

Cassandra's Lament

for unaccompanied women's voices

PROGRAM NOTE:

As Jane Austen's work often explores the gap between private feelings and their public expression, *Cassandra's Lament* explores what may have been such contrasts in her sister Cassandra's bereavement: the private experience of torment and dislocation at odds with public, prayerful sacraments of serenity, composure and acceptance. In memories, the dead's legacy of elegant and eloquent words may be at odds with the urgent utterances of their terminal illness.

So it must have been for Cassandra Austen at the time of her sister Jane's death. In Cassandra's wrenching experience of loss, her memories of Jane's own words and reflections about death – both the transcendent and the tortured – juxtaposed in sharp contrast but ultimately in harmony with the steady inexorable Anglican funeral chant that publicly accompanied Jane's body to its final resting place.

Cassandra's Lament, is a collage of melodies and words, elements of Cassandra Austen's psychic soundscape at the time of her sister's death. Fragments and shadows of memory and sudden pangs of loss streak across her inner landscape with poignant urgency, juxtaposed with ongoing echoes of the. In *Cassandra's Lament*, brief excerpts from the traditional, serene Anglican Requiem chant are juxtaposed with phrases from Cassandra's distraught and poignant letters, lines from Jane's formal prayer, hanging at St. Nicholas' Church, Steventon, and the simple, agonized words Jane uttered on her deathbed. The texts and the melodies associated with each of these recur, and reoccur, reflecting the ruminative process of grief. The reappearances of the serpentine lines seem at first to be identical, but each apparent repetition is subtly altered, changing as grief changes as it heals, imperceptibly and from the inside out.

TEXTS

From the letters of Cassandra Austen: *"The last sad ceremony is to take place on Thursday morning, her dear remains are to be deposited in the Cathedral – it is a satisfaction to me to think that they are to lie in a Building she admird (sic) so much –her precious soul I presume to hope reposes in a far superior Mansion. May mine one day be reunited to it..."*

"What I have lost, no one but myself can know. I have lost a treasure, such a Sister, such a friend as never can have been surpassed. She was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow. I had not a thought concealed from her, and it is as if I had lost a part of myself. I loved her only too well, [but]not better than she deserved..."

"When I asked her if there was anything she wanted, her answer was she wanted nothing but death and some of her words were 'God grand me patience, Pray for me Oh Pray for me.'"

From the Prayers of Jane Austen: *Give us grace almighty father, so to pray, as to deserve to be heard...Look with compassion on the afflicted..., assuage the pangs of disease, comfort the broken in spirit.*

From the Anglican Requiem:

*In paradisum deducant te Angeli;
in tuo adventu suscipiant te Martyres,
et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Ierusalem.
Chorus Angelorum te suscipiat,
et cum Lazaro quondam paupere
aeternam habeas requiem.*

*May Angels lead you into paradise;
When you arrive, may the Martyrs receive you,
and lead you to the holy city of Jerusalem.
May a choir of Angels receive you,
and with Lazarus, once a poor man,
may you have eternal rest.*

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

Solo Soprano and Solo Alto are singers taken from the Soprano 1 and Alto 1 sections, respectively. Their parts are notated only when they differ from those of their sections.

Because *Cassandra's Lament* focuses on contrasts (between darkness and light, public and private, and between silence and dense harmonic textures), dynamic changes and durations of all notes must be closely observed, holding long or tied notes for their full value, and not singing through any marked rests so as to create the pronounced tang of dissonance resulting from their juxtaposition with newly articulated harmonic material.

Frequent small modifications are implied in overall tempi: as the Latin chant enters and re-enters, tempo should tend to relax, and the running triplet figures' tempo may quicken.