

Kelvin Thomson

Babel

for soprano voice and piano

2014

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Babel was commissioned by the PCC of St John's Friern Barnet
for a First World War memorial concert.

The first performance was given by
Tami Tal (soprano), and Kelvin Thomson (piano) at
St John's Friern Barnet, North London on 8th November 2014

Duration: c. 6 minutes

Performance materials available from the composer

Babel

Therefore is the name of it called Babel

AND still we stood and stared far down
Into that ember-glowing town
Which every shaft and shock of fate
Had shorn unto its base. Too late
Came carelessly Serenity.

Now torn and broken houses gaze
On to the rat-infested maze
That once sent up rose-silver haze
To mingle through eternity.

The outlines, once so strongly wrought,
Of city walls, are now a thought
Or jest unto the dead who fought . . .
Foundation for futurity.

The shimmering sands where once there played
Children with painted pail and spade
Are drearily desolate, afraid
To meet Night's dark humanity,

Whose silver cool remakes the dead,
And lays no blame on any head
For all the havoc, fire, and lead,
That fell upon us suddenly.

When all we came to know as good
Gave way to Evil's fiery flood,
And monstrous myths of iron and blood
Seem to obscure God's clarity.

Deep sunk in sin, this tragic star
Sinks deeper still, and wages war
Against itself ; strewn all the seas
With victims of a world disease.
—And we are left to drink the lees
Of Babel's direful prophecy.

OSBERT SITWELL¹

¹ Osbert Sitwell, 'Babel' in *The Muse in Arms* ed. by E. B. Osborn (London: John Murray, 1917).

Performance instructions

Piano: where pedal markings are not specified, the pianist should use phrase marks to guide legato pedaling according to taste. The una corda pedal can also be used according to taste.

Programme note

I chose to set Osbert Sitwell's first published poem 'Babel' (1916) in *Babel* for soprano voice and piano, a commissioned song for a First World War memorial event.² I was seduced by the poem's direct and vivid metaphorical links, in this case between war's futility and the Tower of Babel's chaos. Sitwell (1892-1969), Edith's younger brother, wrote poetry during his time spent in the trenches near Ypres, and his poem doesn't generate pity for combatants or victims. Nevertheless, I wished to musically encapsulate the disturbing emotions Sitwell's poem stirred in me.

The setting follows the poem's seven stanza structure with overt word-painting. For example, an allusion to a children's nursery rhyme in stanza four (bar 37 ff.) to evoke stanza four's suggested poignant memories: 'where once there played | Children with painted pail and spade'. Or exploiting the full soprano voice range from Middle C to a top B⁵ to point the word 'world' in the phrase 'With victims of world disease' (bar 97). The hidden connection in this case was a musical cipher based on the letters B-A-B-E-L – translated into musical notes as B-A-B_b-E-G[#]

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² Osbert Sitwell, 'Babel' in *The Muse in Arms*, ed. by E. B. Osborn (London: John Murray, 1917), p. 38, in *Internet Archive*
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for Nigel
Babel

Osbert Sitwell (1892-1969)

Kelvin Thomson

Moderato risoluto ♩ = 90

The first system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in 7/4 time, starting with a whole rest followed by a half note in 5/4 time. The middle and bottom staves are piano accompaniment. The piano part begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand. The tempo is marked *Moderato risoluto* with a quarter note equal to 90 beats per minute. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The system concludes with a forte (*f*) dynamic and the instruction *And*.

The second system of the musical score continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "still we stood and stared far". The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand. The system concludes with a piano (*Ped.*) instruction.

The third system of the musical score continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "down In - to that em - ber glow - ing town". The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand. The system concludes with a piano (*Ped.*) instruction.

