

## *On the Transmigration of Souls*

### *Stabat Mater*

### *Fire-Memory/River-Memory*

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**Performed November 3, 2007**

**In his poem *Nänie*, Friedrich Schiller wrote:**

Even the beautiful must die...

But a song of remembrance on the lips of those who loved them is wonderful.

The three pieces on this evening's program all deal with loss and sorrow, but more importantly with remembering. If it is in remembering that we mourn, then it is also in remembering that we are comforted. It is in remembering that people, deeds and events are woven into the fabric of our lives and our societies. Even the words we use – memorial, commemorate – have “to remember” as their root.

Karol Szymanowski's 1926 *Stabat Mater* was in fact written as a memorial. Szymanowski was inspired by Józef Jankowski's remarkable Polish translation of the Latin hymn. Its simplicity and immediacy lends great poignancy to the story of a mother's grief as she must witness her son's death. Mendelssohn Club commissioned and premiered *Fire-Memory/River-Memory* in 1998. Composer James Primosch turned to the poetry of Denise Levertov, whose powerful imagery drew equally on her deep spirituality and her fierce opposition to the Vietnam war. This concert also features the Philadelphia premiere of John Adams' Pulitzer Prize-winning *On the Transmigration of Souls*, written for the first anniversary of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. Adams drew his text largely from notices and flyers placed at ground zero by those who lost loved ones. Adams accomplishes the rare feat of creating a work which is both musically significant and emotionally moving without exploiting the grief of those whom the tragedy touched.



### *Stabat Mater*

This year marks the 125th anniversary of the birth of Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937), one of the most influential Polish composers of the 20th century. He was born into a family of Polish gentry living in the village of Tymoszowska in what is now part of the Ukraine. His musical education eventually took him to Warsaw in 1901. His arrival there coincided with a renewed interest in Polish culture, and he became a founding member of Young Poland in Music, a group of composers dedicated to promoting a contemporary Polish musical idiom. While his early compositions were well received, he quickly lost favor with the critics. He took this opportunity to travel extensively. He lived for a time

in Vienna and Paris, and he visited Italy, Sicily and northern Africa, periodically returning to Tymoszówska to compose. Many of the compositions from this period have the flavor of the exotic Mediterranean cultures he experienced, like the song cycle *Songs of an Infatuated Muezzin*. With the family home and possessions destroyed in the Russian Revolution, he returned to Warsaw in the early 1920's, and his interest in creating a new Polish musical tradition was rekindled. He began to collect folk music from the southern Tatra Mountain region. He wrote extensively about his theories of Polish national music and struggled to include them in the curriculum when he became director of the Warsaw Conservatory and its successor, the Music Institute of Warsaw. Although popular with the students and younger faculty, his ideas were vigorously opposed by the musical establishment and he was eventually dismissed from his posts. His ideas, however, took shape in his compositions, crystallizing in his 1926 *Stabat Mater*.

This new interest in Polish nationalism coincided with the creation of the modern Polish state, for when Szymanowski was born, there had been no Poland for nearly a century. At one time, the kingdom of Poland had been the largest and most prosperous land in Europe, stretching from Lithuania to the Ukraine. Poland had supplied the ruling dynasty of the Russian Empire, and had saved Europe from the invading Turks when King Jan Sobieski lifted the Siege of Vienna in 1683. But her power had waned and by the end of the 18th century, Poland had been divided between Prussia, Austria and Russia. It was only after World War I that Poland was restored as a sovereign nation. During the long years of partition, the Polish people kept their language, history and culture alive. It is perhaps a mark of how closely Polish national identity, culture and the arts were entwined that Poland's delegate to the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations was the noted pianist and composer Ignacy Jan Paderewski.

Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater* began in 1924 with a commission for a Polish requiem from the Princess de Polignac. The Princess, nee Winnaretta Singer, was heiress to the sewing machine fortune and an American expatriate living in Paris. Her marriage to Prince Edmond de Polignac was largely one of convenience, since both were openly gay, but it allowed them to indulge their passion for music. The Princess's salon became a gathering place for the literary and musical lights of Paris and she commissioned important works from composers including Stravinsky, Satie, Milhaud, Poulenc and Kurt Weill. Szymanowski began to sketch out a requiem but both he and the Princess appeared to lose interest and the project languished. It revived with a second commission, this from a wealthy industrialist who wanted a work written in memory of his wife. Rather than a requiem, Szymanowski suggested a setting of the *Stabat Mater* instead. The medieval poem about the sorrowing mother of Jesus struck a chord with Szymanowski, who had just lost his niece and had spent several months consoling his sister. And he was inspired by a remarkable Polish translation of the Latin text by Józef Jankowski.

