

The Witness Cantata

by

Swanee Hunt

WITNESS IS an ambiguous word, encompassing present experience as well as future testimony. The breadth of that word leaves room for the polarities of religious experience: the deeply personal and the proclaimed.

Witness. Within the word lies a fullness that speaks of all life and living. In our ongoing story we carry forward what we have already witnessed – as we bear witness to the future.

In the Christian faith, Good Friday is the paramount occasion of the passion of God. Those who stood near the cross at Calvary witnessed a suffering not trivialized by any confidence that Christ's agony had a purpose. Nor did they have reason to believe that all that was lost would be restored. This mystery of God crucified is a central symbol of Christian faith. However hard the church has had to struggle to be faithful to the depth of that symbol, the truth of this mystery is witnessed daily by women and men, believers and non-believers alike, whose lives are rich in tragedy and hope – lives that carry forward the story of Good Friday.

Collected from the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the “seven last words of Christ” are spoken anew here. I've written program notes to give the listener a clue about how I tried to match meter, melody, and message. The King James texts are pronounced by a narrator, then interpreted through the texts of five modern writers addressing political oppression, racism, marginalization, mental struggle, and profound loss. But, though the words are heavy, they carry with them a persistent, expectant wonder: “something not known to anyone before, but wild in our breast for centuries.”

In the past, people of all faiths have found an hour spent with this piece to be a meaningful time of reflection on hope in the face of despair, of inner light confronting outer darkness. The Witness Cantata is a reminder that suffering is an inescapable and even rich part of life — not simply to be avoided, but to be integrated into a whole understanding of what it means to be human. Now as ever, its fitting to pause and connect to the suffering that we as individuals have borne, have inflicted, and have alleviated.



Authors

ANNA AKHMATOVA was born in 1888 into a well-to-do Russian family. The poems of her early womanhood were a popular success, and she was a significant figure in the pre-revolutionary group of poets who, according to Max Hayward, wrote with a “spirit of awe and humility before life as it presents itself to the human mind and sense.” In 1912, Akhmatova brought forth both her first book of poems and her only child, Lev. But her life and thus her verse following the 1917 revolution became a refraction of epic tragedy.

Akhmatova’s poetry in Russian is in strict meter and rhymes, gravitating toward the vernacular with the quality almost of folksong. And she indeed became the voice of the folk, her verse commonly learned by heart. But from 1922, Soviet authorities attempted to silence her, forbidding publication of her work and imprisoning Lev as a hostage for 18 years. In desperate efforts to win his freedom, she wrote doggerel glorifying Stalin. But she dared not write down, even on a scrap of paper, the poems found in this cantata. Akhmatova and seven trusted friends held these in memory.

In the political struggles between 1914 and 1949, more than 20 million Russian people were killed. Given that context, and given her own life — intermittent struggles with tuberculosis, the cruel suppression of her own art and that of her colleagues, the execution of two husbands, the long imprisonment of her son — it is a wonder, not that Akhmatova writes of tragedy, but rather that she maintains a trace of hope. The themes of her Orthodox Christian faith — sin, expiation, and ultimate redemption — created for Akhmatova meaning in the midst of near total destruction and despair. Following the artistically stifling years under Josef Stalin, the poetry of Russia, including Akhmatova’s work flourished during the “thaw” under the rule of Nikita Khrushchev. She died in 1966.

WILLIAM BLAKE was born in 1757, into a life of poverty and isolation in the heart of industrial London. Largely self-taught, he began writing poetry when he was 12 and was apprenticed to a London engraver at the age of 14. A lover of the Gothic-styled art and architecture that surrounded him, Blake deliberately wrote in the style of the Hebrew prophets and apocalyptic writers. He envisioned his works as

expressions of prophecy, following in the footsteps of Elijah and Milton. His poetry and visual art are inextricably linked.

As an engraver, he made a meager living; but he was regarded as a misfit and never found an audience for the unique vision expressed in his poetry, prose, and artwork. Blake did not always act as a solitary artist. The collaboration with his wife, Catherine Boucher, would lead to the production of some of literature's greatest works. A rebel his entire life, Blake was a sympathizer with the forces of revolution, both in America and France. Blake was also something of a feminist, supporting equality between the sexes in the institution of marriage.

Today, he is considered the first of the great English Romantic poets, as well as one of the finest English engravers. The combination of his love for art and literature, and exceptional skill as an artist may be seen in his fantastic drawings for Dante's *Inferno*. Blake died in 1827, still struggling to finish the last of these illustrations. His *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is recognized as a work of genius.

