Three Psalms

by Mason Emmert

Texts from
Psalms 12, 66, and 120

Three Psalms

The impetus for this work was research into the various types and functions of psalms from a textual perspective; how do they function as poetry, rather than as liturgy? Unsurprisingly, there is a good deal of scholarship on this subject, often categorizing psalms based on their subjects. In particular, this work focuses on Psalm 66 (functioning both as a Hymn of Praise and a Hymn of Thanksgiving), Psalm 12 (a Community Lament), and Psalm 120 (an Individual Lament).[1]

I had several goals from the beginning of the compositional process. First, I wanted to pay homage to the tradition of harmonized chant; the second movement does this with a contemporary harmonic flavor. Second, I wanted my third movement to reflect my admiration of Renaissance counterpoint; an individual lament needed parts that could function with melodic independence while also working together.

Finally, I knew that the composition needed to be, simply, enjoyable. I, like many others, have a complex relationship with Christianity and with religion, but singing both sacred and secular music has always made me happy. From the start, I wanted the composition of the piece to reflect this pleasure and be musically and aesthetically satisfying independently of the words. Music should appeal to our most basic senses; it should not address primarily those individuals who can grasp its complexities. I hope that the music I have written will illuminate the texts for those who engage with them but will nevertheless provide excitement and joy for those who do not.

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[1] These categorizations are based on the writings of Lawrence Boadt, specifically Boadt, Lawrence, Richard J. Clifford, and Daniel J. Harrington. "Israelite Worship and Prayer." *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. New York: Paulist, 1984. 282. Print.

Performance Notes

The piece was composed primarily for an SATB choir consisting of approximately 30 singers, but the premiere performance featured slightly different personnel, both for convenience and for the sake of accentuating the structure and relationship between movements. As the first movement is the call to worship, it was performed by the full ensemble. The second and third movements are more particular, personal laments, and it was therefore appropriate to utilize a solo quintet for them. The final movement began with the quintet (as the opening of the final movement follows directly from the end of the third movement), but the full ensemble joined for the last 19 measures of the piece, balancing the texture at the beginning of the work and including as many voices as possible for the repeated "Praise be to God."

The solo that is written in the third movement was originally intended for one voice to carry throughout. However, considering that the solo section in measures 68-84 sits considerably higher than the rest, these bars may be sung by a different soloist (provided that the final line of the movement is performed, as it was meant to be, as a completion of the first line of the movement).

Movement 1: Psalm 66

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Movement 2: Psalm 12

Movement 3: Psalm 120

Quasi recitativo ♩=50

Solo: I call on the Lord in my dis-tress...

SOPRANO: I call on the Lord in my dis-tress, and he

ALTO: I call on the

TENOR: I call on the Lord in

BASS:

Save me, Lord, from

an-swers me, he an-swers me

Lord in my dis-tress, and he an-swers me, he an-swers me.

my dis-tress, and he an-swers me, he an-swers me

I call on the Lord in my dis-tress

Movement 4: Psalm 66