The *Stabat Mater* is generally attributed to the 13th century poet and Franciscan monk Jacopone da Todi. He was a wealthy and successful lawyer, but following the tragic death of his young wife, for which he blamed himself, he underwent a dramatic change of lifestyle. He gave away all his possessions and lived as a beggar, engaging in increasingly bizarre behavior intended to mortify himself. After ten years of this self-imposed penance, he joined the Franciscan order. He wrote more than 200 lauds, or sacred poems, many of which were set to music and used in liturgical services. His poetry was simple and unaffected, written mostly in his native Umbrian dialect, and had an immense appeal to the common people. Jankowski captured this same simplicity and directness in his

Polish translation, even while preserving the original meter and rhyming scheme of the Latin hymn. There is great poignancy in the plainness of the language, and Jankowski occasionally adds phrases which put the reader directly into the story, sharing in Christ's suffering. To achieve something of the same effect, the text in the program is based on a translation of Jankowski's version rather than the usual poetic translation of the Latin.

The *Stabat Mater* is set for soprano, alto and baritone solos, chorus and orchestra, and is divided into six sections. Szymanowski takes advantage of those large forces, continually combining and recombining them to achieve a variety of textures and colors. The music is heavily influenced by traditional Polish liturgical music, but Szymanowski rarely quotes those sources explicitly, relying instead on short phrases which suggest not only traditional melodies but also the original plainsong chant. He also incorporates many elements of early music, like voices moving in parallel intervals, long pedal tones and whole tone cadences. It is music of extraordinary beauty and drama, and remains Szymanowski's most enduring composition.

## ***Fire-Memory/River-Memory***

*Fire-Memory/River-Memory* was commissioned and premiered in 1998 by Mendelssohn Club. Composer and pianist James Primosch currently serves as Robert Weiss Professor of Music at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Presser Electronic Music Studio. He holds a DMA from Columbia University and has studied with such distinguished composers as Mario Davidowsky, George Crumb and Richard Wernick. His instrumental, vocal and electronic works have been performed throughout the United States and Europe by ensembles including the Chicago Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Collage, the New York New Music Ensemble, the Twentieth Century Consort and Speculum Musicæ. His *Icons* was played at the ISCM/League of Composers World Music Days in Hong Kong, and Dawn Upshaw included one of his songs in her Carnegie Hall debut recital. He has received numerous honors including a Goddard Leberon Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, two prizes from the American Academy-Institute of Arts and Letters, a Regional Arts Fellowship to the American Academy in Rome, a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, the Stoeger Prize of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and a fellowship to the Tanglewood Music Center. Primosch is also active as a pianist, especially in the area of contemporary music. His compositions and performances have been issued on the New World, CRI, Centaur, Albany, Azica, Bard, Bridge, Smithsonian Collection and Crystal Records labels.



Primosch turned to the work of the British-born, American poet Denise Levertov for the text of *Fire-Memory/River-Memory*, selecting two separate but thematically related poems. *What Were They Like?* is a poem that was inspired by Levertov's fierce opposition to the Vietnam war. It is in the form of a set of eclectic but seemingly innocent questions about the lives and customs of the Vietnamese people. There is a bitterly ironic tone to the answers, which depict the complete destruction of a way of life by the ravages of war in a horrifyingly matter of fact way. Even more chilling is the repeated phrase, "It

is not remembered,” as if all traces of a people and culture have been lost from our collective memory. With no memory, there is no connection, and the people and their lives and customs might as well be something out of myth. It is as if a square has been removed from a quilt, or tiles from a mosaic, and we are diminished by the loss.

Primosch’s setting of this text is extraordinary, arranging it now as a dialog. The questions are generally given to the men’s voices in short phrases, often accompanied by brass and with just a hint of self-importance, like examination questions posed by a teacher. The answers are given by the women’s voices in long, sinuous melodies in which the voices weave in and out of each other. It lends an air of innocence which stands in sharp contrast to the sadness and horror in their answers. And even when the music rises in its emotional pitch, the emotion quickly fades. It is as if the loss of memory and connection also makes it impossible to feel true empathy with the people, which is possibly the greatest horror of all.

