Two Orchestral Songs

I  The Sacrifice
II  How Weeps the Hangman

by

Jonathan Scott Brubacher

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in Composition

Faculty of Music
University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

The song cycle, Two Orchestral Songs, is a setting of two texts by Canadian poet Gwendolyn MacEwen (1941–1987) from her 1969 collection, The Shadow-Maker. The texts are symbolic in nature and discuss the question of personal sacrifice. In “The Sacrifice,” the narrator observes leaves falling in autumn and compares this “necessary death” against the “unnecessary” sacrifices that we make when we lay down our most beautiful aspects, our “golden selves,” at the “altars of the world” in order to please some external arbiter (the “shapeless ghost”). However, much like a man raking leaves in autumn, these dropped aspects get gathered up by “the Gardener” (a metaphor for Time), and we are left questioning whether our deliberate sacrifices enabled us to achieve the divine end to which we were intended.

“How Weeps the Hangman,” employs similar imagery of leaves representing the “season’s sacrifice” of “pain, love, glory, blood.” The titular metaphor of the Hangman, however, draws on tarot imagery, specifically the twelfth Major Arcana card known as The Hanged Man, which depicts a man hanging upside-down by one foot from a cross or living tree; the man’s facial expression is usually neutral, not an expression of suffering. The card is interpreted in various ways as meaning sacrifice, letting go, surrender, and acceptance. In MacEwen’s poem, the narrator places herself (and us) on the way to the scaffold to offer up our seasonal sacrifices, but the lingering question focuses not on the object (us, The Hanged Man), but on the agent of change, the hooded Hangman who “does his duty to you and me.”
She wonders what pain our own whimpering in the sacrificial process causes to him, whether he and the “embarrassed tree” weep at our losses.

The musical language of this composition employs extended tonal key areas based on synthetic scales, in particular the four transpositionally related enneatonic scales. The harmonies are largely tertian in structure, with added tones and superimposed sonorities creating an effect of bitonality. The imagery of dropping leaves is recreated musically by the prominent use of descending seconds and descending thirds in the melodic and accompanying parts.
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Two Orchestral Songs

I  The Sacrifice
II  How Weeps the Hangman

Texts by Gwendolyn MacEwen

2012
INSTRUMENTATION

2 Flutes (2nd doubling Piccolo)
2 Oboes
2 Clarinets in B♭
2 Bassoons

4 Horns in F
2 Trumpets in C
2 Trombones
Tuba

Percussion (2 players)
  Glockenspiel
  Tubular Bells
  Xylophone
  2 Triangles (high & medium)
  2 Tam-tams (medium & low)
  2 Suspended Cymbals (high & low)
  Bass drum
  Snare drum
  2 Concert toms (medium & low)

Marimba

Harp

Piano

Voice (Contralto)

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
Double Bass
PERFORMANCE NOTES

Duration is approximately 15 minutes.

Score is in C.

Piccolo and xylophone sound one octave higher than written, and glockenspiel two octaves higher. Double bass sounds one octave lower than written.

Accidentals are carried through the bar and through all tied notes. Accidentals affect only those notes in the register of appearance. Some cautionary accidentals appear in the score for ease of performance.
The Sacrifice

I considered too long
the leaves and their golden
falling (these
sacrifices, these
necessary deaths),
until at last I came to see
how my people were dropping
one by one
their golden moments
to the ground,
and offering up the holy
oil of all their loves
to burn black and sour
at what insufferable
altars of the world,
the dizzy smoke encircling
their yearning hands,
their loins,
and the voices of my people
turning into feeble echoes
as they let their truest
prayers
drop sadly to the ground
and called instead
for some shapeless
ghost
to consecrate and take
these gifts,
these living
offerings
they didn’t need to make.

Now I can’t watch a man rake
leaves in autumn, for I think
of that other,
unnecessary season
when the Gardener comes to gather
all the living leaves
(these best
of our dreams)
we let fall
one by one
deliberately.

Did we think
that by killing
our golden
selves, O
God,
we were somehow
gathering Thee?

Gwendolyn MacEwen
How Weeps the Hangman

Now the leaf the wild tree announces
is the season’s sacrifice, and I
throw you all — pain, love, glory, blood
to the wind, crying die, die, die
for the whimpering hangman of our days,
die for the love we bear.
O bless our loves and our seasonal slaves;
the sacrifice the hooded lord demands is here.
Look, we have seen too much, you and I
and the mad embarrassed tree
(don’t ask me how much, don’t ask)
and now our very bones are ropes of glass.
Come to me for I love thee,
saith the scaffold, saith the cross;
O hangman thy hood attracts me much
(do not ask why, do not ask).
We are only victims of
the cold lords of winter and of love,
and we don’t know what amount of pain
our whimpers cause to the whining tree
or how weeps the hangman as
he does his duty to you and me.

Gwendolyn MacEwen

The texts for “The Sacrifice” and “How Weeps the Hangman” are reprinted from The Shadow-Maker, copyright © 1969 by Gwendolyn MacEwen. Used by permission of the author’s family.
for Drew Tompkins and Fabiano Rocha, with much love and thanks
Two Orchestral Songs

1 The Sacrifice

Score in C

Text by Gwendolyn MacEwen

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II How Weeps the Hangman

Moderate = 88

© J. Scott Brubacher 2012
Moderate \( \frac{4}{4} \approx 88 \)