Tlatelolco

A Song for Three Voices



For soprano, cor anglais, (bass) trombone and marimba

Music by David Lancaster

Poetry by Marcela del Rio, translated by Victoria Carpenter

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Duration c. 45 minutes

Programme note:

It is the early autumn of 1968 and the eyes of the world are on Mexico, where the Olympic Games are about to begin. At that time - all around the world - student protests are challenging the establishment, and Mexico – under the authoritarian government of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz - is no different.

On October 2nd, around 10,000 university and high school students have gathered in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas to protest the government's actions and listen peacefully to speeches. Many local men, women and children also watch and listen. The students congregate outside the Chihuahua Building, a thirteen-story apartment complex on one side of the square. The students are chanting *¡No queremos olimpiadas, queremos revolución!* ("We don't want Olympics, we want revolution!").

Rally organizers do not try to call off the protest when they notice an increased military presence in the area: 5,000 soldiers, 200 armoured vehicles and trucks surround the plaza. Two helicopters, one from the police, and another one from the army, fly over the plaza. They fire coloured flares above the crowd. The first gunshots ring out.

Subsequent events are still shrouded in mystery: the number of people killed at Tlatelolco is not known. The official memorial lists 27 names, but the consensus is that the final death toll was between 300-400 people; others suggest that that it was more than 1000. Witnesses to the event claim that the bodies were first removed in ambulances and later military officials came and piled up bodies, not knowing if they were dead or alive, into military trucks, while some say that the bodies were loaded onto garbage lorries and sent to unknown destinations. The soldiers rounded up the remaining students onto the Chihuahua Building's elevator walls, stripped them, and beat them.

The 'three voices' of the title are firstly the words of an eyewitness (spoken by the soloist), secondly, her poetic internal monologue (arioso singing) and, thirdly, extracts from the 16th century Manuscrito de Tlatelolco, which describes the fall of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, providing a strange parallel narrative which seems to anticipate the events of 1968.

Dr Victoria Carpenter, then a colleague at York St John University, approached me in 2015 with a view to collaboration. Her interest in the subject was a significant part of her research, and her book *The Tlatelolco Massacre, Mexico 1968, and the Emotional Triangle of Anger, Grief and Shame (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018)* was published on the 50th anniversary of the massacre. At our first meeting she outlined the narrative of events at Tlatelolco and introduced me to the epic poem by Marcela del Rio, which she was translating into English at that time. I was immediately drawn to the project, attracted by the many ambiguities and inconsistencies in the narrative and the multi-layered nature of the poetry which re-tells events from multiple perspectives, something which has long been a feature of my writing. I wrote the score in the spring of 2016 and the music was first performed during York's Festival of Ideas that summer, with soprano soloist Anna Snow.

Notes for performance:

Any staging of the work should attempt to clarify the distinction between the three voices, and demonstrate (using available space or projected backdrops, for example) the multiple perspectives on the narrative.

Key to the text:

Lines in italics (not bold): this is a third person narrative about a poet being witness to the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre. These words are spoken, in a manner which is calm and detached.

Lines in regular font (not italics or bold): this is her internal monologue, possibly the poem she is writing. There words are sung (accompanied by marimba and cor anglais) in a freer, expressive arioso style.

Lines in bold: quotations for Manuscrito de Tlatelolco, a 16th century account of the fall of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan'. These are sung (accompanied by cor anglais and trombone, sometimes with marimba) in a more overtly dramatic style, sometimes with a declamatory edge but elsewhere (in the slower sections) a greater sense of sympathy and sadness.

Instrumental Ensemble:

Ideally, the instrumental ensemble should <u>not</u> be conducted. If the work is staged, the instrumentalists should be visible to the audience. The trombone part was originally conceived for bass trombone but does not explore a wide range; it is perfectly playable on tenor trombone.

To them:

the dead

the imprisoned

the humiliated

То

the fallen

the ridiculed

the tortured

A woman. A poet. Sitting in front of an electric typewriter, her fingers jump, skip, whirl across the keys, not noticing its make, brand or origin.







The poet stops writing. The bibles of the peoples are alike. The histories too. Everything is written in the same aded ink of her veins. She walks to the window of her apartment on the 13th floor of a brand new building adorned with the two intertwined 'H's of its name.

Thirteen skies. Thirteen floors. An ominous analogy.

From her window she watches them appear: they come two by two, three by three, four by six, six by two, but never one by one.













When they were saying this, they didn't know they were poets whose fate was sealed.







The poet, once again in front of her American typewriter, is composing an ode to extoll ancient nations, as she reads of their exploits, their defeats, their pointless sacrifices.







Below, the square is filling up with young spirits. They come like birds from a Hitchcock movie. There doesn't seem to be a plan or purpose, but they come. They come two by three, three by four, two by six, But never one by one.

The October sun chills the pavement. Peace in the trees. Not in the leaves. Through their trunks Sap runs, Traverses, Flows, Not knowing dates, premonitions or flaming skies.

The five of the clock rolls across the square In the incantations of sulphur, And the thirteen of the skies, through the air.

The afternoon comes along. The bells call for the hour of mass. But they don't go to church, they stay in the square. A square of celebrations, fiestas, A harvest square on market days, A bazaar, A square of colours, songs and flowers.







The square is filling up with youthful tempers, murmers of protest, demands as angry as they are ancient.

Those who don't want to know why. Those who know, demand. Those who know and those who don't unite; everyone demands, everyone wants to know why.

They have filled the square, they sit down like the poet, not to write, but to listen to the siren songs.

The songs of earthly passions with the air of eternity.

The poet's insatiable eyes read the truths of ancient words.











A green light, not a ray from the sky, Falls from above, from an iron bird.

The soldiers burst out on either side of the church, firing.










The woman, hidden, shielded behind a wall barricaded with books, does not dare face the square where a man-made lightning turned a party into a tempest.















The poet doesn't sing any more. Her whole body Has become one enormous ear: she just listens To the voices, cries, screams, moans.

Through the open windows Come gunpowder and lead mixed with screams. Under the powdered plaster of damaged walls White asphixia is the stone's promise of a shroud.

She still doubts that what she hears *Is true.*



A book falls, split in half: The Life of St John, Patron Saint of Youth. A bullet in the middle opened its pages like a flower, Black petals fell, the bullet remained inside.

It's the moment of truth. If the window is not free, Neither is her body. The poet gets up From her book trench, walks to the window And her whole body becomes eyes watching death.



































Since when is owning a photo a crime? Since when do you have to disown your children?



The building, brilliant before, now in flames, is burning. And even in agony, in a heroic battle, covers, Hides, shelters, conceals children, friends, Children's friends, Not children, Not children's not friends...











Rain has come to put out the fire Saving the wounded building from death. The day is done. Stars in the sky Hid - they can't bear to watch what the new Herods have done.







A glow in the eyes and the poet is a statue in the window. A single landscape: a memory Remains forever burned into her eyes. The bodywas: her eyes.

The bodies go as they came Before they became memories: Two by two Three by three Four by six Six by two But never one by one.

They are collected and piled up on white stretchers, Like milk, that's put into white trucks.

It's the colour of innocence!

Iron tanks search And search Leave And come back Their reflectors shining: One-eyed iron giants.

They have taken the living and the dead.



The sun rises in the thirteen October skies That the poet will not see any more from the thirteen floors Of the new building that has stopped being new Because now it has a past A memory Intertwined like the two H's of its name.

A soldier, Now that the roar of the massacre And the memory have passed, Opens a magazine and reads new comics In the first light of dawn.