

CHOROSYNTHESIS

*Creating A World Where The Choral Art And Its Communities Are Thriving
And Preeminent*

EMPOWERING SILENCED VOICES PROGRAM NOTES

DO YOU HEAR HOW MANY YOU ARE?

“Do You Hear How Many You Are?” for SATB choir was written in April and May of 2010. The origins of this piece and text come from a very interesting experience I had in December of 2009. I have been learning a lot in the past few years about the state of our world and the many huge problems and crises we are faced with in the near future, and this discovery has been so daunting and overwhelming to me. So much change needs to happen in order for the near and long-term future of our world to be just and stable that I have felt a lot of guilt over my choice of profession. Why have I chosen to be a composer and musician when I could make more of an impact on solving these problems if I were a scientist or policy maker etc.?

I have been struggling to find a solution to this dilemma for a while now and I just happened to be thinking about it, while filled with lots of stress and worries, one night as I was falling asleep in December of 2009. At the moment when I was in that state halfway between sleep and consciousness, I suddenly heard the line “Do you hear how many you are?” in my head, yet I felt as though I didn't come up with the line but that it was said TO me. I was instantly comforted, as if a load fell off my shoulders, and then I began to hear it being sung, which I knew was the beginning of a choral piece.

I woke up, wrote down the music I was hearing (about the first six measures of the work) and then wrote down this entire poem. I truly feel that this message came to me for a reason, and that I need to share it through the music I create. Those of us who want to change the world for the better are not alone; we are many and we will make our voices hear in order to heal the world.

-Keane Southard, 2010

LIKE A DARLING

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye marks out the physical and emotional effects of terrorism with people— first graders, mothers, friends; with everyday objects— kettles, apples, glasses of water; with locations— Texas, Turkey, Syria. She captures with these everyday words just how alarmingly common, even mundane, news of terrorism has become to us. Her text and my musical setting are understated and all lead toward one word that offers hope in a world so torn apart, “together.”

I stumbled across Nye’s poetry shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, and saw that the pain, fear, and loss that many Americans were feeling was not unique to us. Though it was new to me, tragedies like that had been part of the daily lives of millions in the Middle East for generations. The bombing of the 2013 Boston Marathon, and the 8 year old boy, Martin Richard, who was killed by the explosions brought to mind the boy in Nye’s poem. The middle movement of *Like a Darling* was written in 2013 shortly after the Boston Marathon Bombing. I have many friends and colleagues in Boston from my time there in grad school. A couple dear singer-friends were running in the marathon that year, and another life-long friend was volunteering in the first aid tent like he does every year. Seeing the events unfold on television brought back the fear and helplessness that I felt while watching the Twin Towers fall on 9/11. I responded to these powerless feelings in the only way I know how, with music. I returned to Nye’s poem in the fall of 2015 with the thought of completing the cycle. I had finished the third poem in early November and was working on setting the first poem when terrorists attacked Paris.

I can recall news of terrorism throughout my life: the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Oklahoma City, 9/11— politics, fear, and difference tearing people apart. I’m not sure if this will ever change, but I think Naomi Shihab Nye is onto something when she prompts us to consider just one word— together.

The text for this work is the poetic triptych titled “Darling” from *Fuel*, a collection of poetry by Naomi Shihab Nye published by Boa Editions, Ltd., Rochester, NY, 1998. Used here with the kind permission of the author.

-Steven Serpa, 2016

IN MIDNIGHT SLEEP

Walt Whitman's poem, "In Midnight Sleep," left a mark in the back of my mind from the time I first came across it many years ago. I had always desired to set the text to music, but

it never quite came out right. In 2014, a series of events occurred regarding police brutality and the subsequent deaths of civilians. These events caused many protests and a violent uproar from this nation's people. Riots erupted across the country and it seemed as if our society was being ripped apart at the seams. Whitman had the misfortune of witnessing the seams come apart in his own time. Having served as a volunteer nurse during the American Civil War, this poem is a reflection of his thoughts and what he saw during a period of unrest. While my mind was troubled with the events surrounding Ferguson and Eric Garner, this text came back to me as if it were a vision. In this vision, I saw people that I knew and loved waging war against one another. Senseless violence surrounded me, and it was then that this poem truly spoke to me.

My work, *In Midnight Sleep*, is a direct response to the social injustices revolving around Ferguson and Baltimore. The riots that took place had a strong effect on me and I felt called to respond in the best manner I could. Choral music can be an evocative vessel for messages that are important to contemporary society. My goal is to exploit the advantages of a choir in order to promote awareness to important social commentaries.

-Andrew Rodriguez, 2015

OVER THE CITY

Over the City, In memory of the victims of the bombing of Hiroshima, was premiered on August 6, 1995 in Seattle. Commissioned by a nation-wide consortium of 30 Unitarian Churches to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima (August 6, 1945), the premiere was given simultaneously in thirty cities across the United States.

