

## PROGRAM NOTE

“In creating the film score to accompany Niobe Thompson’s acclaimed documentary series *The Great Human Odyssey*, Darren Fung truly came home. He came home, firstly, to Edmonton, where, almost 20 years ago, he got a major opportunity as a budding composer, thanks to the innovative Young Composers Project, an initiative launched by then ESO Composer in Residence John Estacio, which gave a promising high school composer a chance to create a work for orchestra. Now based in Los Angeles, Fung was thrilled that he came home to record his score with Edmonton musicians. “Being able to come home – it was a brilliant homecoming, because it was great to work with a lot of the same people who were in that orchestra 20 years ago who performed my Young Composers Project – I hope my writing has improved a little since then,” he added with a laugh to *Signature* magazine. “But also, just to be able to just share it with people from your home community – I think that was really a lot of fun.”

He came home, also, because Dr. Thompson’s documentary film company, Clearwater Documentary, is based in Edmonton, and it was the music for another film that introduced Dr. Thompson to Darren Fung’s oeuvre. “Niobe was incredibly collaborative in the sense that he would say, ‘I’m not sure that I agree with that,’ and I’ll try to argue my way through and he’d say, ‘OK, you win that one,’ Fung notes. “Other times, he’d just say, ‘No way, this doesn’t work for me,’ you know? So it was collaborative, but it was a very enjoyable process with Niobe. Being collaborative doesn’t mean having low standards – it means you know what you want, but you’re open to different ideas of how something works.”

Dr. Thompson will introduce his film tonight, and Darren Fung will conduct, as he did for the soundtrack of the series. Musicians from the Edmonton Symphony, as well as choir Pro Coro Canada were part of that original recording. “This was my first time writing for choir in a studio setting,” Darren confesses, “and so experimenting with that, you realize my God, that stuff that they teach you, that four-part harmony stuff is all very theoretical, but does that really work in practice? We were changing a lot of the women’s parts because I had written them quite low, and then we were literally changing them on the fly, as we go along.”

Scoring the documentary was also a bit like coming home for Fung, as he is very much at home writing music for the idiom. His IMDb website entry lists 62 projects – a very impressive number for the young artist – and many of them are documentaries. “When you’re writing a film score, you have to understand that you’re a gun for hire, right?” he explains. “You don’t get to write just what you want to write. So on one hand, you could think of it as a little bit restrictive in the sense that you’re always at the service of the director. On the other hand, that’s what a film score is – you’re always serving the picture and the greater need. So it’s not a matter of writing what you think look nice with the picture; you have to think about story arc and emotion. So we’d have a spotting session, where I sit next to Niobe and then we go through the film and check out what music belongs where, and he gives me notes and I ask him questions, like ‘Whose music is it? Is it this character’s music, is it the audience’s music, what should we be feeling here?’ So I don’t really see it as a restriction, but more as a collaborative process. It’s not the same thing as writing a concert piece where you have a blank palette.”

It’s rare, Darren Fung says, that a documentary like this will be scored for full orchestra and choir, and he was thrilled that his music could match the scope of Niobe Thompson’s vision. “About a year into Niobe’s shooting,” Fung recalls, “he had just come back from Siberia, and showed me some of the re-creation. There were these shots of this Inuit man who was basically jumping over ice floes – it was this dolly shot, and the background is just magnificent. And I go, ‘Holy s\*\*t! How the h\*\*l did he shoot that?’ It was stunning, but more than anything, that’s sort of when I understood the enormity of the project – I understood this really needs an orchestral and choral score, because it’s so big and so magnificent. That’s something that really only an orchestra and choir can really deliver on the grandeur and the epic-ness of the project.”