THEODORE ROETHKE wrote poetry rich with the verdant imagery of his father's greenhouse. But his imagery reaches many levels, including that inner world in which he grieved the death of his father, explored the power of the archetypal and mystical, and struggled to keep mind and soul of one piece. Born in 1908, Roethke was hospitalized repeatedly for mental illness. Throughout his career his periodic bouts of depression served as opportunities for self-exploration. His poems are possessed of an intense lyricism. They range from witty poems in strict meter and regular stanzas to free verse poems full of mystical and surrealistic imagery. At all times, however, nature's mystery, beauty, fierceness, and sensuality are close by.

Roethke's stylistic innovations and mastery of his craft secured his reputation as one of the most widely read American poets of the 20th Century. He was honored with a number of prestigious awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Fulbright grant, as well as a Pulitzer Prize in 1954. Roethke died of a heart attack in 1963.

ELIE WIESEL was born in Romania in 1928. As a youth, Wiesel studied religion and his life centered on his family and small community. His peaceful existence was shattered forever during the horrific events of the Second World War. Following the Nazi occupation of his community, Wiesel was deported with his village to Auschwitz when he was 16, and then to Buchenwald. During the horrendous events of that time, he lost his parents and a younger sister to the cruelty of the Nazi regime.

After the liberation of the camps in April 1945, Wiesel spent several years in a French orphanage and in 1948 began to study in Paris at the Sorbonne. There he met Nobel laureate Francois Mauriac, who eventually influenced Wiesel to break his vowed silence and write of his experience in the concentration camps. *Night*, his first book, is a memoir of these experiences and a masterpiece in Holocaust literature.

Now living in New York, Wiesel is the author of more than 40 works dealing with Judaism, the Holocaust, and the moral responsibility of all people to fight hatred, racism and genocide. He has dedicated the latter part of his life to the witness of the second-generation and the vital requirement that memory and action be carried on after the camp survivors have all left us. Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, and continues to be an internationally recognized symbol of hope and remembrance.

The Witness Cantata

Prelude

A cantata is a choral work of substantial length, with a religious theme. And true to that expectation, this piece begins with the cello playing an old hymn, "Beneath the cross of Jesus." Themes that emerge later are introduced, one by one, by the instrumental ensemble. Then unexpectedly, the boy soprano interrupts with a haunting "Where is God?" His pleading question is answered only by the chorus, humming the rocking of a cradle. That motif leads into the words of Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," a premonition that the hour ahead has eternal significance, outside of any specific time or place.

To see a world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a wildflower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

W. Blake

Scriptural Setting (Mark 15:1-20, 22)

Straightway in the morning the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council, and bound Jesus, and carried him away, and delivered him to Pilate.

And Pilate asked him, "Art thou the King of the Jews?"

And Jesus answered, "Thou sayest it."

And the chief priests accused him of many things: but he answered nothing.

And Pilate asked him again, saying, "Answer thou nothing? Behold how many things they witness against thee."

But Jesus still answered nothing; so that Pilate marveled.

And Pilate said unto the multitude, "What will you then that I shall do unto him whom you call the King of the Jews?"

And they cried out, "Crucify him."

Then Pilate said unto them, "Why, what evil hath he done?"

And they cried out the more exceedingly, "Crucify him!"

Beware of Terrible Times

If the prelude implied a spiritual space, text from "July 1914" in Akhmatova's book *White Flock* sets a physical scene. The piece begins with an all-stops-out fortissimo, as if hell has opened and is about to swallow us. Even the instruments have turned mean as they join with the chorus of devils. Their storming and crashing is broken up by verses which serve to introduce the four adult soloists. Each sings over a Fellini-esque accompaniment a waltz-metered vamp that seems simple enough, with touches of tambourine or triangle. But their words are anything but sweet, and the listener is left with an uneasy feeling: perhaps these are menacing clowns in a twisted carnival. "Dies Irae, Dies Illa," I have added from the Latin Mass as a less subtle message: "Day of wrath, day of judgment." The piece ends with a choral fugue and a final, fortissimo "Beware!"

All month a smell of burning, of dry peat
smoldering in the bogs.

Even the birds have stopped singing,
the aspen does not tremble.

The god of wrath glares in the sky,
the fields have been parched since Easter.

A one-legged pilgrim stood in the yard
with his mouth full of prophecies:

“Beware of terrible times...the earth
opening for a crowd of corpses.

Expect famine, earthquakes, plagues,
and heavens darkened by eclipses.

“But our land will not be divided
by the enemy at his pleasure:
the Mother-of-God will spread
a white shroud over these great sorrows.”

From the burning woods drifts
the sweet smell of juniper.

Widows grieve over their brood,
the village rings with their lamentation.

If the land thirsted, it was not in vain,
nor were prayers wasted;
for a warm red rain soaks
the trampled fields.

Low, low hangs the empty sky,
tender is the voice of the supplicant:

“They wound Thy most holy body,
They are casting lots for Thy garments.”

A. Akhmatova

First Word (Luke 23:34)

And the people stood beholding.