The text for *Over the City* is derived from an actual experience. During my two-year stay in Japan I had traveled down to Nagasaki and visited the bomb museum there and ate, it seems, some bad fish from a little food stall. I had planned to stop off in Hiroshima on the way back to Kobe, but on route became extremely ill. By the time I reached Hiroshima the conductor had encamped me in his little office on the train (a retching foreigner is rather noticeable in Japan). All I remember of Hiroshima is the brief sight of it through the window and my garbled emotions, compounded by food poisoning. Only later did I equate that historical date, August 6th, in Hiroshima with my own illness -- the symptoms of food poisoning strangely mocking those of radiation sickness.

World War II is often referred to as "the good war." But it was horrible, as all wars are. There were atrocities on all sides. Even if the rationale is true, as the purveyors of Realpolitik assert (that the war ended earlier due to our dropping of the atomic bomb), it is

nevertheless, a legacy in which we can never, in any way, take pride. Human beings, most of whom had very little control over the conduct of the war, were savagely slaughtered. The "hibakusha" (survivors of the Bomb) and their descendants continue to suffer today and are often ostracized by their own communities. The Bomb was so horrific that "no one" wants to remember it. Even those who died are left "homeless." So, fifty years later, it is so commendable that you are here, if only for a few moments, to be reconciled with the more than 200,000 men, women and children who lost their lives.

-Molly McGee, June 26, 1995

(poet, not composer)

BLUE PHOENIX

Blue Phoenix is part of my long-term project called Axis of Beauty -- a now decade-long creative response to the George W. Bush administration's "Axis of Evil" wartime propaganda -- which has introduced western audiences to many texts by living Middle Eastern poets, journalists, and everyday citizens, via twelve different pieces and cycles so far. In 2005 I listened to every episode of the student-run War News Radio podcast (among other sources of direct interviews with Iraqis experiencing the U.S. occupation) and this text leaped out as one of the most important to me.

-Kala Pierson, 2015

When the bombs were falling, I was crazy enough to get on the roof. I felt I should see this,

because artists are the eyes of the culture. It was beautiful — you know?

When all the stores were closed, and Baghdad was really a hot spot, I kept on doing art until I ran out of pigment.

There was nothing to paint with, except boxes of crayons. So I mixed up wax paint, using heat.

I made thirty wax works: some on cardboard, some on old record sleeves.

The blue one is my favorite. You see the blue color taking over everything, but also reds and yellows

penetrating the blues, like flashing rockets penetrating the calm sky.

CANTICLES FOR THE HOLY INNOCENTS

In memoriam

Lydia Charity Schatz (2002–2010)

LYDIA (KOKO) SCHATZ was born in Liberia and adopted by a family in Paradise, California. Her adoptive parents, Kevin and Elizabeth Schatz, followed the doctrines of a preacher named Michael Pearl. Pearl teaches that children's so-called rebellious wills must be broken by repeated corporal punishment with a quarter-inch plumbing supply line. When Lydia mispronounced a word, this was seen as a sign of rebellion. Following Pearl's doctrine, the Schatzes whipped her for seven hours, taking breaks for prayer. This resulted in her death from kidney failure a day later, on February 6, 2010. She was seven years old. After Lydia's murder, Michael Pearl wrote that in response to his critics, he laughed.

Canticles for the Holy Innocents is dedicated to the memory of Lydia Schatz, though it is also for the thousands of children who die each year as a result of violence and abuse. Like the Holy Innocents killed by Herod, these children hold a place of special honor and special sorrow in the Christian faith. The texts are taken from early Latin hymns and prayers, used in liturgy to commemorate their martyrdom. The musical setting blends adaptations of late medieval polyphony with modern harmonic techniques to evoke a timeless sense of consolation.

-Eric Pazdziora, 2015

ZEALOT CANTICLE

"The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny."

Wole Soyinka, Dec. 14th, 1971

Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) is a Nigerian poet, playwright, novelist, and recipient of the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1967 Soyinka was arrested and imprisoned for "civil defiance." His crimes? Denouncing the suppression of human rights and free speech by the military dictatorship of General Yakubu Gowon, intervening in an attempt to avoid the Nigerian/Biafran civil war, and condemning the genocide of the Igbo people. In the decades following his release, Soyinka has remained an outspoken advocate for human rights.

During his two years in prison, Soyinka spent several stints in solitary confinement and went on a number of hunger strikes; some near fatal. He chronicled his imprisonment in the book *The Man Died*, much of which was written in secret between the lines of books

smuggled in by friends and sympathetic jailers and on scraps of paper and tissue hidden in the cracks in his cell, with a stolen pen, then with ingeniously homemade ink and hand-crafted writing utensils.

In addition to the obvious physical effect of extreme fasts, there are the psychological and mental consequences. Soyinka writes of “achieving true weightlessness...blown about by the lightest breeze, by the lightest lyrical thought or metaphor” and describes spells of delirium, hallucination, but also trance-like states and unparalleled lucidity. Near the end of his imprisonment (thus the end of the book), the three-part phrase “I need nothing. I feel nothing. I desire nothing.” becomes a repeated refrain; a mantra, if you will. The phrase is both an internal safe-haven for Soyinka’s mind as well as a defiant response to his interrogators.

