

Convivium Musicum, winter 2014 - notes about tonight's program

The sacred stories of the Judeo-Christian tradition, though they center around the relationship between God and humanity, are nevertheless largely stories of mortal, not divine, experience. This should come as no surprise: in polytheistic traditions, such as those of ancient Greece and Rome, gods and goddesses can spend time cavorting with one another, but the God of Israel would be reduced to monologues (see especially the creation-prompting pronouncements of Genesis) were it not for the offspring of Adam and Eve.

And so we find in the Torah and Testaments themes that are remarkably commonplace and familiar, in other words wholly human: tales of folly and wisdom, birth and death, love and loss, to name just a few. Wisely or not, we have chosen just one of those markers of the human condition - the experience of loss - as the theme of tonight's concert, a theme which sacred texts and, by extension, sacred compositions explore with rich variety.

The most meaningful and painful losses are of something or someone held dear: a place, a people, a person. Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonian Empire is the presumed backdrop for the great poem, or series of poems, in the Old Testament known collectively as the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Most of the Hebrew poetry of the Lamentations is arranged as an acrostic: each section of poem begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So as not to lose entirely this organizational principle (the reason for which, incidentally, is unknown), translations of the Lamentations typically include the acrostic Hebrew letters as markers for each new section.

In most musical settings from the Renaissance - and Robert White's is no exception - these single letters, no more than two syllables, afford opportunities for contrapuntal studies in miniature, unchecked by long-winded prose or poetry. For the body of the poem, White (a rough contemporary of William Byrd, though he lived a much shorter life than his more famous contemporary and fellow Catholic) offers a setting of subtle variety of expression. Perhaps most memorable are several "call-and-response" passages, in which a single voice is answered after just one note by the remaining parts entering together, followed by a homophonic passage peppered with ornament and compelling harmonies.

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William Byrd's work on a similar theme (though not from the Lamentations proper) is an example of, among many other compositional devices, his skillful juxtaposition of polyphonic and homophonic textures. Following its introduction in flowing interlaced imitation, Byrd's setting comes to a seeming halt as four of the five voices intone "Zion is deserted," which gesture is then repeated an octave lower by a different distribution of voices.

In the Book of Jeremiah, a scene of loss unfolds in a terse yet powerful manner as "a voice is heard in Ramah." We are summoned by a sound we can barely recognize and a face we cannot yet see. Only in the next sentence do we learn that the voice is Rachel's, and that she weeps for her children who are no more. Rachel's "children" are commonly interpreted as being her descendents, the long-suffering House of Benjamin. The Gospel of Matthew cites this passage to imply that Herod's slaughter of the innocents fulfills the Old Testament prophecy.

Tonight we juxtapose two musical settings of the Matthew text, one by Jacob Clemens non Papa and another by Giaches de Wert. We invite you to listen and compare how these composers used musical means - melodic shape, pacing and timing, text repetition, vocal ranges, and so on - to create and vary musical moods and effects in setting the same text.

As Rachel weeps for her people, King David laments for Saul, Jonathan, and Absalom in two different passages and musical settings. Absalom, a sort of Old Testament dandy, was one of David's favored sons. He eventually took up arms against his father, only to die in battle. But in the aftermath of David's adept defeat of the son who betrayed him, the victorious king's response is not triumphant but despairing: "would God I had died for thee." Weelkes's setting, in sighing gestures and daring chromatic shifts, evocatively underscores David's tortured state as he sings his lament.

David sorrowed before, over the death of his royal predecessor, Saul, and Saul's son Jonathan. David and Jonathan formed a bond of friendship that some later commentators have interpreted as romantic love. Whatever the nature of this Biblical bromance, David's own words describe Jonathan's companionship as superior to the love of women. Josquin des Prez's expansive setting typifies many of his technical accomplishments: a master musical architect, the composer uses layers of voices and levels of musical activity to underscore both affect and structure. You can hear, for example, how in the middle of a broader musical thought Josquin often employs just two or three voices in a relatively syllabic setting, while the approach to the end of a major section is marked by all voices and greater use of melismatic writing, which is to say, the allocation of many notes to a single syllable of text.



The music-making of our own time is so pluralistic in style and purpose that it is hard to conceive of a time when a single composer would be almost universally regarded as the most accomplished. This was true for Josquin, and his death in 1521 elicited a flood of commemorative laments in a variety of guises. Tonight we offer three examples, all by relatively unknown composers. Of the most substantial, Jean Richafort's setting of the Requiem Mass, we will sing just the Introit ("Requiem aeternam..."), Kyrie, and Communion ("Lux aeterna...") movements. The Requiem Mass, or *Missa pro defunctis* (Mass for the dead), is a variant of the more familiar Eucharist celebration, tailored to memorialize the soul(s) of the faithful departed, and by extension to solicit favor when our own demise is at hand. Richafort's setting is remarkable in several respects, but the most striking, though perhaps not the most immediately audible, is that it is built around multiple pre-existing melodies. The first, which can be heard in the top voice most easily, is a (sometimes highly decorated) version of the Gregorian chant melody of the Requiem Mass. That would suffice for many composers, but Richafort's mastery of composition allows him to also weave in to the tenor parts a second Gregorian melody, "Circumdederunt me" (itself a text associated with the Requiem Mass) in canon with itself at the fifth.

Two other - much shorter - works also pay homage to Josquin at his passing. Benedictus Appenzeller sets a secular (though the text makes reference to the church) Latin text addressed to the Muses, wherein Death is cursed for killing the good and sparing the wicked. Finally, you will hear the sumptuous eight-voice setting of "O mors inevitabilis" by Hieronymus Vinders, a piece that seems, like Josquin himself, to be finished too soon.

Lest we leave tonight's concert in wailing and lamentation ourselves, our program ends with an uplifting message, at least relatively speaking. "Blessed are the dead," says the Psalmist, as set by Heinrich Schütz, for not only do they rest from their labors, but their works follow them. In other words, in more than one sense, we are not lost, even in death. Whatever our confession, we can all count ourselves blessed (however we choose to interpret the word) by the works of these remarkable composers that have survived for us to enjoy, and be grateful that their works have followed them long after their brief time among the living has past.