

### *Seven Last Words*

Michael John Trotta (b. 1978, 2016)

SATB, with soprano and baritone soloists.

Piano, chamber ensemble (flute, oboe, horn, piano), or full orchestra (flute, oboe, 2 trumpets in C, horn, timpani, harp, strings).

(c. 40')

Seven movements: I: Father, Forgive Them

(*Pater, dimitte illis*), II: Today, You Will Be with Me (*Hodie mecum eris*), III: Behold Your Son Ecce filius tuus), IV: I Thirst (Sitio), V: My God, Why Have You Abandoned Me? (*Deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti me?*), VI: Into Your Hands I Surrender My Soul (In manus tuas), VII: It Is Finished (*Consummatum est*)

Text: English or Latin

Score available from: [www.morningstarmusic.com](http://www.morningstarmusic.com)

Recording: *Michael John Trotta: Seven Last*

*Words*. Kansas City Repertory Singers, Kansas City Repertory Orchestra, Ben A Spalding. ARSIS Audio, 70-390. 2017.

In his famous *Poetics of Music* of 1939, Stravinsky observes, “A real tradition is not the relic of a past that is irretrievably gone; it is a living force that animates and informs the present.” Michael J. Trotta’s *Seven Last Words* is a work solidly grounded in tradition, yet incorporates a musical language that, in George Gershwin’s words, “informs the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time.”

Musical settings for the Seven Last Words date from at least the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and composers of many style periods have contributed, including de Lassus (16th century), Schütz (1645), Haydn (1787), Frank (1859), Dubois (1867), and MacMillan (1993), and many others. (Although, as Trotta points out, settings in English are relatively rare.) Trotta adheres to the tradition, sometimes incorporating innovations in scoring or ordering of texts introduced by previous composers.

Musically, Trotta presents a broad range of musical conventions and devices, allowing the Words to “expose a gamut of emotions...in a way that distills the most poignant moments of the human condition.” Additionally, the setting interpolates liturgical texts not contained within the traditional set, “further expanding the story and the reaction of those present and witness to the Passion.”

An American composer, conductor, and clinician based in New York City, Trotta completed *Seven Last Words* in 2016. The work was commissioned by four churches: Highland Presbyterian in Louisville, Kentucky, Ladue Chapel Presbyterian in St. Louis, Missouri, Westminster Presbyterian in Greenville, South Carolina, and White Memorial Presbyterian in Raleigh, North Carolina. It will receive its premiere at Carnegie Hall on May 27, 2017. The dynamic interplay of time-honored musical gestures with present-day sonorities is present at the outset of the piece. The first Word, Father, Forgive Them, begins with an ominous sounding tonic in the lower strings, followed by an octave and then a fifth in succession, leading to an unexpected major seventh chord in m. 3. Emotionally, the contrast between somber gloom and reassuring light is established immediately. Musically, the gesture prepares for the statement of the main motive—a simple ascending line consisting of a perfect fifth and a minor second. This theme will recur throughout the work as a unifying element, in both minor and major (with a major second as the upper interval) guises.

The opening measures also reveal the overall harmonic strategy of the piece—diatonic chords, sometimes employing sevenths or higher intervals, usually in functional succession. Strong bows to tradition also appear: at a point of transition just before the middle of the movement, two measures clearly recall the powerful rhythms (complete with tympani reinforcement) of Beethoven’s Fifth

Symphony. An even more direct historical gesture is heard in the inclusion of a fugue section later in the movement, aptly setting an interpolation of the Kyrie. The head motive of the subject is essentially the opening theme of the movement, but its expansion into a fugue subject makes it identical in character to the opening of Bach's Fugue in G Minor from book one of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Indeed, it is essentially the same subject with a reordering of the intervals of the head motive.

The inclusion of a circle of fifths in the harmonic motion of the fugue makes the Baroque reference complete. The final cadence of the movement is fascinating. Recall that the work opened with an octave followed by the addition of an open fifth. The closing gesture reflects that event by setting up a perfect authentic cadence in minor only to end on an open fifth. Oddly enough, the voicing of the chord, combined with the lingering sonorities in the memory, convinced me that I was hearing a major triad (Picardy third). It wasn't until I checked the score that I was aware of the missing third. The ambiguity perfectly portrays the mixture of despair and hope that permeates the texts.

