

Seven Last Words from the Cross (1995) by James MacMillan

Text and notes written by James MacMillan

Source: Boosey & Hawkes, <http://www.boosey.com/cr/music/James-MacMillan-Seven-Last-Words-from-the-Cross/6108>

- 1. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**
- 2. Woman, Behold, Thy Son!..Behold, Thy Mother!**
- 3. Verily, I say unto you today, thou shalt be with me in Paradise**
- 4. Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?**
- 5. I thirst**
- 6. It is finished**
- 7. Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit**

1. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (St. Luke)

Hosanna filio David
benedictus qui venit in nomine Domine
Rex Israel, Hosanni in excelsis

Hosanna to the Son of David
blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,
The King of Israel, Hosanna in the Highest.

The Palm Sunday Exclamation

The life that I held dear I delivered into the hands of the unrighteous
and my inheritance has become for me like a lion in the forest.
My enemy spoke out against me,
'Come gather together and hasten to devour him'.
They placed me in a wasteland of desolation,
and all the earth mourned for me.
For there was no one who would acknowledge me or give me help.
Men rose up against me and spared not my life.

From the Good Friday Responsaries for Tenebrae

The work begins with a cadential figure from the end of the clarinet quintet Tuireadh (lament), repeated over and over, upon which the rest of the music gradually builds. Violin "fanfares" emerge when the men start singing the Palm Sunday Exclamation Hosanna to the Son of David. Finally, another idea unfolds – a plainsong monotone with the words from one of the Good

Friday Responsaries for Tenebrae.

2. Woman, Behold Thy Son!...Behold, Thy Mother! (St. Luke)

Again a repeated cadential figure forms the basis of this movement, this time evoking memories of Bach's Passion chorales. The choir and ensemble operate according to different procedures – the choir repeating the words Woman, Behold Thy Son to a shifting three bar phrase, the strings becoming gradually more frantic as the music evolves. They both give way to an exhausted Behold, Thy Son.

3. Verily, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise (St. Luke)

Ecce Lignum Crucis
in quo salus mundi pependit:
Venite adoremus

Behold the Wood of the Cross
on which The Saviour of the world was hung
Come let us adore him

Good Friday Versicle

Christ's words are kept until the very end of the movement when they are sung by two high sopranos, accompanied by high violins. The rest of the piece is a setting of the Good Friday Versicle *Ecce Lignum Crucis*. During the liturgy this is normally sung three times, each time at a higher pitch as the cross is slowly unveiled and revealed to the people. Here also the music begins with two basses, rises with the tenors and then again with two altos. A high violin solo features throughout.

4. Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani (St. Matthew and St. Luke)

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me

The music rises tortuously from low to high before the choir deliver an impassioned, full-throated lament above which the strings float and glide. The movement eventually subsides through a downward canonic motion to end as it began.

5. I thirst (St. John)

Ego te potaviaqua salutis de petra:
et tu me postast felle et aceto

I gave you to drink of life-giving water from the rock:
and you gave me to drink of gall and vinegar

From the Good Friday Reproaches

The two words *I thirst* are set to a static and slow-moving harmonic procedure which is deliberately bare and desolate. The interpolated text from the Good Friday Reproaches is heard whispered and distantly chanted.

6. It is finished (St. John)

My eyes were blind with weeping,
For he that consoled me is far from me:
Consider all you people,
is there any sorrow like my sorrow?
All you who pass along this way take heed
and consider if there is any sorrow like mine.

From the Good Friday Responsaries for Tenebrae

The movement begins with hammer-blows which subside and out of which grows quiet choral material which is largely unaccompanied throughout. The three words act as a background for a more prominent text taken from the Good Friday Responsaries.

7. Father, into Thy hands I commend my Spirit (St. Luke)

The first word is exclaimed in anguish three times before the music descends in resignation. The choir has finished – the work is subsequently completed by strings alone.

On setting such texts it is vital to maintain some emotional objectivity in order to control musical expression in the way that the Good Friday liturgy is a realistic containment of grief. Nevertheless it is inspiring when one witnesses people weep real tears on Good Friday as if the death of Christ was a personal tragedy. In this final movement, with its long instrumental postlude, the liturgical detachment breaks down and gives way to a more personal reflection: hence the resonance here of Scottish traditional lament music.