Andante lacrimoso ♩ = 80

7

Which ev'-ry shaft and shock of fate Had shorn un - to its

10

base. Too late Came care - less - ly Se-

13

re - ni - ty. Now torn and bro - ken

16

hou-ses gaze on to the rat in-fes-ted maze

19

That once sent up rose-sil-ver haze

23

To ming-le through e-ter-ni-ty

26 *Più mosso* ♩ = 86

mp

The out - lines once so strong-lywrought, Of

29

ci - ty walls, are now a thought or jest un - to the dead

33

pp

who fought Foun - da - tion for fu -

**Dolce, calmo
quasi lullaby**

36

rall.

$\text{♩} = 72$

p

tu - ri - ty. _____ The shim - mer - ing sands

pp semplice

40

where once there played Chil - dren with pain - ted pail and spade

45

are drea - ri - ly de - so - late a - fraid

50

to meet Night's dark hu-man - i - ty.

This system contains measures 50 through 55. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the left hand and a more melodic line in the right hand. The lyrics are: "to meet Night's dark hu-man - i - ty."

Moderato patetico

56

$\text{♩} = 80$

Whose sil - ver

lontano *pp*

Ped.

This system contains measures 56 through 60. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part has a complex texture with multiple layers of eighth notes and rests. The lyrics are: "Whose sil - ver". Performance markings include *lontano*, *pp*, and *Ped.*. The tempo is marked **Moderato patetico** with a metronome marking of $\text{♩} = 80$.

61

cool re - makes the dead, And lays no

This system contains measures 61 through 65. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part continues with a complex texture of eighth notes and rests. The lyrics are: "cool re - makes the dead, And lays no".

65

blame on a - ny head For all the ha - voc, fire and

f *mp*

mf *f*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 65 through 69. The vocal line starts with a half note 'blame' and a quarter note 'on'. The piano accompaniment features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include *f* and *mp* for the vocal line, and *mf* and *f* for the piano accompaniment.

70

lead _____ That fell u - pon us sud - den - ly. _____

p *pp*

mf Ped.

Detailed description: This system contains measures 70 through 73. The vocal line has a triplet of eighth notes in measure 70 and a half note 'lead' with a long dash. The piano accompaniment includes a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a bass line with a 'Ped.' marking. Dynamics include *p* and *pp* for the vocal line, and *mf* for the piano accompaniment.

Allegretto appassionato

74

When all we came to know as good Gave way to

mf *f*

mf

$\text{♩} = 108$

Detailed description: This system contains measures 74 through 77. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto appassionato' with a quarter note equal to 108. The vocal line starts with a half note 'When' and a quarter note 'all'. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include *mf* and *f* for the vocal line, and *mf* for the piano accompaniment.

79

E-vil's fi - ery flood, ___

And mon-strous myths of ir'n and blood [iron]

Ped.

84

Seem to ob-scure ___

God's ___ cla-ri-ty. ___

p *pp*

p *pp*

Ped. Ped. Ped.

89

Allegro con moto ♩ = 120

Deep sunk in sin, this tra-gic star Sinks dee-per

ppp *f*

93

still, and wa-ges war A-gainst it - self; strewn

ff

96

all the seas With vic-tims of a world dis-ease. And

p

99 **Meno mosso** ♩ = 90

we_ are_ left to drink the lees Of

mf

p

Grave ♩ = 55

103

pp

Musical score for measures 103-105. The system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 5/4 time and contains the lyrics: "Ba - bel's_ dire - ful pro - phe - cy." The piano accompaniment features a right hand with sustained chords and a left hand with a melodic line. Dynamics include *pp* and *ppp*. A fermata is present over the final note of the vocal line.

106

Ped.

8^{vb}

Musical score for measures 106-108. The system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 5/4 time and contains the lyrics: "Ped." and "morendo". The piano accompaniment features a right hand with sustained chords and a left hand with a melodic line. Dynamics include *pp* and *ppp*. A fermata is present over the final note of the vocal line. A *morendo* marking is present in the piano part. A dashed line with an 8^{vb} marking is shown below the piano part.