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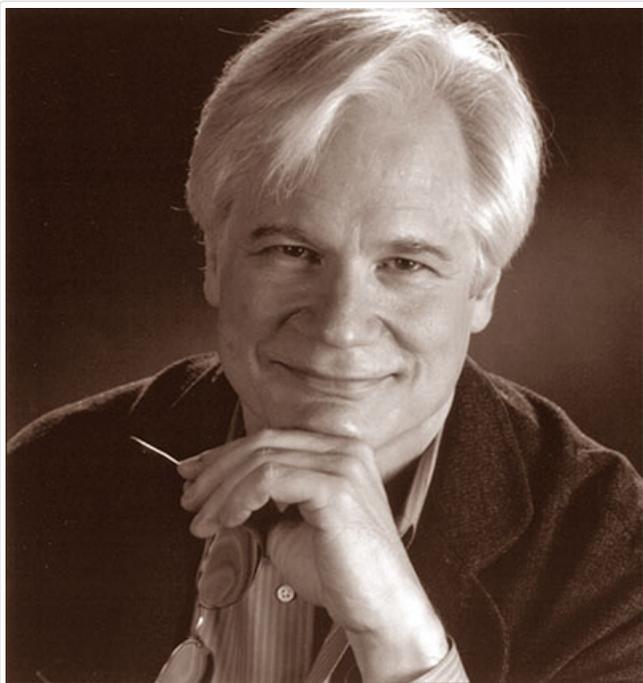
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Lamenting Celebrations or Celebrating Lamentations

by VIRGINIA NEWES



David Hoose

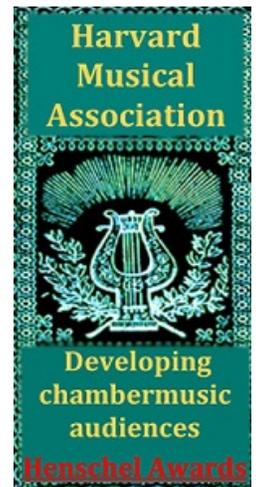
Celebrating his 35th year as conductor and music director of the Cantata Singers, David Hoose juxtaposed two cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach with the newly-commissioned *Lamentations* by composer and MIT professor Peter Child on Saturday at Jordan Hall.

Many of us may be familiar with portions of the *Lamentations* text, which appears in five chapters following the *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* in both the King James Bible and the Latin Vulgate. By the Middle Ages, lamentation chants had become part of the Roman Catholic liturgy for the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday leading up to Easter. Polyphonic settings by Victoria and Lassus, among others, in the 16th century, and by Marc-Antoine Charpentier and François Couperin in the 17th and 18th centuries, make much of the emotionally evocative texts that vividly depict the dispossession and exile of the Jewish people after the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in the 6th century BC. In an engaging pre-concert talk, Peter Child talked about the wider significance of the *Lamentations* texts and his

choice to set selected verses from the 20th-century translation of Chapter 3 by the American poet David Rosenberg. Child's setting is intimately connected to Rosenberg's text, and closely follows its form and expressive spirit. Rosenberg's translation is at once a recreation of the Hebrew original, which Rosenberg reads as embodying the female voice of Zion, and a transmutation into his own voice. It links the horrific events of ancient history to the modern horror of the European Holocaust and the despair and sense of abandonment felt by the people of the Jewish diaspora and of the destroyed Syrian city of Aleppo. To these sufferers Child would add all the abandoned, vilified people of our own time — the homeless and the refugees — in keeping with the Cantata Singers' commitment to new works concerned with social justice. In the Hebrew original, each stanza is headed by a letter of the alphabet in a kind of acrostic, a feature retained in the Vulgate (although not in the King James version) and in both Rosenberg's translation and Child's setting. Child set about a third of Rosenberg's text in ten connected sections.

