

Wayne Siegel

Burning River

for 4 channel tape surround sound (14')
1999

Available on CD from DaCapo Records

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The composition Burning River was inspired by a particular section in Book 21 of The Iliad by Homer. In this section, Achilles runs amok against the Trojans. He chases them to the river, Scamander, and forces them into the water, where he continues his merciless slaughter. The river is soon blocked by the many corpses and Scamander pleads with Achilles to end the bloodshed. Achilles refuses to cease straightaway and Scamander is shocked by Achilles' arrogance. The river responds by overflowing its own banks and creating a veritable deluge. Finally the Gods intervene and Hephaestus sends a huge fire across the plain to stop the flooding.

I was attracted to this section of the Iliad because of the many references to sounds. In addition to the battle, there are references to the sounds of the river, the flood, the great fire and the transition between and blending of these contrasting elements. Some quotations from Book 21 of the Iliad are also included in the composition recited by Professor Otto Steen Due in the original language, Ancient Greek. Often the voice is transformed into something unrecognizable, but at times the voice is brought into focus and heard clearly. Burning River begins and ends with a quote from the Iliad, which roughly translated reads:

"As when the smoke rises up towards the broad arch of heaven
Over a burning town, and is sent by the rath of the Gods
Suffering it brings to all, and to many it brings death;
Such were the torments and sorrows Achilles brought to the Trojans."

Burning River was commissioned by the New Carlsberg Glyptotek Museum with financial support from the Danish Arts Foundation and produced at DIEM in Aarhus, Denmark. The composition was premiered along with works by five other Danish composers at the Glyptotek Museum in Copenhagen in the Autumn of 1999 in connection with a complete reading of The Iliad in a new Danish edition translated by Professor Otto Steen Due.