

The Witness Cantata Lyrics

By Swanee Hunt

I. Auguries of Innocence (Prelude)

Where is God?

To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour

II. Beware of Terrible Times

Solos

Beware

Beware

Beware

Choir

Beware of terrible times... the Earth opening of a crowd of corpses

Expect famine, earth-quakes, plagues, and heavens darkened by eclipses.

Solos

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 punched since Easter.

Choir

Beware of terrible times

the Earth opening for a crowd of corpses.

Expect famine, earth-quakes, plagues, and heavens darkened by eclipses.

Dies irae, dies illa.

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
Beware of terrible times
the Earth opening for a crowd of corpses.
Expect famine, earth-quakes, plagues, and heavens darkened by eclipses.
Dies irae, dies illa.
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"
Beware of terrible times ...
The Earth opening for a crowd of corpses.
Expect famine, earth-quakes, plagues, and heavens darkened by eclipses.
Beware, Beware, Beware

III. Kyrie

Choir

Father forgive them,
for they know not what they do, what they do
They are blinded by their passion,
they are deafened by their fears,
and they cannot feel your heartbreak

and they cannot taste your tears.
Father forgive us,
for we know not what we do, what we do, we do.
Kyrie eleison.

IV. Dying Man

Solo

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."

V. Mary Magdalene

Tenor

Mary Magdalena beat her breasts and sobbed
His dear disciples stone faced stared

Alto

His mother stood apart
His mother stood apart

His mother stood apart

His mother

Tenor

His dear disciples stone faced stared

Soprano

Mary Magdalena beat her breasts and sobbed

Boy

Will you forget?

Will you forget?

Choir

No other looked into her secret eyes

Nobody dared

Alto

His mother stood apart

His mother stood apart

His mother stood apart

His mother

Tenor

His dear disciples stone faced stared

Soprano

Mary Magdalena beat her breasts and sobbed

VI. Stabat Mater

Soprano

At the foot of the cross stands a mother in grief
watching her son in his passion.

Woman behold your son your heart
your heart must be breaking now

to see life's creation twisted in agony
At the brink of our lives
waits the mother of all
watching her world in its passion.
Oh God behold your world
your heart, your heart must be breaking now
to see your life's creation twisted in agony.

VII. Seventeen Months

Alto

For seventeen months I've cried aloud,
calling you back to your lair.
I hurled myself to 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 bight enormous start stares me straight in the eyes,
Promising death.
Ah, soon.

VIII. The Gallows

Tenor/Bass I and II

Ah

Solo

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.

Tenor/Bass I and II

The gallows threw its shadow over him.

Ah

Where is God? Where is He?

Solo

Three victims mounted onto chairs.
Three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.
“Where is God?” someone behind me asked.
At a sign the chairs tipped over.
Total silence throughout the cap.
On the horizon,
The sun was setting.
We were weeping.
Then the march past began.
The two 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 voices asking:
"Where is God now?"
And I heard a voice within me answer him:
"Here he is, hanging here on this gallows."

IX. Already Madness Lifts its Wings

Solo

Already madness lifts its wing to cover half my soul

All Chorus

that taste of opiate wine.

Lure of the dark valley.

Solo

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 the 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 consolations parting word.

X. Marrow

I was flung back from suffering and love when light divided on a storm-tossed tree

I have slain my will

And still I live
I would be near
I shut my eyes to see
I shut my eyes
I bleed my bones
Their marrow to bestow up on that God who knows what I would know.

XI. Interlude Solos

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 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.

XII. Everything is Plundered

Ev'rything is plundered, betrayed, sold
Death's great black wing scrapes the air.
Mis'ry gnaws to the bone
Why then do we not despair?
By day from the surrounding words,

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

Amen