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Jan 23 2018

Concert Review: Cantata Singers — Music That Bears Witness to Catastrophe

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Peter Child's challenge was to match his orchestral and choral music to the harrowing nature of the text — and he worked this out well.



Cantata Singers at NEC's Jordan Hall. David Hoose, Music Director. Photo: Michael McVey.

By Susan Miron

In its 35 years since David Hoose took over the helm at Cantata Singers, this excellent Boston-based chorus and orchestra has established a distinguished history of commissioning important choral-orchestral works that deal with the theme of social justice. They include John

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The Arts on Stamps of the World — December 30
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Harbison's *The Flight Into Egypt*, which won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in Music, and a more recent commission, Elena Ruehr's *Eve*, which received its world premiere on the first concert of Cantata Singers' 2014-15 season. In 1990, the group asked Donald Sur to compose *Slavery Documents*, the first of three large choral-orchestral works based on texts that focus on the scourge of slavery. Hoose has written that Donald Sur's, T.J. Anderson's, and Lior Navok's subject matter and music interact in ways that continue to resonate with the mission of the group, just as the words and music of Bach have since 1964.

On Saturday, in Jordan Hall, the **Cantata Singers** presented the world premiere of the second work they have commissioned from Peter Child — *Lamentations*, which was bookended in the performance by two Bach cantatas. The first, J.S. Bach's Cantata BWV 2, "Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein," (1724) had never been performed by this ensemble before. The piece is not on the level of the composer's greatest cantatas, but it was given a lovely performance, with beautiful contributions by alto Lynn Torgove, tenor William Hite, bass Mark Andrew Cleveland, and violinist Danielle Maddon.

The Book of Lamentations (Hebrew: **אֵיכָה**) is one of the Five Scrolls (*Megillot*) that make up the writing (*Ketuvim*) of the Hebrew Bible (along with Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth, and Ecclesiastes). It is traditionally recited on the fast day of Tisha B'Av (the Ninth of Av), an occasion for mourning the destruction of both the First and Second Temples.

Child, a longtime Professor at MIT who has enjoyed a four decade long friendship with conductor Hoose, presented an unusually interesting pre-concert talk. He explained how he came to understand The Book of Lamentations through the prism of an extremely personal translation/ interpretation of the text by poet David Rosenberg, who imagined its writer was, among other things, a woman.

It took some time for Child to settle on what theme would drive his composition; 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 his inspiration flagged or he felt overwhelmed by the scope of the project, Child told *The Boston Globe* that he "would just open the newspaper and read another article and want to get back to the piece. It was that direct." When he began work on the commission, the refugee crisis in Syria was foremost 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 handle it in a preachy way, lest the piece veer away from art and into agitprop. His solution came once he took another look at *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 these various books. It is his attempt to make them both faithful to the past and capable of speaking to a modern audience.

It was in the poet's rendering of the Book of Lamentations that Child found the ideal text for his project. Rosenberg's translation veers away from the quiet austerity found in other versions, making use of a language that strives for an astonishing vividness, even violence. Given the turmoil of this approach, the legacy of the Holocaust seems to loom like an ever-present shadow.

For Child, the Rosenberg version helped him with his text, so that it "somehow universalizes the issue, the way biblical texts often do." It permitted him to treat the refugee crisis as a reverberation rather than a cause. His strategy, he pointed out, was similar to that of John

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Harbison in *The Flight Into Egypt*, a 1986 Cantata Singers commission in which a biblical story provided an occasion for reflection on the blight of homelessness. Hoose has noted the connection between the two pieces, writing 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 look at Rosenberg’s treatment of the Book of Lamentations reveals how eerily close the text touches on the human disasters that spurred Child’s composition. “All the world turned its eyes away/ I crawled in the desert” runs 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 commented. Indeed, though the composer wanted to point out injustice through allusion rather than condemnation, the accusations in the piece are startlingly direct.

Asked what he wanted an audience to take away from hearing the composition, Child responded, “I hope that text’s humanistic significance, the way it speaks to our present conditions, will be both obvious and subtle enough that it will affect people.” The Book of Lamentations takes the form of an alphabetic acrostic, and Child sticks to this format, using ten of Hebrew’s 22 letters. Rosenberg ramps up, dramatically, the stark Hebrew original, making the text “timely” in a not particularly subtle way (unlike the more nuanced approach of some contemporary Hagaddahs). Child’s challenge was to match the orchestral and choral music to the harrowing nature of the text — and he worked this out well. To have music bear witness to catastrophe, to abandonment, to the plight of the wretched, to enduring sorrow is difficult. But Child has done a very commendable job, producing a powerful work that deserves to be performed often. The Cantata Singers did not have the music to work with until quite recently, and they did astonishingly well, in large measure due to Hoose. (This commission honors his 35 years of service.) The two intrepid soloists were mezzo-soprano Jennifer Webb and Will Prapestis. The bass soloist was Will Prapestis. Pianist Eliko Akahori played wonderfully and percussionist Robert Schulz created colors galore with an artillery of enchanting instruments.

The two-part Cantata BWV 21, “Ich Hatte viel Bekümmernis,” echoes several of the dire themes in *Lamentations*: “Sighs, tears, anguish, trouble, anxious longing, fear and death gnaw at my constricted heart, I experience misery, pain.” One of the performance’s highlights occurred near its beginning: a beautiful aria sung by soprano Alexandra Whitfield accompanied by the legendary Bach oboist Peggy Pearson, who also delighted in the opening Sinfonia. The septet of soloists included Karyl Ryczek, soprano; Jennifer Webb, alto; Eric Christopher Perry, tenor; Jason Sabol, tenor; and the always glorious Mark Andrew Cleveland, bass. Over the years the Cantata Singers have presented this piece five times, and it is no wonder — it is glorious.

Susan Miron, a harpist, has been a book reviewer for over 20 years for a large variety of literary publications and newspapers. Her fields of expertise were East and Central European, Irish, and Israeli literature. Susan covers classical music for *The Arts Fuse* and *The Boston Musical Intelligencer*.

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