

Stephen Jaffe
Songs of Turning

Cantata for Soprano and Baritone Soloists, Chorus and Chamber Orchestra

EXPLANATORY NOTE

My 1996 cantata Songs of Turning consists of a Prologue and three parts, each of which deals with a different aspect of turning, or transformation. While by no means specific to any liturgical tradition, I got the idea for the structure of the cantata from the call to the community in the Jewish liturgy on Yom Kippur, in which “*Yearning, Caring and Turning avert the harshness of God’s decree.*” A gloss on this phrase is given in the Prologue and also gave rise to the three main sections of the piece: The Letter (which is about the human yearning for forgiveness), Last Instruction (which is about revelation, or the possibility of prayer), and Transformations (how might we live if we were aware of the sacred?)

Songs of Turning was conceived somewhat differently than a new chamber piece or orchestral composition. Guiding its creation was the notion that the singing of a cantata is more than the presentation of narrative or ceremony *to* a passive audience. At best, such a musical project offers a unique experience of community—a bringing together of instrumentalists, vocalists, supporters, and listeners as stakeholders in search of something to be revealed or probed, something affirmed; something greater than themselves. In composing Songs of Turning, I thought about those who might participate. For choral groups, there are opportunities to sing hushed music and to thunder, but just as fundamentally, to participate *with* the soloists as stories unfold. For audiences, the piece purposefully, even provocatively crosses boundaries of sacred and secular. Contemplating the Buddha, a letter written to Ann Landers, and the prophets of the Bible within one sitting will be unusual. Similarly, it will be novel to hear the sounds of three clarinets, marimba, and Ting sha (Tibetan Prayer Bells) mingling within one compositional conception. My aim was that the music, and the combination of vernacular and sacred texts would be spiritually provocative--- for those who do and do not consider themselves “religious”. The texts and music address the possibilities of transformation. It’s really the transformation which is important, more than any particular way.

Songs of Turning is dedicated “to those who turn and those who might turn.”

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AND THE
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No 1. Prologue (Chorus, Orchestra)

Abraham, he was tested.
In his gaze, was converted.
And we are tested, too.

These are times that try our souls;
These are trying times.
We are we are judged by what we do
And we must live with who we are.

Faith, prayer and action alter a harsh decree.
Faith and yearning; prayer and reflection transform.

PART ONE: THE LETTER

No. 2, Soprano

Six years ago,
on New Year's Eve,
my husband John and I went to a party
at the home of friends.
We were in the mood to celebrate.
After five years of scrimping and saving,
we had bought a modest house
and repaid in full our college loans.
John had one more semester of law school
and excellent job prospects.
So we were really in the mood to live it up.

Actually saying good night to the host
was the last thing either one of us remembers
until after the accident.
God forgive us,
we ended the life of a thirteen year old boy
who was delivering bakery goods on his bicycle.
Witnesses said
he was dragged more than 200 feet.
The doctors did everything... his injuries were too extensive.
The lad never regained consciousness
and died after four days.

No. 2a. Chorus and soprano ("In those few moments")

In those few moments when we got the news, the whole world changed.
Never again will it be the same.

No. 2b. Aria and Recitative, conclusion (Soprano):

We called on the family but they refused to see us.
Who could blame them?
My husband never finished law school.
He lost his job and was unemployed...
He was impotent ..
I ate.. and gained 40 pounds.
Neither of us slept..
There were recurring nightmares...

People kept saying : "Life goes on." (Chorus)
It does if they mean the sun comes up every day, but
the kind of existence we had could hardly be called living.
I must keep writing before I lose my courage.
Maybe this ... will make an impression on someone.
If you don't hurt, maim,
or kill yourself or a loved one,
you might kill a little boy who is trying to learn some extra pocket money.

3a. Recitative and Aria (Baritone):

We have no way of knowing from the letter
how the parents of the boy who was struck down have fared
in the six intervening years. ..

As one who as lost a fourteen-year-old-son...
I have not known a day in which I did not think about him,
in which I did not probe the empty space his death left behind like a tongue probing a missing tooth.
But I know, too, that religion has given me the strength to bear his loss without being broken by it,
to remember but to be able to enjoy life.

But what of the other family...
who caused the accident
and six years later wrote the letter:
Must they remain "forever guilty"?
There is no changing the result of the accident
That cost the life of an innocent child,
But does it have to darken their lives, perpetually as well?

There are some things we cannot do for ourselves, and
we cannot do even for each other.
Removing the burden of guilt is one of them.
We need God to wash us clean.

(to Soprano:) Does God sees you as "forever guilty"

or does God see your good, clean, caring side as clearly
as God sees your weak, careless one.
Can you learn to see yourselves as God sees you?

4a. CHORUS ("Purge me with hyssop...")

Purge me with hyssop till I am pure,
Wash me till I am whiter than snow...
Fashion a pure heart for me, O God,
Create in me a steadfast spirit.
[Do not cast me out of your presence...
Let me again rejoice in your help.]

4b. Baritone

We cannot renew our own strength.
We cannot supply ourselves
with the one thing we are out of.
For that, we have to turn to God to renew our strength
so that we can keep running and not grow weary.

4c. Baritone, Soprano, Chorus ("Cursed are they...")

Cursed are they who trust in man, who make mere flesh their strength and turn their thoughts from God.
They shall be like a bush in the desert, set in the scorched places of the wilderness.

Blessed are they who put their trust in the Lord.
They shall be like a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream.
It does not sense the coming of heat, its leaves are ever fresh.

Amen.

PART TWO **LAST INSTRUCTION**

No. 5 Baritone and Ensemble

"Make of yourself a light,"
said the Buddha,
before he died.
I think of this every morning
as the east begins
to tear off its many clouds
of darkness, to send up the first
signal--a white fan
streaked with pink and violet,
even green.
An old man, he lay down
between two sala trees,
and he might have said anything,
knowing it was his final hour.
The light burns upward,
it thickens and settles over the fields.
Around him, the villagers gathered
and stretched forth to listen.
Even before the sun itself
hangs, disattached, in the blue air
I am touched everywhere
by its ocean of yellow waves.
No doubt he thought of everything
that had happened in his difficult life.
And then I feel the sun itself
as it blazes over the hills,
like a million flowers on fire--
clearly I'm not needed,
yet I feel myself turning
into something of inextricable value.
Slowly, beneath the branches,
he raised his head.
He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.

PART THREE TRANSFORMATIONS

No. 6 Chorus and Soloists

Sing out openly
and the Lord
will hear your voice

call into empty space
for help
and he answers" Here I am"

But peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,
can't be imagined before it is made,
can't be known except in the words of its making...

A feeling towards it,
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have
until we begin to utter its metaphors,
learning them as we speak.

A line of peace might appear
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making...

A cadence of peace might balance its weight
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,
an energy field more intense than war
might pulse then
stanza by stanza into the world,
each act of living
one of its words, each word
a vibration of light--facets of the growing crystal.

the light inside you breaks open
as certain and irrevocable
as dawn

you will see yourself
healed by a human warmth
in the reality of daylight

a sky clearing over you
like new flesh over a wound
your body will be whole

and you will see it in the light
of others revealed
in care for the hurt you've left behind.

Amen.

TEXTS by the composer (No. 1); and

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