And the rulers also derided him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he be the Christ, the chosen of God."

And the soldiers also mocked him, saying, "If Thou be the King of the Jews, save thyself."

Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Kyrie

The compassion in the third word from the cross is reflected in the gentle cello and harp background, as an all-women's chorus introduces a new idea: the motherhood of God. Their familiar three-part harmony is caressing and comforting. "Kyrie eleison," the women implore at the end. "Lord, have mercy."

Father, Mother forgive them,
for they know not what they do.
They are blinded by their passion,
they are deafened by their fears.
And they cannot feel your heart break,
and they cannot taste your tears.
Father, Mother, forgive us,
for we know not what we do.
Kyrie eleison.

S. Hunt

Second Word (Luke 23:32, 39-43)

And there were also two others, criminals, with him to be put to death. And one of the criminals who was hanged railed at him, saying, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we, indeed, justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds. But this man hath done nothing amiss." And he said unto Jesus, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." And Jesus said unto him, "Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

The Dying Man

We can sense the loneliness of the crucifixion in the stark, heavy piano chords of this accompaniment. As the tenor soloist returns for each new verse, another instrument joins, first the cello, then the viola. The last line is triumphant, and the tenor claims heaven with the G-sharp of a brilliant E-major chord.

I heard a dying man
Say to his gathered kin,
"My soul's hung out to dry,
Like a fresh-salted skin;
I doubt I'll use it again.
"What's done is yet to come;
The flesh deserts the bone,
But a kiss widens the rose;
I know, as the dying know,
Eternity is Now.
"A man sees, as he dies,
Death's possibilities;
My heart sways with the world.
I am that final thing,
A man learning to sing!"

T. Roethke

Third Word (John 19:25, 26)

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus, therefore, saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, "Woman, behold thy son! "

Mary Magdalene

A setting of words from Akmatova's "Crucifixion" is the first of three pieces, much like a triptych above a medieval altar. In the restless pizzicato of the cello and syncopated percussion, we can imagine the trio at the foot of Jesus' cross. Mary, his intimate friend, is in the grip of a panicked grief; the soprano sobs in a wailing portamento. The tenor sings the part of Jesus' closest man friend, John the Beloved, with a straight, monotone "stone-faced, stare." The mezzo is the more mature Mary, Jesus' mother, who stands apart, her trauma expressed in an almost obsessive repetition. The three appear in the piece one at a time, but ultimately come together in their grief.

Mary Magdalene beat her breast and sobbed.
His dear disciple, stone-faced, stared.
His mother stood apart. No other looked
into her secret eyes. Nobody dared.

A. Akhmatova

Stabat Mater

A chiming clock reminds us that hours are passing. This is the most lyrical moment in the cantata, a beautiful tribute to “the suffering mother.” The soprano lines arc over viola triplets that become the theme of the next piece. In the first verse, she is the mother of Jesus. In the second, she is the mother of the world, the creator. As she mourns her son on the cross, she mourns a twisted world.

At the foot of the cross
stands a mother in grief
watching her son in his passion.
Woman,
behold your son.
Your heart must be breaking now,
to see your
life's creation
twisted in agony.

At the brink of our lives
waits the Mother of all
Watching Her world in its passion.
O, God,
behold Your world.
Your heart must be breaking now
to see your
life's creation
twisted in agony.

S. Hunt

Seventeen Months

Sweet sadness changes to anger. With gut-wrenching words from her poem "Requiem," Akhmatova describes the endless wait each day outside the Peter and Paul Fortress where her son was imprisoned. The mezzo is passionate, forceful, with a fierce piano accompaniment. But her anger breaks with the word "Kill!" and she pours her heart into "Nothing is left but dusty flowers."

For seventeen months I have cried aloud,
calling you back to your lair.
I hurled myself at the hangman's foot.
You are my son, changed into a nightmare.
Confusion occupies the world,
and I am powerless to tell
somebody brute from something human,
or on what day the world spells, "Kill!"
Nothing is left but dusty flowers,
the tinkling thurible, and tracks
that lead to nowhere. Night of stone,
whose bright enormous star
stares me straight in the eyes,
promising death, ah soon!

A. Akhmatova

Fourth Word (Matthew 27:45-46)

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" "Eli, Eli, lama sabachta li?"

The Gallows

This scene from the small book *Night* is the emotional climax of the cantata, a passage from Wiesel's autobiography in which a young boy, a favorite of the camp, is hung alongside two others. The forced march is sung in the men's chorus, in a depressingly drab and repetitive background to the baritone narrative. The viola and cello reintroduce the poignant triplets. Here, the boy soprano as the boy who is being hung, and a Christ figure, repeats his insistent query, "Where is God now?" Wiesel offers that God is hanging on the gallows. Dead perhaps? The music chooses a different interpretation, that God is one with the boy, and identified with the suffering of all humanity.

