchestral work, The Spark Catchers, was inspired by a Lemm Sissay poem of the same name that focuses on a strike by women working in a 19th-century match factory. It was premiered at the BBC Proms by Chineke!, an orchestra comprised primarily of Black and

In Short

Born: May 17, 1984, in London, United Kingdom
Resides: New York City
Work composed: 2013
World premiere: September 26, 2013, in London, by Southbank Sinfonia, Duncan Ward, conductor
New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which also mark the work’s New York Premiere
Estimated duration: ca. 7 minutes
ethnic-minority musicians. *Disillusioned Dreamer*, premiered by the Berkeley Symphony in 2019, takes its title from a line in Ralph Ellison’s novel *The Invisible Man*.

More-recent premieres include *Where is the chariot of fire?*, in January 2021 by the Hallé Orchestra; *Tuxedo: Vasco “de” Gama*, on First Night of the Proms in 2020; and *Tuxedo: Crown; Sun King*, by the London Sinfonietta this past June. The *Tuxedo* titles are part of a series inspired by the work of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. With an eye toward references in Basquiat’s paintings to multiculturalism and the African diaspora, *Tuxedo: Vasco “de” Gama* incorporates a music box rendition of the spiritual *Wade in the Water*.

A questioning of historical perspectives and social contracts, expressed through an upending of traditional musical constructs (whether atypical instrumentation or unanticipated dynamic shifts) is threaded through Kendall’s compositions. Some of those elements can be found in *Kanashibari*, in which the composer sets out to explore the dichotomy of sleep — benign, peaceful, and calming, but also filled with mental anguish and potential terror. This earlier selection from her catalogue may have something to say to us today, when so many people have reported experiencing strange and disorienting pandemic dreams. The US Premiere of *Kanashibari* was only recently performed, in March 2021 by the Seattle Symphony; this is its first performance in New York.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), two horns, two trumpets, vibraphone, xylophone, cabassa, claves, whip, and strings.

— Rebecca Winzenried, an arts writer, former program editor for the New York Philharmonic, and former editor in chief of Symphony Magazine

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**In the Composer’s Words**

Sleep paralysis is an incredibly fascinating phenomenon when one temporarily experiences an inability to move when either falling asleep or awakening. This happens when the sleep cycles become out-of-sync with each other and the brain essentially awakes before the body. It is often associated with very real-like visions and hallucinations, such as an intruder in the room or clothes on the floor coming to life, to which one is unable to react due to paralysis. I have been wanting to base a piece on sleep for a while, as it is something to which we can all relate, affecting our everyday lives for the positive or negative whether or not we are aware of it. I found it interesting that most automatically associate sleep with being calm and restful, when in fact it is often a disturbed experience for many of us. Sleep paralysis most certainly is not a restful experience, usually occurring during periods of intense stress.

The piece depicts an episode of sleep paralysis. The music is mostly energetic to illustrate the extremely heightened experience. In contrast, the opening is still and soothing as though one is falling asleep. It gradually becomes more frenetic to illustrate the sleep cycles becoming out-of-sync. The middle-most section portrays hallucinatory visions of simple everyday items around the bedroom coming to life, creating a curious fantasy dream world, which comes to a sudden halt as the cycles eventually snap back together before waking.

— Hannah Kendall, 2013