

Clarinet Concerto
Adrift on the Wine-Dark Sea (2018)
by Kareem Roustom (b. 1971)

Program Notes:

This work is inspired by two books that were written almost 2,700 years apart but tell a similar tale. Homer's *The Odyssey* and *A Hope More Powerful Than The Sea* by Melissa Fleming, who is the Chief of Communications at the UNHCR. The respective protagonists in each book, Odysseus and Syrian refugee Doaa Al-Zamel, both embark on a perilous journey at sea in an attempt to reach home and a place of refuge. In both cases the consequences of the journey across the Mediterranean are brutal and deadly. In both instances their ships are sunk and Odysseus and Ms. Al-Zamel are stranded at sea for several horrific days awaiting rescue. The story of their survival is almost unbelievable. Reading Homer's epic poem, one can imagine Odysseus, the cunning hero of the Trojan war, surviving for days at sea without food and water while clinging onto bits of wreckage from his ship. But to read the story of Ms. Al-Zamel, a petite ninety pound woman who could not swim but survived at sea for four days with nothing but a children's swimming pool inner tube while holding on to two infants and keeping them alive, is almost beyond belief. Perhaps we need mythology to help us to understand and process exceptionally difficult life circumstances such as those experienced by Ms. Al-Zamel and by thousands of refugees who have made this same journey.

This concerto is a meditation on these two stories. The clarinet plays the role of Odysseus/refugee and the orchestra the role of the sea and all the hurdles that stand in the way of home/refuge. The work begins with Odysseus/refugee confronting the sea from the shore departure. There is a struggle to simply get on a vessel and make it out to sea. This is followed by the sea journey itself, which is unstable and tense. Eventually the sea rages and the ship sinks. Odysseus/refugee are adrift on the sea, which has become an even darker and more dangerous place. While the general trajectory of the work up to this point, the trajectory of the finale is upwards. After much struggle there is an arrival to the 'other shore' where a sense of calm eventually pervades. However, this 'other shore' is not clearly defined. It could be a peaceful place of refuge or it could be an afterlife. It is up to the imagination of the listener to decide the fate of Odysseus/refugee. If I am attempting to make a point with this work it is this; just as it requires the exercise of imagination to decide the fate of Odysseus/refugee in this work, it also requires imagination to craft just and humane policies that deal with the refugee crisis that is upon the world at this time. After all, it is imagination that holds the keys to both despair and hope.

Kareem Roustom • July 2017
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