

**The Flight Into Egypt** (1986) was composed on commission from Cantata Singers. The commission allowed me to follow through on musical ideas already in motion, at a time when I was working on a number of projects (of which this was the least “practical”). It is my first choral music in five years and renews an association with Cantata Singers that dates to 1969, when I became their Music Director, and continues to the present through many friendships and my close relationship with their remarkable Music Director, David Hoose.

I began *The Flight* on an impulse stemming from a conversation with Craig Smith and Rose Mary Harbison about Christmas texts. Craig Smith mentioned the Christmas season counseling experience of Rev. Al Kershaw at Emmanuel Church as a time when need, isolation, and anxiety increase. We agreed that the darker side of Christmas needs representation, especially in a time of increasing distance between the privileged and the less fortunate.

I have worked twice before with unedited Bible texts in a narrative manner favored by Schütz and Stravinsky, and I’m sure I will again. Without those pieces I would feel that a significant part of what I want to do as a composer would not have a voice. In this piece the subject matter gave rise to musical techniques: a frequent reliance on points of imitation, and the derivation of most of the music from the short motives stated at the outset. These are metaphors for the pre-ordained, inevitable aspect of the story. The harmony is more freely ordered, in the interest of a more flexible and compassionate rendering of the details of the narrative. The most expressive element in the piece is the continuity, which fuses the narrative into one continuous impression, both abstract and highly colored.

When I wrote this piece, I didn’t even know of the existence of Schütz’s incomparable setting of this text. But I should have known that if anyone were to be exploring the shadow-image of Christmas, in times not unlike ours, it would be that composer.

**But Mary Stood** (2006) was commissioned by Cantata Singers in honor of David Rockefeller, Jr. It begins with a Prelude for string orchestra, actually composed last, a summary of many of the musical questions posed in the other movements.

The two choral motets resulted from requests from important women in my life: my mother-in-law and my mother. These women were both political activists and religious seekers. They asked me (many years ago) to memorialize them with settings of their favorite scriptural passages.

In “Let Your Heart Be Troubled,” the aural picture contrasts the idea of the Consoled, remaining behind, with Christ in His upward journey. The word “Charity” frames the text from Corinthians and is set as a symmetrical musical emblem, held by forces from above and below. More ambiguous harmonies describe various states of incomplete knowledge.

Much of this music was composed while working with Cantata Singers on Bach’s Saint John Passion. There, at the moment of Jesus’ death, the two Marys move to the center of the stage. Jesus’ words to John, “Behold your mother,” ignited the power of the anima in the prayers and iconography of early Christianity.

Mary Magdalene, her presence both contrasting and complementary to Jesus’ mother, is the first to see that the tomb is empty, the first to meet the risen Christ, the first to report it. (“Do not touch me,” says Christ in the King James version, while “Cease clinging to me” is the 1976 translation by the Catholic Council.) John, the last gospel writer, responds to the longing for the Eternal Feminine: compassion, approachability, and sensuality.

Between the two unaccompanied choral movements, “But Mary Stood,” for soprano, double choir, and string orchestra, proposes the soloist as both Narrator and Mary, the double choir as Jesus. These three characters each have their own vocabulary, family related. The setting envisions a Mary Magdalene who was the true intimate of Jesus, who understood, intellectually and intuitively, his purpose on earth.

In composing a piece to honor longtime Cantata Singers leader and colleague David Rockefeller, Jr., I resolved to make something that would live close to the center of the themes typically associated with the Cantata Singers. All of us who have been involved with this organization have been grateful for the places the subject matter has

taken us. This was at the heart of David's devotion to the group, and I feel privileged to be able to add to our common legacy.

**The Supper at Emmaus** (2014) is a cantata on texts from Luke and I Timothy. The work was commissioned jointly by Cantata Singers and Emmanuel Music, with generous support from David Rockefeller, Jr., the Mattina R. Proctor Foundation, and Epp K.J. Sonin. The first performance of the outer choral movements was given in 2014, with the orchestra and chorus of Emmanuel Music, Ryan Turner, conductor, and the first performance of the complete work was given by Cantata Singers and David Hoose in 2015.

David wrote to me at the end of July 2013, asking if I would be able to compose a piece for the Cantata Singers 50th anniversary. I described to him a long-contemplated cantata, *The Supper at Emmaus*, which our friend Craig Smith discussed with me some years ago—for both of us a favorite Biblical passage. Completing it now, in Craig's memory, suggested a collaboration with Emmanuel Music, which the leadership of both organizations was able to arrange.

