

Programme Notes for the music for launch in Rome of *Triumphs and Laments* written by Philip Miller

April 21–22 2016

The music for *Triumph and Laments* emerges from the images we all carry, today, of a mass of migrants trudging across Europe. These are the 21st century processions: parents and children and friends, brothers and sisters, dragging their scant belongings from a place of terrible violence to a place of imagined sanctuary, a place that might become “home”.

These are, of course, not the first exiles. Neither will they be the last. *Triumphs and Laments* coincides, this year, with the Jewish festival of Passover, which commemorates the flight of the Israelites from servitude in Egypt. As my own starting point, I examined the Hebraic liturgical songs of the late Renaissance Italian composer Salomone Rossi of Mantua, a Jew.

Rossi’s madrigal, “Al Naharot Bavel” is based on the text of Psalm 137 from the Book of Exodus:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

It speaks to me not only of oppressed nations forced into exile, but of the nationalism and violence that ensues, also expressed in the psalm.

My structure for the composition came from re-imagining this psalm being played stereophonically, by two musical processions of singers along the waters of the Tiber. One procession is an expression of triumph, and one of lament. Imagine the rivers of Babylon, or the Red Sea, or indeed the expanse of Mediterranean Sea between Africa and Lampedusa: brass players and percussionists walk toward each other from two different geographical positions along the river, as if encountering each other across a body of water. The narratives of migration are tragic, but can also be redemptive. As migrants leave loved ones behind, or make it to the imagined ‘promised land’ only to find a new world of difficulties, Triumph and Lament talk to each other each other across the water.

Exploring the dissonances, harmonic shifts and mottos of Rossi’s work, together with my co-composer Thuthuka Sibisi, we have broken down the song into fragments, loops, and rhythmical motifs. I have extended moments of both dissonance and resolution, which speak to the emotions of both lamentation and triumph emerge from the two musical processions. Every call of a triumphant musical phrase which emanates from the Triumphal procession, is answered by their counterpoint procession of Laments, with music of mourning and darkness.

But the musical elaboration of Salomone Rossi also gives way to musical eruptions where voices both from the present and the past resonate within the sound-world of the processions: a Mandinkan slave song from West Africa, an ancient Southern Italian melismatic folk songs or a battle song from the Zulu warriors.

As in all European metropolises, the narratives of migration are inscribed onto its stones. As we walk and play this music along the banks of the Tiber, I choose not to ignore the graffiti written on the walls behind us, much of which has been erased in preparation for the project. Rather, I incorporate these slogans, sometimes foreign or unclear and indecipherable, into a “call and response” chant between the two musical processions. This “sounding” of the erased graffiti from the walls sees visual traces as part of the musical palimpsest that shapes the composition, reminding us of how these inscriptions on the

walls at the banks of the river, continue to mark the triumphs and laments of present day Rome.

Finally, I have chosen the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke from his book *Die Fruhen Gedichte*, Leipzig, 1922 to be recited and sung during the procession:

That is the longing: to dwell amidst the waves/ and have no homeland in time
Questa e la nostalgia: vivere nella piena e non avere patria dentro al tempo