Lamentations is scored for mezzo-soprano and bass solos, four-part chorus, strings, piano, and percussion. Child successfully captured the expressive quality of each stanza, ranging emotionally from the deepest despair and violent anger of the exiled and their sense of abandonment by their God, to the tenderness of reconciliation and hope. His settings are largely syllabic, deriving their rhythm from that of the text; metric conflict introduced by cross accents enrich the texture. Placed on opposite sides of the stage, the dialogue between piano and percussion took place sometimes in whispers, sometimes in loud, aggressive

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pandemonium, the strings joining in equally percussive effects. The well-rehearsed chorus formed the backbone of the ensemble, handling precise declamation and harsh dissonances with aplomb under Hoose's nuanced direction. Cantata Singers Jennifer Webb, mezzo-soprano, and Will Prapetis, baritone, sang the solo parts with secure tone and expressive refinement. This was a fine performance of a deeply moving work.

Lutheran congregations in Bach's time were secure in their belief, yet also wary of being led astray by heretical teaching. *Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein* (Ah God, look down from heaven), BWV 2, is based on Martin Luther's 1524 adaptation of Psalm 12. The first and last stanzas follow Luther's text word for word, but an anonymous editor paraphrased stanzas 2-5 to form two recitative-aria pairs. Their texts follow the drift of Luther's hymn and even borrow an occasional line or two from it, first inveighing in vivid language against the "stench and mold" of heresy, then promising healing through purification by the cross. This is the second of Bach's cycle of chorale cantatas, composed in June 1724 for the 2nd Sunday after Trinity. It is scored for alto, tenor, and bass solos, and an orchestra consisting of two oboes, strings, and a continuo group of cello, bass viol, bassoon, and organ. Four trombones double the voices in the opening and closing choruses. Bach set the opening chorale stanza as a cantus firmus motet for four voice parts, with an independent continuo line. Each line of the chorale melody is sung in long notes by the altos, prepared, as in a chorale prelude for organ, by anticipatory fugal exploration of the melody in the other parts. For a choir of some 42 singers to execute this kind of elaborate polyphony can present problems of diffuse tone and dragging tempo. Hoose's unflagging beat and dynamic control kept this from happening, although better balance with the instrumental ensemble might have been achieved with fewer singers. The "secco" tenor recitative that followed was accompanied only by the continuo group, but its two chorale-based lines, beginning "They teach vain, false deceit" were set in expressive "adagio arioso" style. There followed an alto aria, sung by Lynn Torgove that featured a lively violin obbligato, beautifully played by concertmaster Danielle Maddon in dialogue with cellist David Russell. The bass recitative, representing the "Vox Christi" and accompanied by strings, could be heard as the central focus of the cantata's narrative, as Christ hears the distress of the afflicted. Basso Mark Andrew Cleveland was particularly affecting in the central arioso advocating mercy to the poor. A joyful tenor aria, delivered with panache by William Hite promised purification by means of the cross to the lively concerto-like accompaniment of two oboes, strings, and continuo. The final chorale verse was a straightforward setting with trombones doubling the vocal parts.

Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis in meinem Herzen (I had much trouble in my heart) is Bach's most extended work in the cantata genre. In two parts, it was intended for performance before and after the hour-long sermon. Like other psalm cantatas, it could be adapted to varied occasions without regard to the ecclesiastical year. The cover of the original parts was labelled "Per ogni tempo" (For all seasons), but a note in Bach's hand tells us it was performed on the 3rd Sunday after Trinity, 1714. The cantata may have been presented at an organ recital at St. Catherine's, Hamburg, in November, 1720, which is where Johann Mattheson, who scathingly criticized its excessive text repetitions in his *Critica Musica* of 1725, must have encountered it. The libretto is old-fashioned in its inclusion of excerpts from Psalms 94, 42, and 116 and the Revelation in the choruses. The intervening recitatives and arias, on the other hand, although they contain references to biblical texts, were set to freely-composed rhymed poetry. The cantata opens with a *Sinfonia* for solo oboe and violin in a mellifluous duet performed by Peggy Pearson and Danielle Maddon, with accompaniment by the second violin and viola over a "walking bass" continuo line. Expressive dissonances in closely spaced violin and oboe entries, and dramatic pauses on diminished 7th chords lent an air of drama to this beautiful Adagio. The first chorus opened with the repeated block chords on "Ich, ich, ich" that sparked Mattheson's criticism, followed by a lively Vivaldian fugue that concluded with another block chord on the word "aber" (but) to introduce a freely-imitative second section, Vivace, on the words "Your consolations revive my soul."

