



12th-Century cathedral: Tarragona in Spain

Interview by Kambriel

Born within the ancient walled quarter of Tarragona, Spain, Carmen Willcox's earliest memories conjure images of the town's 12th-century gothic cathedral, filled with the mysterious chantings of its darkly-robed inhabitants, spectral shadows strewn by myriads of flickering candles, and the ancient, incensed air pervading the vast spaces. Living today in "Paradise", her farm in the countryside of England, she awakens her inner voices in the form of sensual poetry, uncovering the spirits of Romance, Passion, Magic, and Desire.

"How can the language of Dreams, the Whispers of Angels, translate into mortal words? How can the grace and magic of the ever changing Moon, the hushed, rising morning mists, the incensed dusk and the silent, still light of the opiate dawn be whispered of by mortal tongues? But then I surrender, and from somewhere, the words emerge."

--Carmen Willcox

SENTIMENTALIST: *Years ago, you moved from greater London to a more serene East Coast setting, what is it you find so enchanting about the English countryside?*

CARMEN: I think the most spectacular sensation that struck me about this part of England was its sunsets, which were immortalized by the painter **Constable**. Constable captured so many iridescent, unimaginable and exquisite sunsets, but even better than that, I think what really captivates me is the darkness of the nights. In the city, of course, there's always some kind of illumination, and one can never see the stars, but in this part of the world the skies are clear and black. And when the stars punctuate and pierce that blackness, it is sheer magic. On full moon nights, I love to look out from my window and see the moon reflected in the pond, and all the roses in the trees, and the grass silvered by her light.

SENTIMENTALIST: *As one who is very tuned into the nuances of the cycles of the season, what is your favourite time of year, and what do you most appreciate about it?*

CARMEN: Well, it has to be autumn and second, spring. Particularly around my birthday, which is the first of May, when the spring is at its most beautiful. It's just irresistible, everything about the colour of the light, the balmy air, the songs of the birds--it's just stunning. Autumn, which is my favourite of all...because there are mists which are so enchanting and there's always some smell of wood smoke from

people's fires, as the weather begins to turn cold. It really is a mystical time of year, and everything seems so hushed...Walking through the meadows, one can imagine seeing things that are not really there, ghostly, fleeting images--Very often, just the swift and fleeting sight of an owl skimming low and coming towards you, just swooping and soaring away--his eyes, so intently gazing. Walking in that silence is beautifully eerie.

SENTIMENTALIST: *How would you say living in a 16th-century farmhouse affects your work?*

CARMEN: Well, it's the best thing that could have happened to me in my work because it's when everything began for me in terms of writing. I had always had these feelings, sensations, but actually being, living and sleeping in such an ancient place I think really helped them to emerge. It's indescribable, really, to wander through a house and to think that all that it is made of is natural materials. The oak of which the house is constructed must be certainly over a thousand years old when one considers the house is 16th century...you have over a thousand years that is just surrounding and totally enveloping you. To think of all the generations that have been present in the house, and presences that from time to time seem to linger. What I've found particularly interesting was that I discovered some documents and papers going back to that time, and some of them were extracts of Last Will and Testaments of people. It was so interesting to see their names written and to read the words of all that they had bequeathed, and how their lives must have been. In a house like this, you just can not help but be inspired! I take particular care not to modernize the house, so that in any given room there is very little evidence of 20th century life.

SENTIMENTALIST: *Can you share some of your most beloved childhood memories with us?*

CARMEN: I find it difficult to remember much of my childhood, and that is a pity. I wish more memories would come, but for some reason they elude me. Perhaps this is because at the age of 9, I came to England, and I suppose the effort of having to introduce myself and having to understand a new place, culture and language took so much of my attention that the rest of my past was erased. It is extremely sad and I only have very few good memories that still remain. One that is always there and is very, very strong is that of living in the ancient city of Tarragona in Spain, which in Roman times was the capital. I lived within the old part of the city--that is to say within the walls of the city. Just opposite where I lived, a few yards away, was a magnificent cathedral built in the 12th century. Twelfth century--that was amazing to me! I used to pass that back and forth each day from school and to go inside it was just a magnificent experience. It captivated me totally: the incense, the darkness, the chanting, the organ, the candles' glow, the saints, the tapestries, the sculptures, the relics, one could go on and on. That is a very, very vivid memory and one I really treasure as it's very valuable in connecting me with the past when I write.

SENTIMENTALIST: *When did you write your first poem?*

CARMEN: When actually I put pen to paper to record a poem, I must have been about twelve. I'd been in England about two years by that time, and I realized before I was going to sleep that this poem was coming to my mind. I didn't have pen and paper, and I didn't

turn on the light, but kept composing this poem in my head. When I awoke the next day, I remembered it perfectly line by line and wrote it down. I was stunned because I realized that I had learned English!

SENTIMENTALIST: *Many of your poems seem to emanate as voices from those who have passed into death, but are still held in a contemplative reflection of the destinies they left behind. What would your ideal afterlife be like?*

CARMEN: My ideal afterlife would be quite similar to that life which I can sense in this "backdrop", as I call it...It's almost as though one is living in a parallel universe where part of me is here, but there is another me...also living elsewhere at another time, a completely different life. It would be interesting perhaps on ending this life, to find that really I had another life elsewhere that I was returning to full-time! And I wonder, perhaps that's not impossible?

SENTIMENTALIST: *What is it that truly captivates and inspires you?*

CARMEN: Many things really. As I said, one of the things is being somewhere outdoors, totally on one's own with no human sound around, just whatever one can hear that is naturally occurring. Another one is the total opposite, which would be music, which of course is man-made. I dare say music is one of my greatest nourishments and it is a great assistance at times when I write. I can sometimes just listen to one track and it takes me immediately to a certain place, which needs to be written about, or a certain experience. That can also happen with paintings, but to a lesser degree. I think music is an incredibly emotive vibration and it holds memories very clearly so one can return to the same piece of music after a period of time and experience the same sensation as one did upon first hearing it.

SENTIMENTALIST: *What do you hope the future holds for you?*

CARMEN: Well of course we should all say "Oh, all good things, we all want wonderful, lovely things," but even if life would continue just as it is, I should be perfectly happy because in a sense, how else can you improve the feeling of the moment? Because at the moment, you know you're alive and you have got your own thoughts, your own mind, your own heart, your own feelings--you are a complete person. What else could you wish for? I suppose I would just wish to continue as I am hoping that the poetic muse or poetic demon would never leave me. Yes, that I may continue to be able to write, to please those who read and to please myself. It is very important to me that my work pleases people because when I hear somebody expressing themselves about something they've read of mine, I feel so privileged and so happy and honoured. Therefore, in a sense, I seem to write for my audience. At times, part of a poem or a word will be incorporated because of some person who I have met, and has told me about themselves and their sorrows, their desires. The presence of that person stays with me and they become part or partially one of the characters maybe, and many of those are tragic, but that's the nature of a lot of poetry!

To request a catalogue of Carmen's exquisite books, in addition to spoken word CD recordings featuring her poetry, write to: New World Music: The Barn, Becker Green, Beccles, Suffolk, NR34 8NB England