

*Written for and Premiered by the Hartt Symphony Orchestra,
Christopher Zimmerman, conductor*

I usually don't have trouble with titles, they often emerge before a piece's composition even begins. But in this case I found myself struggling. From early on, I felt my Fourth Symphony would be subtitled "Storming Heaven", but the more I thought on it, the more I disliked the violent, hubristic quality of that phrase. There's been too much arrogance around for the past decade. This work is very much about ascension, a process of growth and evolution, a sense of striving for higher things. It didn't help that Terry Riley had already taken the next obvious, perfect title, "The Heaven Ladder". So eventually, spurred on in particular by a reading of Dante's Paradiso, with its imagery of levels of a celestial kingdom, taken a step at time by the pilgrim, I settled on "The Ladder". The work is a quest, a steady climb on a Path. It's both an reflective investigation of an "inner order", and an extroverted glance upward.

The roots of the work are found in an open-improvisation work written in 2005, Changing My Spots. This piece defines a series of harmonic regions based on overtone-derived registration of the twelve chromatic pitches. There are six regions, the fundamental of each fitting into the initial six overtones of a series based on a low A. This same harmonic matrix is at work in this symphony. I actually think of it as a fixed realization of an improvisatory structure, and it amuses me that something so slight might have ultimately been necessary to create a much more ambitious structure.

The work is in a single movement, about 22 minutes long. But it falls into five movements played without pause:

- 1. Towards an Inner Order*
- 2. First Approach (Scherzo 1)*
- 3. The Still Point of Compassion*
- 4. Second Approach (Scherzo 2)*
- 5. At the Gate*

These five follow a symmetric structure of Moderate-Fast-Slow-Fast-Moderate. Their durations contract, however, from one to the next. The first is over 1/3 the length of the entire work. So there is a feeling of a spiral, of the music becoming ever more concentrated as it approaches its goal, which of course, can never be totally achieved.

While all this may sound a little abstract, that's only because—unlike my previous three symphonies—this one is not a series of tone poems, with specific literary/dramatic/political antecedents. It's a quest, that can only be expressed in music. I hope the a quality of intense yearning and searching informs its every moment, and that in the end a listener leaves the piece with a renewed sense of mystery.

---Robert Carl