The brief aria for soprano that followed, with its sighing motives and irregular phrases, was rendered with fine attention to expressive detail by Alexandra Whitfield. Peggy Pearson's obbligato oboe seemed to embody the mournful tones of the "sighs, tears, and anguish" of the poetic text, with its references to Psalms 6 and 31, Job, and Lamentations. The accompanied recitative for tenor is more dramatic. Like the protagonist in Psalm 22, and like Jesus on the cross, the Christian is forsaken by God and his cries are not heard. The themes in the following aria were developed from the metaphor of salt tears in a rushing stream. A sudden interruption came with a shift from Largo to Allegro to invoke the storms and waves that pressed against him, only to return to the "sigh" music, now enhanced by dramatic word painting: precipitous descents on "Here I sink to the ground" and "There I gaze into the maw of Hell." Tenor Eric Christopher Perry made the most of these dramatic contrasts. The chorus based on Psalm 42 that concluded Part I began by treating short sections of the text in contrasting textures, "Was betrübst du dich meine Seele" (Why do you trouble yourself, my soul): homophonic sound blocks; "und bist so unruhig" (and are so restless): imitative and syncopated; "in mir?" (in me?): adagio chords; "Harre auf Gott" (Wait for God): imitative entries, a long held on "Harre (wait); "denn ich werde ihm noch danken" (for I will yet thank Him): homophonic. The conclusion was a grand fugue of great regularity and conciseness on the words "since He is the help of my countenance" with increasingly close entries culminating in a stately Adagio on "and is my God."

Part II opened with an accompanied recitative for soprano (Karyl Ryczek) and bass (Mark Andrew Cleveland), representing a dialogue between the Soul and Jesus. Here the contrast of light (Jesus) and dark (the Soul's despair) in the text was depicted in the first violin by a rising scale, followed by a sudden descent. The dialogue between the two continued in the duet/aria, indistinguishable in style and atmosphere from an operatic love duet of the time. A change of key and shift to a faster triple meter in the middle section highlighted a change of tone: in the knowledge of Christ's love, cares disappear.

As the only movement of the cantata to contain an actual chorale melody combined with a scriptural text, the chorus "Sei nun wieder zufrieden, meine Seele" (Be at peace again, my soul) looks back to an older motet tradition. Stanza 2 of "Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten" appears as a cantus firmus in long notes in the tenor part against a smoothly imitative scale motive in the three other parts on a verse from Psalm 116. In the second section, stanza 5 of the chorale is taken by the soprano part while the three lower parts continue with the initial theme, and oboe and strings double the voices. Evoking the marriage at Cana, the sprightly tenor aria "Erfreue dich, Seele, erfreue dich, Herze" (Rejoice, soul, rejoice, heart), sung with fine attention to its dance rhythms by William Hite asks the soul to turn its sorrow into joy, its weeping into wine. Although scored for continuo accompaniment alone, this was an active melodic line taken by an adroit bassoon (Adrian Morejon) and equally adroit cello (David Russell) that joined the voice in imitative dialogue. The opulent final chorus included additional parts for three trumpets and timpani (but none for trombones) as well as an independent part for bassoon. A short, emphatically declaimed passage in chordal harmony was followed by another monumental fugue on "Lob und Ehre und Preis und Gewalt" (Praise and honor and glory and power), its percussive syllables interlinked with cascading roulades on "Alleluia, Amen" that led to a grand Handelian conclusion.

Virginia Newes, who lives in Cambridge, was Associate Professor of Music History and Musicology at the Eastman School of Music.

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