

## **The Declaration of Human Rights**

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". This sentence is the opening statement of the universal declaration of human rights that was adopted by the United Nations in 1948 and was drafted, in part, by Canadian John Peters Humphrey. In 1990 I was given a commission to write a piece of music celebrating a new monument to the declaration and to Mr. Humphrey's contribution. It was to be unveiled in Ottawa on Elgin Street by the Dalai Lama in late September. The monument was designed by Montreal sculptor Melvin Charney. For many reasons this was a gig that had a special resonance and one I will remember forever.

I decided that because this was a universal declaration, it would be interesting to record this simple, yet impeccable statement in as many different voices and as many different languages as I could. My thought was to make a verbal sound collage of voices, all stating the declaration, set against a musical backdrop. Over the next few weeks, I collected close to sixty people stating the declaration in over forty-five different languages. As I recorded their voices in ethnic restaurants, embassies and immigration services, I was struck by how seriously many people took this statement, particularly from the Developing World: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." I discovered that what I sort of took for granted was for many an important and ongoing struggle. Because of their serious intent I decided to also have the statement, in complete innocence, "out of the mouths of babes" or, as a hope for the future. I recorded a local group of kids in a day care calling out the same declaration. The whole project was a great deal of fun and full of surprises.

When I got to the studio, we started creating the sound collage, layering the many voices and languages in a way

that made textural sense. As we built up the collage, my engineer Marty Jones and I noticed something that is hard to describe to this day. As each voice was placed in the collage, making the same statement, there developed a profound feeling of "rightness" about this project – it was as if it contained within it some spiritual veracity, each voice added was another "Yes" – an affirmation of the project itself. Sometimes you get this feeling when the right mix emerges. Marty and I couldn't believe how it was coming together – as if it were a puzzle waiting to be completed. It was as though our constructed House of Babel was actually making sense on another level. "You were only waiting for this moment to arrive."

Towards the end of the layering I realized I had no Canadian First Nations in the collage and this was more striking because the Oka Crisis had just erupted. I was talking about this with a friend in the studio, when he mentioned that he had a friend who was the chief of the Kanestake First Nation. We phoned and caught this Mohawk man literally under siege. We asked if he would record the declaration in Mohawk. He read the declaration over the phone as the tanks were rumbling down the golf course at Oka.

In some Zen correctness of things, I was not able to attend as our recorded musical collage resonated off the buildings on Elgin Street. The Dalai Lama unveiled the monument on September 30, 1990, but I was there when Nelson Mandela came to celebrate the monument in 1998.

This time the organizers asked me if I could do the original piece live. I thought I could – I would play the music against the prerecorded voices and then I had the idea that I could have the nearby Elgin Street Public School kids yell out the declaration at the place in the recording where the day care kids had done it before. I made arrangements with the school, 100 kids memorized their line, we jiggled the collage around a bit and we were ready. This project already had some weight for me but as I listened to Nelson Mandela speak before we took to the stage, the depth of this

declaration hit home again. On cue I began the piece with my musicians, with Marty Jones cuing the collage. We got through it and then at the end, the kids from Elgin Street School made their declaration with conviction and enthusiasm.