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Music

CLASSICAL NOTES | DAVID WEININGER

In 'Lamentations,' Peter Child ties biblical texts to current refugee crisis

By David Weininger | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 03, 2018

"Lamentations," a new work for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra by Peter Child, is a piece that resonates in a variety of ways with the history of the Cantata Singers, the group for whom it was written. It was commissioned to celebrate the 35th year of David Hoose's intrepid leadership as the group's music director.

"Lamentations," which will be premiered on Jan. 20, also falls into a line of Cantata Singers works animated by themes of social justice — chief among them the three "Slavery Documents" pieces written between 1990 and 2008. It's a connection that Hoose encouraged when he met with Child in the summer of 2016 to discuss the commission, the composer said during a recent phone interview. And Child, a longtime faculty member at MIT, was himself no stranger to "thinking about music in this kind of humanistic way," as he put it.



JON SACHS

Peter Child

It took some time for Child to choose his focus; eventually, he decided that what engaged him most viscerally was “the crisis we’re living through in terms of migrant people and refugees and undocumented people here in the United States . . . whole peoples being maligned and ignored who are suffering and are constantly stateless.” When he began work on the piece, the refugee crisis in Syria was the foremost international situation on his mind; now, he noted sadly, situations in North Africa and Myanmar can be added to the list.

But Child also knew that however strongly he felt about the issue, he didn’t want to deal with it in too straightforward and literal a way, lest the piece veer away from art and into agitprop. His solution came when he rediscovered “A Poet’s Bible,” a translation of selected portions of the Hebrew Bible by David Rosenberg. Rosenberg’s poetic translations aim to recapture what he hears as the authentic voices of the poets who composed its various books, in an attempt to make them both faithful to the past and capable of speaking to a modern audience.

It was in his rendering of the Book of Lamentations that Child found the ideal texts for his project. Rosenberg’s translation replaces the quiet austerity of other versions with language of astonishing vividness, even violence, in which the legacy of the Holocaust seems to loom like an ever-present shadow.

For Child, “using a text that somehow universalizes the issue, the way biblical texts often do,” allowed the refugee crisis to exist as a reverberation rather than an explicit theme. His approach, he pointed out, was similar to that of John Harbison’s “The Flight Into Egypt,” a 1986 Cantata Singers commission in which a biblical story provided an occasion for reflection on the blight of homelessness. And Hoose noted in an e-mail that “in the newly revealed power of these sacred words, and in Peter’s

powerfully direct setting of them, the ancient becomes new, and the human condition is seen, again, in its unchanging universality.”

Even a brief skim of Rosenberg’s text of Lamentations reveals how eerily close it comes to the disasters that spurred Child’s composition. “All the world turned its eyes away/ I crawled in the desert,” is one couplet. Another, particularly wrenching passage reads: “You had made us garbage/ in the world’s eyes/ human refuse/ reeking in a senseless world.”

“That could almost be a headline for the stories we read every day,” Child said of that quatrain. Indeed, for all that he wanted the text of the piece to allude rather than point directly, the sense of injustice was a constant impetus for his work. When his inspiration flagged or he felt overwhelmed by the scope of the project, “I would just open the newspaper and read another article and want to get back to the piece. It was that direct.”

As for the music itself, much of it has the dissonance and dense chromaticism present in many other of Child’s works. That’s especially the case with the final chorus, a text of almost unmitigated fury in which the protagonist petitions God for revenge against his or her oppressors. Yet there are also episodes of luminous tonal warmth, when the words move from despair to thoughts of redemption. One such passage gently sets a text that reads: “The Lord’s mercy brings a new morning/ each day awakens the thought of him.”

Asked what he wanted an audience to take away from hearing the piece, Child returned to the idea of making his subject matter clear, but not too clear. “I hope that the kind of humanistic significance, the way it speaks to our present conditions, will be both obvious and subtle enough that it will affect people. That people will, probably, feel . . .

reinforced in their feelings and beliefs about the need for compassion and generosity to these unfortunate hordes of people in countries such a large part of the world that we're living in right now.”

CANTATA SINGERS

Music of Bach and Child

At Jordan Hall, Jan. 20, 8 p.m. Tickets \$25-\$75. 617-868-5885,

www.cantatasingers.org

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