

Keramos and other Choral Work

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Choral work

Question:

I'm a choral musician and fan, but I was also impressed by several things from Broadway, including your "Wicked". I was especially impressed by "Dear Old Shiz"---I was wondering what your influences are for choral music and how you go about writing it, and how much you have done (I don't know that much about your work, although I am also familiar with "Pippin".)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have always enjoyed writing for chorus. I don't know that I have any special technique; I just basically work it out at the piano, trying to be conscious of range and voice leading, pretty much as I imagine any choral arranger would do. I think by far my best choral work to date is in CHILDREN OF EDEN, which is a semi-oratorio in which the choir serve as the main Storytellers. I will be writing a new choral piece this summer for my friend Daniel Hughes, the artistic director of the San Jose Choral Society, and am looking forward to it. Thanks, Stephen Schwartz

Keramos

Question:

I know the work was commissioned by the Choral Project. Did you choose the text? If so, how did you come upon it? How did you decide which verses to include, omit, and the ordering of verses?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The text was originally suggested to me by Daniel Hughes, the director of the Choral Project. I liked it very much when he sent it to me, and it immediately suggested music to me, particularly the constant, circular motion you mention. I went through the poem and made decisions about what verses to include and in what order, based on my own responses to the content and emotion of the poem. I tried to arrive at a structure that had its own natural build and "story".

Question:

How do you define "Keramos"? I have found several translations, and since the utterances of the word sound like various layers of the movement of the wheel, I wondered how you see, or hear the translation of the word.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I was been told by friends who speak Greek, when I asked, that "keramos" can mean both the "ceramic" and the "ceramicist" (or "potter".) I tended to think of it more as the former, as the clay that is being formed and reformed by the invisible Potter, by its nature or the universe or God.

Question:

As to phrasing in the beginning of the piece, my inclination is to have the baritone and bass voices elide together their utterances of the opening Keramos without breaks after m. 2 and 4. The same for both tenor parts as they repeatedly intone the word. Is this how you hear it?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

That is fine with me, if it can be accomplished in terms of breathing. I don't mind the break that early, but once the turning rhythm comes in, then the staggered breathing, as called for in the music, is necessary to give the feeling of constant motion. Does this answer your specific question?

Question:

Beyond the dynamic markings at the beginnings of verses, there is not much direction within the verses. I am assuming that the rise and fall of the lines themselves will determine the dynamics in each case, except where otherwise marked.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think you will find that to be the case. The most important and challenging aspect of the dynamics is to make sure that the melody, which is traded from part to part, is always clear, while never losing the constant motion underneath (except obviously where the piece stops moving for a bit going into and at the beginning of the last verse.)

"Keramos" - music by Stephen Schwartz, text from the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, will be published by Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc.

A note from the composer: When Daniel Hughes sent me Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Keramos" for me to consider setting as a choral work, I was immediately taken not just by its thematic content, but by its churning inexorable rhythm so evocative of a constantly turning wheel. I have tried to capture in the music this endless motion, which I find both remorseless and oddly comforting.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For a recording of Keramos by the Choral Society see <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/schwartzrecordings2.htm>

For some examples of choral arrangements from Stephen Schwartz musicals see <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/choral-music.htm>