

## *The Parting* – Program Note

In 2016 Mina Miller, the Artistic Director of the Seattle-based organization Music of Remembrance (MOR), contacted me about a new libretto from David Mason based on the life of the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti. In 2014, Music of Remembrance had invited me to compose a chamber opera to another libretto by David. That experience was among the richest and most rewarding of my professional career. MOR recalls the Holocaust through music with concert performances, recordings, educational programs, and an ambitious program of commissioning new works. Their projects always have a special depth of expression and meaning, and they are always expertly realized. Now I had the opportunity to work with them - and with David - once again. I jumped at the chance. It was both an honor and a challenge to compose music to accompany David's elegant and moving words, as well as for the shattering Radnóti poems that David had chosen to incorporate into his libretto. *The Parting* is dedicated to Mina Miller.

*"...some evil is right next door."*

These lines, from the opening monologue of David Mason's libretto, haunted me throughout the many months I spent composing *The Parting*. Perhaps it's our nation's current political and social climate, but in this disappointing time of xenophobia, increased racism, shocking anti-Semitism, divisiveness, and ever-growing tribalism, David's words seemed more accurate than at any other point in my lifetime.

What does it look like, this evil next door? More importantly for a composer charged with creating a new opera, what does it sound like? Picture an apartment in Hungary in the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Music from next door comes through the window. Perhaps it's a young girl singing a folk melody, or a husband and wife playing a four-hand work by Stephen Heller, Emánuel Moór, or any of the lesser-known Romantics. The music is tuneful, straightforward, even common. If there truly is, in the famous phrase of Hannah Arendt, a "banality of evil," might this be the sound of it – this narrow melody followed by a simple sequence, floating on the air from a neighbor's home?

It is this familiar but unplaceable music – a ghostly music from some other time and place - that is the foundation of the opera's score. The theme that starts off the work first appears in its simplest statement, but soon becomes corrupted, presented with wayward pitches, rhythmic changes, odd voicings, and extremes of range and dynamics.

If history teaches us anything, it's that both poetry and love have a way of outlasting evil. In one of the most moving moments in the libretto, Death teaches Radnóti why we live. "To learn what love is. To love. To make beautiful things. To die." In the final ensemble, the original theme returns, but now transformed into something different. Is it hopeful? We have the poetry, after all. But this theme is also a warning, whispering, as in the words of Miklós Radnóti -

*"I lived on Earth in an era such as this..."*

Tom Cipullo  
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