The second Word, "Today You Will Be with Me," displays soft and reflective sentiments, featuring major harmonies and the prevalence of major seventh and ninth chords. Following an extensive orchestral introduction featuring harp and alluding to the original theme that permeates the work, the choir enters with the primary theme of this movement, which has been suggested but not quite stated by the harp. The new theme is built from the same fifth and minor second that comprised the original theme of the work, but in retrograde, starting on the tonic, and descending through the seventh and third of the key. While encompassing the same intervals, it couldn't be more different in character from its minor-

key parent. The tranquility of the movement is maintained by the steady harp accompaniment, and ends quietly with a "Broadway button" played by the lower strings.

The third Word, "Behold Your Son," features soprano solo with orchestra with the prevalence of harp once again. (The harp plays a prominent role throughout the entire work.) This short movement features symmetrical phrasing and a major-key theme adapted from the work's primary motive. Trotta has taken liberties with the text here: The second part of the Word, "Behold thy mother" is not heard. Instead, a verse from the Stabat Mater is interpolated, a strategy previously employed by Dubois.

The fourth Word, "I Thirst," is set in a minor key and scored for baritone solo, choir, and orchestra. The first half of the movement is reminiscent of a Handel aria, complete with ritornello, a quasi *da capo* form, and a strong Baroque feel. The contrasting second half, featuring choir and orchestra, is far more energized, with prominent brass figures, a vigorous section set in 7/8 time, and a final triumphant-sounding major chord played by the brass.

The fifth Word, "My God, Why Have You Abandoned Me?," is set in a minor key. The mood of despair that continues throughout is reinforced by a descending chromatic line in the bass, which previously served as the countersubject of the Kyrie fugue in the first Word. The restricted motion of the vocal parts and abundant chromaticism contribute to the depiction of Christ's weakness and anguish as he faces his approaching death. The orchestra ends the movement, concluding with a slowly fading final chord through the last five bars.

The sixth Word, “Into Your Hands I Surrender My Soul,” is the only completely unaccompanied movement is the composition. It begins with staggered entrances, but homophonic motion prevails throughout, albeit peppered with abundant suspensions and moving inner lines. The overall form is ABA, which the shorter, middle B section set to an interpolated text, “Not, mine, but your will be done.”

The seventh Word, “It is Finished,” is the longest movement by far, and serves as a musical summary of the entire composition. It begins with a statement of the main motive by the horn, accompanied by an energetic rhythmic figure also derived from the first movement. References to previously stated material are abundant, sometimes appearing as exact melodic statements with different words. For example, parts of the solo melody from the third Word reappear in with full choir with the identical orchestral accompaniment. The memorable “Remember me” theme from the second Word returns in the seventh Word with the interpolated text “Truly this man was the Son of God.” Other significant gestures that return in this movement include the 7/8 meter of the fourth Word, this time in 7/16, and the Fifth-Symphony reference from the first movement. The movement concludes with a recapitulation, referencing not of the beginning of the movement, but of the opening of the entire composition, reinforcing the observation that the work constitutes one cohesive musical statement.

Trotta’s *Seven Last Words* is a composition that appeals on many levels. The overall harmonic color is accessible, rich and varied, and one that is familiar to modern-day ears. It wouldn’t be a stretch to observe that several extended passages are reminiscent of what might be heard in a contemporary film score. At the same time, allusions to musical gestures and conventions drawn from the Western classical tradition

are ubiquitous, and can only add to the appreciation of the work by those well steeped in the literature. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the work is highly integrated, with inner logic and connections that even the general listener can appreciate.

It is important to note that the work was commissioned by churches for performance by church choirs consisting of non-professional performers with limited and varied resources. Trotta responded directly to his charge by producing a work that is appealing, adaptable, and within the capabilities of any competent ensemble. *Seven Last Words* is a significant achievement, a worthy participant in the choral tradition, and a welcome contribution to the literature.

—Robert Rawlins