

## Introductory Note

For many years I have thought about composing a set of Lamentations, and especially the verses which do not form part of the liturgical rite of *Tenebrae*, and which therefore have never been set to music before. The poetic and emotional strength of the texts in the context of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. is undeniable, but what makes them so chillingly prophetic to us today is the extent to which they describe events which are happening in the Arab world here and now, two and half thousand years later.

My initial motivation for setting a sequence of Lamentations was sparked off a few years ago by reports of the systematic persecution of Coptic Christians in Egypt. Since then barely a week has gone by without more reports of similar attacks on Christian communities in North Africa - indeed almost the entire Arab world has become a blood-bath of terrorism, persecution and sectarian violence driven by misguided and twisted religious ideologies, chillingly reminiscent of the European medieval Crusades - and so my motivation has become all the more urgent.

Following the model of the liturgical rite of *Tenebrae*, my *Lamentations* alternates verses from the first book of Lamentations (set to richly elaborate polyphony) with *Responsories* taken from contemporary quotations of victims and witnesses from recent attacks against Coptic Christians in Egypt (set to monody). When one compares the original liturgical texts used in *Tenebrae* with the prayers, invocations and laments of these witnesses of contemporary atrocities, one realises how apallingly little has changed in muslim-christian relations in over two thousand years. To clarify and heighten this similarity still further, the modern texts of the *Responsories* have been translated into Latin by Peter Brown, stylistically appropriate to the Vulgate version of Jeremiaiah's Lamentations.

Jeremiaiah's texts themselves are particularly fascinating for the almost tangible tension they create between form (structure) and content (emotion). The first four poems use acrostics, where each verse is headed by a letter from the Hebrew Alphabet - thus there are 22 verses (in the third poem there are  $22 \times 3 = 66$ ), corresponding to the 22 letters in the Hebrew Alphabet. Each of these poems is laid out in two parts, the first ten verses balancing the last ten, with the central message of the poem contained in the central two verses (11, and 12). Some commentators have also attached significance to the 22 verses alluding to the 22 cards of the *Major Arcana (Great Mysteries)* of the occult Tarot deck of playing cards. Each of these cards depicts a scene, mostly featuring a person or persons, with many symbolic elements, such as 'The Magician', 'The Lovers', 'Death', 'The Hanged Man', 'The Devil', 'The Tower (or House of God)', and so on.

It is clear that the poems return again and again to a limited number concurrent themes or ideas, such as 'Adonai', 'Jerusalem', 'Friends', 'Enemies', 'Betrayal', 'Desolation', 'Comforter', 'Pain', 'Sighing' and 'Weeping'. It would not take much imagination to include these themes within the symbolic meanings of each of the traditional Tarot cards. Be that as it may, I have derived 22 themes or 'tarots' from the text, each represented by a particular harmonic chord-structure, timbre, texture, or melodic or rhythmic figuration, which together make up the

musical whole, like small coloured stones in a mosaic or panels in a stained-glass window. The 22 tarots are as follows: Death and destruction; Jerusalem; Vengeance; Calling; Warriors; Virgins; Jews; Weeping; The Comforter; Rejoicing; Heart and Soul; Enemies; Sin; [Consolation?]; Adonai; Bitterness; Desolation; Palpitation; Stomach Churning; Sighing and Groaning; (2 more – check).

The texts I have chosen are the last eight verses from the first book. I selected these partly since they never formed part of the Office of *Tenebrae* and therefore were never set by Renaissance composers, and partly in order to complement settings by composers such as Tallis, White and Lobo, together with which they would most likely be performed. In setting these eight verses I have tried to reflect the same tension between form (structure) and content (emotion) as I have observed in the poems themselves; the intense emotions expressed in the texts are given full reign in the music, whilst at the same time being contained within the basic formal structure of the poems, and informed by the web of their recurrent themes and symbolism.

In sharp contrast to the rich and complex music of the *Lamentations*, the music of the *Responsories* is a simple melodic line, accompanied only by viola da gamba – the first responsory is for the female voices, the second for the male voices, and the third starts by exploring a ‘hybrid timbre’ using mezzos and tenors in unison and ends with female voices. This leads to the final *Antiphon*, a single verse from Psalm 69 where the sopranos are left calling, searching and waiting endlessly for their God.

James Wood, June 2015