The main narrative, "Historia," sets the Biblical report of the story in Luke 24 (KJV) for four soloists and orchestra. Before and after this chronicle comes a Prelude and Postlude, for chorus and orchestra.

The chorus first sings the words from Luke of the guards (are they Angels?) who confront the women coming to the tomb seeking Jesus' body. The Postlude text is from a letter of Paul. Its tone is common and personal; Heinrich Schütz composed, in the *Geistliche Chormusik*, this same text in memory of his friend, the composer Johann Hermann Schein.

When Craig Smith and I talked about this subject, we started with Bach's great Cantata 6, in which the themes of abandonment and loss are expressed as collective anguished lamentation, and as intimate loneliness and uncertainty. We also paid attention to many paintings, especially the two by Caravaggio, the first theatrical, the second later one meditative, with a mysterious new female figure, whose role, we decide, involves us. All the figures, including Jesus, were approachable, familiar. (In some of Caravaggio's other paintings, his historic figures have dirty feet.)

A special hint for the composer came from Duccio's marvelous painting *The Road to Emmaus*. Jesus is talking with the two disciples; he is disguised as a traveler, with broad-brimmed hat, knapsack, and walking stick. One of the archetypal story beginnings: *A Stranger Comes to Town*. And the strangeness, the mystery, the fervor, felicity, and awkwardness of the Scriptural account, a glowing recalcitrant found object, taken on just as it comes.

It is a great privilege to write another large piece of sacred music for two such cultivated institutions as Cantata Singers and Emmanuel Music. I am very grateful to both organizations and to the generous sponsors David Rockefeller Jr., the Mattina R. Proctor Foundation, and Epp K.J. Sonin.

—John Harbison, edited for this program by David Hoose

## **An Appreciation of John Harbison** **by David Hoose**

John Harbison, who celebrates his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on December 20 of this year, has played an essential role in the cultural life of Boston for more than five decades. Most listeners have heard his music, since virtually every significant Boston ensemble—large or small, prestigious or modest—has performed compositions of his, some organizations with great regularity. In particular, those ensembles that have commissioned John to compose new works for them have especially strengthened our connection to his music.

John has touched the Boston musical community in myriad ways: as a probing conductor (former Cantata Singers music director, now Emmanuel Music principal guest conductor, and guest conductor with several contemporary music groups), as music professor at MIT who exposes bright minds to the marvels of classical music, and—perhaps most importantly—as an engaged concert-goer. Few listeners possess John’s breadth and depth of listening experience. Few active composers allow as much openness to as wide a variety of music, from old to new, light to serious, or jazz to classical, for they can find themselves admitting a narrow range of music, perhaps as a way of developing and securing their own creative voices. But John’s appreciation for a huge span of music, new and old, extends generously, and even that which may not appeal to his own musical thinking always receives thoughtful observation and respect.

For me, as someone who has studied, rehearsed, and performed at least twenty-five Harbison choral, orchestral, and chamber works, it is his music that continually and repeatedly gives immense satisfaction. His musical voice is uniquely his and, at the same time, reflects a penetrating understanding of the greatest traditions in classical music—particularly those of Bach and Schütz—as well as those in the seminal worlds of jazz. His language constantly evolves to meet the needs of the particular project at hand, but it remains rooted in musical values that I deeply admire: compelling harmonic motion, closely heard contrapuntal relationships, vital rhythmic life, fascination with the syntax and meaning of texts, and interest in the infinite capacity, both complex and straightforward, of music to breathe in phrases.

In every composition of John’s that I know, from the jazz-infused 1979 Wind Quintet (which the Emmanuel Wind Quintet, of which I was a member, performed about forty times without our interest in it ever fading), to the rigorously conceived Emerson, for unaccompanied chorus, it is easy to see—and hear—his fascination with, and commitment to, the same qualities that he admires in Bach. In his recent book of essays, “What Do We Make of Bach,” John speaks of Bach’s “great synthesis of strict and free elements—law and fantasy—given and divined.” John’s music, too, is inventively systematic, its rigor shot with flexible imagination. The layers of relationships and powerful emotions that arise from such sophisticated thought, always heard and always hearable, bring me back again and again.