

Programme note for *Weggewerp*

The choral cycle *Weggewerp* (*Cast Away / Banished*) was commissioned by VOX Cape Town in memory of Albrecht Hahne, a leprosy sufferer and particularly empathetic Lutheran Pastor who passed away in 2015. Albrecht's former wife – a VOX choir member – was particularly struck by the poignant raw poetry of a faded graffiti that the photographer Derek McKenzie discovered on the wall of an abandoned shepherd's hut on a remote Karoo farm. Reflecting on the circumstances in which an unknown person would have been compelled to shout out these desperate verses many decades ago in a most remote and lonely place, resonated in such a profound way with Albrecht's life experiences that the idea came up to use the verses in a musical tribute to his memory.

It is interesting to note that the place and space from which the verses came to our attention contributed so much additional meaning to the text that it took a somewhat more distant observer to recognize that the 'writing on the wall' was actually a Psalm verse. I will admit that I was still blissfully unaware of this fact while setting the text to music – which I consider a very fortunate kind of ignorance in hindsight. In this way I was guided by what I considered to be the special quality of an unmistakably unique 'Karoo language', in effect furnishing the verses with a new and original authorship, rather than submitting to a potentially more revering and less intense treatment of a traditionally biblical text.

Recognizing the canonical origin of the text did not, of course, take anything away in the end but instead added another layer of meaning and offered some further interesting insights. One of them concerns a framework for dating the wall scribbles to a certain degree, considering that they are based on the old Afrikaans bible translation first published in 1933. Another one concerns the subtle but clearly deliberate omissions: Where the biblical text reads "you lifted me up and cast me away" (verse 11), the anonymous author evidently was not compelled to mention the issue of "lifted up". Verses 14 to 27, where there is talk of mercy and salvation, are completely missing. Instead, the author offers his own take on eternity with which he irrefutably concludes the lamentation: "until death". Thereby the 'Karoo authorship' is in fact reaffirmed – an overwhelmingly existential experience of place overriding canonical scripture.

To further emphasize this Karoo context, I decided to place the piece into a cycle of landscape-related text settings. Admitting that this is a rather vague, very wide and fully external frame of reference and, moreover, that my choice of related text is purely subjective, I will nevertheless proffer that the language of W.E.G. Louw (born in Sutherland) and C.L. Leipoldt (born in Worcester) shows a particular atmospheric kinship due to the two poets' 'phenotype'. Compared to that of the Psalm, their language is much more reflexive and restrained, but thereby arguably creates a suitable frame for the drastic and highly dramatic lament of *Slapeloos* at the core of the cycle.

In a different context, *Weggewerp* forms part of a compositional process in which I attempt to find a well-fitting musical idiom for the sound of Afrikaans as a spoken – or rather sung – language. I consider this language, with its characteristically short words and succinct expressions, open vowels and large variety of nuanced diphthongs to be a particularly suitable singing language. Arguably the expressive quality of Afrikaans relies less on sophisticated grammar or extensive vocabulary and more on how (well) it is spoken individually – and hence how it is sung. Hence it resists all too generic conventions of setting texts to music, asking for a highly nuanced approach to do justice to its own fine and quite intangible expressive nuances. I have come to appreciate this as an equally hard and rewarding compositional challenge.

From an ever wider perspective, the struggle with the 'musical sound' of Afrikaans is but one of a series of defining contexts or 'ecologies' of my work, on a par with the study of musical idioms of selected indigenous African cultures, the field of historically informed performances of early European music or the attempts at credible and meaningful artistic responses to the remarkable diversity of South Africa's cultural and natural heritage.

While this very heritage arguably amounts to a most inspirational environment, it is alarming to note how it is instead increasingly being disregarded and neglected, in fact threatened, downgraded or downright destroyed in tragically ignorant and irreverent ways. Support for projects that culturally engage with this uniquely complex ecology and that attempt to find meaningful connections to appropriate ways of living with and in it, is rare. I therefore sincerely thank VOX for creating this collaborative opportunity: for commissioning the work, for not being intimidated by its technical challenges and for the sustained and dedicated commitment to 'voice' this tribute to Albrecht Hahne, to Afrikaans as a 'harshly poetic' form of expression and to the vastness of the Karoo, which will hopefully continue to exert its cultural and spiritual stimulus, begging us to stretch our imagination beyond our usually all too cluttered horizons.

Hans Huysen