One day when we came back from work
We saw three gallows...three black crows.
Three victims in chains –
and one of them,
the little servant, the sad-eyed angel...
All eyes were on the child.
He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips.
The gallows threw its shadows over him...
Three victims mounted onto chairs.
Three necks were placed
at the same moment
within the nooses.
"Where is God? Where is He?"
someone behind me asked.
At a sign the chairs tipped over.
Total silence throughout the camp.
On the horizon, the sun was setting.
We were weeping.

Then the march past began.
The two adults were no longer alive.
Their tongues hung swollen,
blue-tinged.
But the third rope was still moving;
being so light, the child was still alive....
For more than half an hour
he stayed there,
struggling between life and death,
dying in slow agony
under our eyes.
He was still alive
when I passed in front of him.
His tongue was still red,
his eyes were not yet glazed.
Behind me,
I heard the same man asking:
“Where is God now?”
And I heard a voice within me answer him:
“...Here He is –
hanging here
on this gallows....”

E. Wiesel

Fifth Word (John 19:28-29)

Then Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, "I thirst."

Already Madness

Another passage from "Requiem" comes in as fast-beating drums restore the tension and a madwoman screams. The baritone alludes to the vinegar that Jesus has passed up, as "opiate wine, lure of the dark valley. "The drums are quiet but continue pressing their manic tempo as he hands over the piece to the mezzo mother. Slow triplets lifted from "Seventeen Months" reappear in the melody, as well as the soprano theme from the "Stabat Mater." The men's chorus ends the piece in lush harmony that folds into lonely unison.

Already madness lifts its wing
to cover half my soul.
That taste of opiate wine!
Lure of the dark valley!
Now everything is clear.
I admit my defeat. The tongue
of my ravings in my ear
is the tongue of a stranger.
No use to fall down on my knees
and beg for mercy's sake.
Nothing I counted mine, out of my life,
is mine to take:
not my son's terrible eyes
not the elaborate stone flower
of grief, not the day of storm,
not the trial of the visiting hour,
not the dear coolness of his hands,
not the lime trees' agitated shade,
not the thin cricket-sound
of consolation's parting word.

A. Akhmatova

Sixth Word (Luke 23:46)

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

The Marrow

This is one of the most difficult pieces to sing, an exposed trio of mezzo, tenor and cello. The lines are contrapuntal but uncomplicated, leaving the musicians to interpret what it means to "bleed my bones."

I was flung back from suffering and love
When light divided on a storm-tossed tree.
Yea, I have slain my will, and still I live.
I would be near; I shut my eyes to see;
I bleed my bones, their marrow to bestow
Upon that God who knows what I would know.

T. Roethke

Seventh Word (John 19:30)

Then Jesus said, "It is finished."

Interlude

Here Roethke's words provide poetic fallacy, with forces of nature warning of an impending storm, a release that never comes.

Unaccompanied, this is a difficult piece for the soloists who color their voices to interpret the words of the poem. At the end, it is once again the little boy who mourns with the same half-note intervals as we heard from the gallows, "What we had hoped for did not come to pass."

The element of air was out of hand.
The rush of wind ripped off the tender leaves
And flung them in confusion on the land.
We waited for the first rain in the eaves.
The chaos grew as hour-by-hour the light
Decreased beneath an undivided sky.
Our pupils widened with unnatural night,
But still the road and dusty field kept dry.
The rain stayed in its cloud; full dark came near;
The wind lay motionless in the long grass.
The veins within our hands betrayed our fear.
What we had hoped for had not come to pass.

T. Roethke

Everything is Plundered

Switching moods, as if he has stepped out from under the eaves and is now strolling down the lane, the innocent boy continues a more hopeful tune, with harp and strings in major mode. But with the wail of a madwoman, the mood darkens into minor mode, as the chorus laments that all seems to be lost. Once again, it is the boy's pure treble that breaks through with a naïve "Why then do we not despair?" The answer comes in the beauty of the cherry trees and the star-filled skies — the miracles of nature that inspire a wild hope somehow new, yet essential to who we are as humans. As in the first piece of the cantata, the chorus retrieves the boy's theme at the beginning, but carries it into a fugue, with the soloists joining in a grand "Amen." But the last word is the young boy's, whose insistent questioning is heard above the jubilant chorus.

Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold,
Death's great black wing scrapes the air,
 Misery gnaws to the bone.
 Why then do we not despair?
By day, from the surrounding woods,
 cherries blow summer into town;
 at night the deep transparent skies
 glitter with new galaxies.
And the miraculous comes so close
 to our ruined, dirty houses –
something not known to anyone before,
 but wild in our breast for centuries.

A. Akhmatova

Amen