

Reflections on James Adler's *Memento Mori*
(Published Program Notes)
Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus
April 1996

Different, powerful, beautiful, unusual, painful, difficult, eclectic...these are just a few of the ways my colleagues in the chorus have described *Memento mori: an AIDS requiem*. Beginning with passages from the requiem mass (the Roman Catholic "Mass for the Dead") and adding Hebrew prayers as well as contemporary poetry and prose, James Adler's requiem is as diverse, complex and personal as the people to whom he dedicates it, the "courageous men and women who are living with and who have succumbed to" AIDS.

As would a requiem mass, the work opens with the *Requiem aeternam*, an introductory hymn that sets the tone for the occasion by asking God to grant eternal rest to the souls of the departed, to let "perpetual light shine on them." Within this introit is interpolated the first verse of the *Kyrie Eleison* imploring "Lord, have mercy." The focus here is not on death itself but rather on what will become of the souls in the afterlife.

Adler then departs from this traditional liturgical foundation by incorporating a poem by Quentin Crisp, Britain's notorious and self-professed "raging queen." Beginning with the simple announcement, "Now I am dead," what may first seem a solemn acceptance of death turns to disquiet as the voice of the dead subject muses, "And here I walk and wonder why I died." The focus thus shifts from an acceptance of death and anticipation of the afterlife to an immediate need to know "why?" What explanation can there be for such suffering and death?

As if to answer this consuming question, the score returns to the first part of the well-known *Dies irae* and its horrific images of a wrathful God who swiftly punishes sin with death: "Nothing will remain unpunished." This is not the voice of this requiem's God, however, but that of a society ever ready to justify the inexplicable as the "will of God," a society that would cruelly dismiss a virus such as AIDS as an act of divine retribution.

In place of this pervasive misconception, Adler offers a more universal and humane vision of God by including two Hebrew prayers, the *Yizkor* and *El Malei Rachamim*. Originating during the 11th century as a tribute to the countless Jews massacred by the Crusaders and still said as a memorial to all the faithful departed, the *Yizkor* ("Remembrance") might be thought of as the prayer of a community honoring those who have suffered and died senselessly and needlessly. Such suffering and death, whether due to historical prejudice or current disease, are not preordained punishments but rather tragic sacrifices, sacrifices that will enable the souls of the departed to join the "Divine Presence" as so beautifully celebrated in the *El Malei Rachamim* ("God of Mercies").

Once again, the focus shifts, this time from concern for the departed to that of the survivor. Adler returns to Quentin Crisp whose *The Wounded* (or "Ingemisco" in Latin) so succinctly captures the sorrow, helplessness and dismay faced by the living: "What shall we say... What can we do... Where can we hide?" This despair continues in the Latin *Lacrymosa* ("Weeping") but is soon countered by a passage of strikingly poignant though little-known prose by an American writer. Taken from an unfinished play by Philip Justin Smith entitled *Chosen Family*, this excerpt chronicles the final moments in the life of "David" as experienced by the one person who has cared for him throughout his illness — his lover, partner and friend.

What might be perceived as tragic loss transforms into heavenly celebration: David departs this world and is immediately embraced by a chorus of angels who, as tradition holds, joyously herald his arrival by singing the *Holy! Holy! Holy!* in English, Latin (*Sanctus*) and Hebrew (*Kadosh*), extending a loving, all-inclusive welcome which concludes with *Chorus angelorum* ("Choirs of angels sing you to your rest").

The angels' assurances of eternal rest resound as "requiem" is reintroduced from two other sections from the requiem mass: from the *Pie Jesu* ("Sweet Jesus"); the last two lines of the *Dies irae*, emphasizing Christ's sweetness and mercy; and from the *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God") with its metaphor of Christ as the sacrificial lamb.

In the *Lux aeterna* ("Eternal Light"), the theme of heavenly light is brought down to earth in an excerpt from Denis Stokes' *Park Flickers*. Written as a recollection of the 1992 AIDS Candlelight Vigil and March in Washington, D.C., this passage profiles one person's discovery of how she will respond to the AIDS epidemic: she will carry her flickering light from the march back into the darkness of an unknowing and uncaring world and "hope that my flicker could help them to see, to know, to feel."

The final movement of *Memento mori* begins with *Survival* by Atlanta's own Bill Weaver. Taken from his *Plague Songs*, this poem is an acknowledgment of the brutal impact made by AIDS on his life and those he loves; more importantly, though, *Survival* is the author's covenant to embrace and *live* life: "We will affirm life every day that we have left."

The movement ends with *Chorus angelorum... Requiem aeternam* which, in the Roman burial service, is said as the coffin is lowered into the ground.

They are gone from us. They are with the angels now.
Requiem aeternam. Amen.