In 2002 Soyinka published a set of poems titled “Twelve Canticles for the Zealot”; a strangely beautiful and terrifying look into the mind(s) of fanatics, containing a subtle catalogue of the horrific results, past and present. I decided to set two of these poems (I. and IX.).

In the first poem I couldn’t help but reflect upon the parallels between the delirium of the religious fanatic and the delirium of Soyinka himself during hunger fasts. Self-deprivation and hallucinations are not the sole prerogatives of the unjustly imprisoned, after all, but also common among zealots of another sort. Visions of God are hailed in prophets and scripture, but wielded as weapons by the demented. Soyinka’s own renunciations of self (“I need/feel/desire nothing.”) are renunciations and exhortations echoed in ultra-devotees from Buddhist monks and Hindu ascetics to Christian hermits and the Taliban.

Is there then not a thin line between extreme devotion – zealotry – and radicalism? And that line is both personal and public. One zealot preaches against the errors of a different faith, another spews hatred towards those who hold that faith. One extols devotion, the other breeds divisiveness. We only have to turn on the television to see how small the step can be from self-righteousness to roadside bombs and political/social oppression.

The second poem – the heart of the piece – begins with a Soyinka making a universal plea for peace from multiple languages and religious cultures. This is voiced by the choir; our voice, the voice of the “99%,” to use a currently popular term. Solo voices sing in unison with the clarinet; are they saints? Do they plead with or for the zealots? Throughout, the clarinet provides commentary and images of sound, at times weeping, at times hopeful, at times violent and bordering on insanity.

While writing the piece, the figure of Wole Soyinka's gaunt frame was constantly before me; weakened by hunger and isolation, yet ultimately stronger than iron bars and dictator alike.

Zealot Canticle was co-commissioned by Donald Nally and the Cincinnati Vocal Arts Ensemble and concert:nova, and composed while a Fellow at the MacDowell Colony. I'd like to express my gratitude to Donald, VAE, and concert:nova for their devotion to music as a living and always relevant art form.

-Lansing McLoskey, 2011

Shalom (Hebrew) peace

Irosu wonrin (Igbo) all is one

Salaam ailekum (Arabic) peace unto you

Shanti (Sanskrit) the peace which passeth understanding

Oom (Sanskrit) all or whole/the essence of breath, life, everything that exists

A CLEAR MIDNIGHT

Walt Whitman is, perhaps, the origin of the American poetic voice. His words resound strongly and universally. What I find most appealing about his poetry is how he enters - so easily - into the contemplative mode of which "A Clear Midnight" is a shining example. I seek to enhance this mode with my choice of harmonies and to give further clarity to the words which so inspired their selection. But Whitman was a committed humanist and despite his proclivity to turn inward he experienced a desire to serve and assist those around him. I can only aspire towards this same goal and hope that my music can bring others some comfort and reprieve.

Justice is an absolute, whether it take the form of social, political, or civil. I can only hope that I've given some justice to Whitman's words that express this as well.

-Thomas Schuttenhelm, 2015

OUT OF HER PLACE

Out of Her Place was commissioned by Choral Chameleon for a concert celebrating women's history. I chose a text by the iconic advocate Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), drawn to her direct style and the fact that she was interested in equality for everyone, not only for women. Her words seemed particularly relevant to people today: we all have to make decisions regarding when to conform to others' expectations and when to "strike out alone" and do what we feel we must. I included lines from her letters, set for a solo soprano, to show that these decisions are not without consequences, that opposing society's conventions often involves considerable sacrifice and isolation. I was very conscious of the fact that she did not live to see universal suffrage, despite 50 years of work toward that goal; I tried to balance that awareness with an awe for her perseverance, and the power of advocates to change public opinion and political realities.

This work deals with the struggle for political and social equality; its scope is not limited to women's rights. For example, Empire City Chorus included this piece on their "A More Perfect Union" concerts bringing attention to LGBT rights. I hope it can be effective promoting social justice in many contexts.

-Rebekah Driscoll, 2015

UNLEASH THE BEAUTY OF YOUR EYES

This piece was commissioned by an LGBT choir attempting to address the lack of choral music which uses LGBT-related texts. Even though there are many pieces written by LGBT composers, traditional texts are usually used rather than ones they felt they could connect to. For this reason, I selected a text by ancient Greek poet Sappho who was born on island of Lesbos.

The text by Sappho contains so much energy, drive and emotion, which made it an excellent choice to set to music. Whilst we have no record of how Sappho set her texts to music on the Greek island of Lesbos in 600BC, I feel fortunate that we at least have record of these inspiring words. I have reinterpreted this text in a contemporary choral idiom which I feel has the power to move listeners today. This piece explores a range of vocal and colouristic effects to reflect the energy, beauty and passion within this text. I contrast fast lines with lyrical duets in the upper voices, as I create expansive sound worlds by combining singing alongside effects such as whistling and chord clusters.

-Alexander Campkin, 2014