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Haydn *Seven Last Words of Christ*

Haydn's Seven Last Words of Christ, one of the composer's most profound works, has its genesis in an unusual commission. Haydn himself explained the details of the circumstance in his preface to one of the first editions of the piece:

About fifteen years ago I was requested by a canon of Cadiz to compose instrumental music on The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross. It was customary at the Cathedral of Cadiz to produce an oratorio every year during Lent, the effect of the performance being not a little enhanced by the following circumstances. The walls, windows, and pillars of the church were hung with black cloth, and only one large lamp hanging from the centre of the roof broke the solemn darkness. At midday, the doors were closed and the ceremony began. After a short service the bishop ascended the pulpit, pronounced the first of the seven words (or sentences) and delivered a discourse thereon. This ended, he left the pulpit, and prostrated himself before the altar. The interval was filled by music. The bishop then in like manner pronounced the second word, then the third, and so on, the orchestra following on the conclusion of each discourse. My composition was subject to these conditions, and it was no easy task to compose seven adagios lasting ten minutes each, and to succeed one another without fatiguing the listeners; indeed, I found it quite impossible to confine myself to the appointed limits...

The Seven Last Words comprises an introduction, seven slow movements corresponding to the seven words, and a musical depiction of the earthquake following the crucifixion. It exists in several versions: for orchestra, for orchestra and chorus, and for string quartet by Haydn, as well as a reduction for piano which was approved by the composer. Of these, the arrangement for string quartet has a particular purity and intimacy in which the flexibility and subtlety of the string instruments' sound serves to enhance the vulnerability of the expression. It is a dark and deeply moving work inspiring searching contemplation. Mostly homophonic, with melodic lines supported by simple accompanying figures, the piece explores and reveals within this elemental texture the emotional resonances inherent in the story of the crucifixion. The music is often stark, barren and painful, but always overwhelmingly human. Strength and frailty, grief and acceptance, bewilderment and understanding are all expressed with the greatest economy of means and intensity of gesture. The work serves as a meditation on the gravity of tragedy, as well as on the possibilities of hope and redemption. It is music of great weight as well as great transparency, coupling profound directness of affect with ennobling humility.

In striving to create a performance which was suited to our feelings about the work, as well as to performance outside of a strictly religious venue, we decided to commission poems to be read before each of the slow movements, one poem for each of the Words. Our hope was to find a poet whose work shared certain important aesthetic qualities inherent in the Haydn. The poems were to be secular rather than specifically religious, based on the universal human qualities evident in the story of the crucifixion and in the music. There needed to be a sense of penetrating insight and of deep feeling, setting up a dialogue between word and music. The poetry of Mark Strand shares with the Haydn a surface of relative simplicity betraying underneath a piercing understanding of the human spirit. His is poetry which is quite musical in its cadence, lending itself to well to being read aloud.. There is a complete lack of pretense in his poetry, which has the sincerity so immediately apparent in the Haydn. Mark Strand is a beautiful and wise artist, and it has been an immense privilege to collaborate with him and to feel part of the genesis of a rich and affecting set of poems.

Although the composite work comprising Haydn's music and Mark Strand's poetry forms an integrated artistic whole, with poetry and music symbiotically entwined, the project was originally conceived of with hopes of a collaboration with a specific space as a third artistic element, a remarkable edifice in Houston, Texas: the Rothko Chapel. This is an octagonal building completed by the great painter Mark Rothko near the very end of his life housing fourteen of his canvases arranged in triptychs and as single panels, all of which are variations on the black monochrome. The paintings evoke a world of great tragedy, and of great beauty, with subtle gradations of the darkness of the canvases inviting the viewer to enter into their world and meditate upon it. Both the Haydn and the Rothko achieve great depth of expression with a certain simplicity of means. The blackness of the canvases in the chapel, combined with its light--a soft luminescence coming from a skylight which has a panel hanging underneath it diverting the light around its edges--gives the space a certain similarity to the cathedral in Cadiz where the Haydn was first performed. In fact, an analogy could be made between the relationship of the full orchestral version to the string quartet version of the piece and that between the grand Cadiz cathedral and the sparer Rothko chapel. The atmosphere of quiet concentration the chapel inspires makes it an ideal setting for a hearing of the Seven Last Words. Our quartet had the opportunity to perform this version of the work, with Mark Strand reading, at the chapel twice in February 2002, through da Camera of Houston; it was a deeply meaningful and powerful experience.

On a personal note, this is quite possibly my most beloved piece of music, and to be involved in bringing it to life in the present moment is always both revelatory and humbling. There is no better confirmation of the great privilege and joy of being a musician.

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