*Of Rivers* is a poem born of Levertov’s deep and abiding spirituality. Levertov was a convert to the Catholic religion, but her faith was far from conventional. For her, there was no separation between the sacred and the ordinary experiences of everyday life, and she saw the divine in every aspect of the world that surrounded her. That “rivers remember” is somewhat of a paradoxical image, for the essence of water is its fluidity. Rather, it is a collective memory, formed by the forces that shape the river, transmitted to the water in a “pilgrim conversation” even as the water carries the memory onward as it flows downstream. In this context, it forms a sort of mirror image of *What Were They Like?* Primosch opens this movement with a short, angular phrase which builds in momentum and intensity, like the gathering of waters into a river. The chorus enters with that same angular phrase on the text “rivers” and a contrasting, arched phrase “remember.” The music builds, slowly and inexorably, into a torrent of sound. The opening line is quoted again at the end with the word “remember” being repeated over and over, transformed now into a plea or exhortation.

## ***On the Transmigration of Souls***

John Adams is one of America’s pre-eminent composers. He studied composition with such notable composers as Leon Kirchner, Earl Kim, Roger Sessions, Howard Shapiro and David Del Tredici. He has been composer-in-residence for the San Francisco Symphony, conductor, music advisor and creative chair of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and artistic director of the Ojai and Cabrillo Music Festivals in California. He has led the Philadelphia Orchestra, the London Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Halle Orchestra and Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in concerts of his own works. Casual audiences may know him best for his 1986 fanfare *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, but he has composed extensively in all genres and might be best represented by his choral and vocal music, including *Harmonium*, based on the poetry of John Donne and Emily Dickinson, *The Wound-Dresser*, based on poetry of Walt Whitman, and his operas *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*.



*On the Transmigration of Souls* was commissioned in 2002 by the

New York Philharmonic for the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. The commission itself was not without controversy. Adams' opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* deals with the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* by Palestinian terrorists. Adams portrayed all the characters equally, giving them all hopes, aspiration and motivations. This included the Palestinians, and many mistakenly felt the opera was pro-Palestinian and anti-Semitic. In fact, performances of choruses from the opera were cancelled by the Boston Symphony in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

The word *transmigration* in the title does not refer to Hindu theology, but for Adams simply means moving from one state to another, and the souls in question are not just the dead but also those who were touched by the tragedy. Adams refers to *On the Transmigration of Souls* as a "memory space" and he drew his text largely from messages and missing-person notices which had been posted at ground zero by those who lost loved ones in the attack. He was attracted by the simplicity and directness of the messages, he says, for when faced with the deepest emotion and feelings, people speak in the plainest language possible.

The simplicity with which the work unfolds belies the complex and meticulous construction of the piece. The sound is carefully built up in layers: a recorded tape which itself is composed of layers of different voices and city sounds, the orchestra, the adult chorus, and a children's chorus. The individual parts often move forward with different rhythms and different tonalities. Words are sometimes fragmented, with syllables distributed variously among the individual sections of the choirs. The effect is not unlike looking at a cityscape as reflected by a glass skyscraper, where minute variations in the placement of the windows give an image which is at once distorted and yet still recognizable as a whole. One of Adams' models for the piece was Charles Ives, who also wrote a work commemorating a public tragedy. Ives was walking along a New York street in May of 1915 when word came of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and he watched as people spontaneously joined in singing a hymn which was playing on a hurdy-gurdy. He incorporated the scene into his *Orchestral Set No. 2*, titling the movement *From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of the People Again Arose*. And Adams does make a direct allusion to a different but also very apt Ives work, *The Unanswered Question*, with a long, mournful solo trumpet line.

The piece opens with a recorded soundscape, taken from the sounds of traffic and footsteps and distant voices and sirens, the sort of background noises you might hear in any city. A boy's voice enters, repeating the word "missing" over and over again, as the litany of names begins and the chorus enters wordlessly, singing in parallel harmonies like medieval organum. The text begins in fragments but gradually coalesces into short phrases. As the phrases become longer, they paint miniature sketches of some of the victims: "she had a voice like an angel;" "he was tall, extremely good-looking;" "he was the apple of my father's eye." The music builds in intensity, reaching a climax with the lines "I wanted to dig him out. I know just where he is." After an even more intense orchestral interlude, the choirs enter again, repeating the words "love" and "light" over and over again. It is a moment of supreme catharsis. When the orchestra softly re-enters, there is an incredible feeling of release, and the music ends with a quiet serenity.

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