

On the 8th of April 2006 at the Luckman Fine Arts Complex in Los Angeles the Luckman Jazz Orchestra world-premiered my new hour-long suite dedicated to Elizabeth Catlett.

Composer's Notes: Suite for Elizabeth Catlett by James Newton

This is the second suite that I have written inspired by a great visual artist. The first was a suite for Frida Kahlo, composed in 1991 and recorded in 1994. The great artist Elizabeth Catlett inspires this suite.

Why Elizabeth Catlett? As an artist, she creates works that transcend many boundaries and evidence a great understanding of the cultural essences of groups of people. Long before multiculturalism was in vogue, her works displayed a highly fluent integration of African-American, Mexican, West and Central African, and European aesthetics. In her work there is phenomenal technique and abundance of intellectual prowess, all at the service of a most soulful language. Ms. Catlett's genius has achieved a rare balance of the highest artistic levels and accessibility to the general public without compromise.

While composing this suite, I have thought hard about a six-year cycle that began with a trip to Niger in 2000. Subsequent concerts in Brazil and Cuba compelled me to re-examine the music of the African Diaspora and many of its connections. During these six years I have stepped back from extreme musical complexity and reordered my music completely. In examining Ms. Catlett's work for this suite I found that her art is a perfect analog for this journey because it encompasses the connections of the African Diaspora in a very fluid and refined manner. In my next compositions I will be returning to the complexity, but with what I have learned from this six-year rediscovery of the roots of the music. I know that Ms. Catlett's images will continue to burn deeply in my soul as I humbly move forward.

Viewing her famous linocut Sharecropper, one can observe the legacy of the dignity, nobility, power, and humility of African-American women of rural America. I am flooded with memories of my maternal grandmother and other relatives who lived their lives as sharecroppers and shared these same qualities. Sharecropper is arguably the most famous visual art image of an African-American woman. In translating this image to music I leaned upon the legacy of Negro spirituals and an updating of Louis Armstrong's revolutionary transferal of the feeling of spirituals into a Blues environment. The spiritual Only Through Prayer is new, but the feeling goes back to the original 1952 image of the Sharecropper.

The Portrait of Elizabeth is a musical portrait of a woman who has taught us much about the unique qualities of Black womanhood. Inspiration for this

movement came from her sculptures, photographs of her which display her tenderness and strength, and stories about her taking no "mess" from anyone.

Harriet is inspired by Ms. Catlett's 1970 image of Harriet Tubman. The narrative in this movement comes from the book of Isaiah 40:4-5: "...Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth: and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." Other parts of this movement are focused on a woman called Moses and the dangers of the Underground Railroad. Writing this movement, I constantly looked at Ms. Catlett's gripping linocut of Harriet absolutely in command, holding a gun while leading slaves to freedom.

Blues to Elizabeth Catlett touches upon the Blues' presence in Ms. Catlett's aesthetic. The Blues is present in her lithograph of Blues Player and also in the looks on the faces of a number of her works, particularly in the I am the Negro Woman series created in the late 1940s.

Liz y Pancho (Canción de Amor) is a musical portrait of Elizabeth Catlett and her late husband, artist Francisco Mora, falling in love in Mexico City. There are elements of Mexican music blended with the jazz tradition. In this work I looked to Charles Mingus' Tijuana Moods and different collaborations of Miles Davis and Gil Evans. During the same period, Ms. Catlett was dealing with Jim Crow and the political persecution of McCarthyism, and she was not welcomed in her native country for a number of years. This emotional polarity is represented by a modern fast-tempo piece entitled Black List ed. These two works are coupled to represent the positive things that Mexico gave Ms. Catlett and the intense pain of being rejected by her own country.

Elizabeth Catlett has for many years been one of my greatest heroes. This humble offering to her genius comes from the bottom of my heart. I would like to thank my friend Lanny Hartley for his brilliant arranging skills.