

Daniel PASTIRČAK

## *Miserere: Meditations on Psalm 51*

*King David slept with Uriah's wife. She got pregnant. David had then him murdered. After some time he realised what he did; he laid on the cold floor of the Temple for one night and, in the morning, he wrote Psalm 51 (Miserere). I wrote my meditations while listening to Arvo PÄRT's monumental Miserere. I was inspired not only by the music, but also by the ancient liturgical text. Miserere is also an old Christian text on resurrection and last judgement.*

### MISERERE MEI, DEUS, SECUNDUM MAGNAM MISERICORDIAM TUAM

A voice emerges almost unnoticed from silence. The lone elements of heaven flow without touch over the lonely voice of a man. Darkness, illuminated by gloomy streaks of light. Guilt and purity, emptiness. The horizontal peace of sea surface. Shapes from the amorphous to the objective, from the unclear to the specific. The potential for death, the potential for resurrection. The eggshell must break so that the bird inside can be resurrected.

Singing: recitative in a single tone. Instruments: clarinet, oboe – a subtle light structure of two short tones. Empty space of silence, gentle feathers, short lines. Details lost in space. In the meeting of vocal and instrumental music, amidst the silence of long pauses, the earthly and heavenly elements come into a dialogue.

### ET SECUNDUM MULTITUDINEM MISERATIONUM TUARUM, DELE INIQUITATEM MEAM

The wide, warm, deep tone of a bass clarinet moves up from the bottom, as a stretch of land on the horizon, as a depth full of shadows. The voice of the bass clarinet is lengthy, steady, unchanged; only occasionally interrupted by an intake of breath. Like a horizon in front of which a story, lit by footlights, unfolds. The tune develops slowly, almost indiscernibly, like leaf after leaf of a bud exposed to the light of a full moon. A human voice shines in it as worn-out gold in a probe under grey rough plaster, as if it was an icon in the ruins of a temple.

### GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR MERCY

God, do not treat me according to myself. You are Mercy: Be to me according to Yourself. May You not be the mirror of myself! May my pride not fall onto me so that I am not despicable in Your eyes! May my ignorance not descend on me in Your silence!

What are you asking for, David, when you call on God's mercy? Without Mercy the "Self" is only a link in the chain of causes and consequences. Only if God surpasses the mechanics of causality, can the Absolute have the quality of Person. Only if God is personal, can one become a person.

God, You approach me in mercy, as to someone whom I can become, not as to the one whom I have been so far. Blind law knows only what has happened, but it does not know that which could come to be. It spreads over the fossils of yesterday. But mercy opens the gate

of tomorrow's morning. Under the law we are closed in a motionless finish. For mercy I move towards a goal in a dance of creation in which I am formed. In law I am abandoned, completed by the hand of the Creator, and exposed on a little pedestal to the ruthless gaze of critics.

To be a person means to be free and helpless at the same time. Free to make a decision and powerless to carry it out. The wind of hope blows between that freedom and powerlessness. The hope can drive us onto treacherous rocks, or drown us in hostile regions, but it can also blow us into the harbour of home. Only in the midst of *Miserere*, only snug in Mercy, can one be on the way home.

### AMPLIUS LAVA ME AB INIQUITATE MEA

Colour: Ashy background; purple tones of the clarinet; halftones; shades; warm ochre of the vocals; crimson, pink, orange, lemon-coloured, white: pastel colours. Clear silver of the oboe, golden reflections. Coal earth-like black colour of the bass clarinet; earth-like brown clay spread over the smooth empty background; metallic colours of the organ – steel, bronze, turquoise blue.



## THOROUGHLY CLEANSE ME FROM MY GUILT

If the evil with which I have identified is only forgiven, I have no hope that I could be changed. I need the inexorable truth to be changed. An author, when writing a text, always judges it and grants it mercy at the same time. The author is the first critic of the work, relentlessly scratching out parts of the text that must go.

The text is granted mercy when new material is added to replace the cancelled lines; balance and unity return to the text. The pen in the author's hand is the cross. The cross is a sign of judgement – profound erasure. The cross is a sign of mercy – new creation.

## QUONIAM INIQUITATEM MEAM EGO COGNOSCO

Vocals ascend from depth. They grow stronger, overlap, and turn around in a whirl, like leaves driven by autumn wind. In the background, the drumbeat intensifies threateningly, peaking with the bang of a gong. Colour? Greyish black on dark grey, unspecified shapes. Fragments of fog. Shadows of bats come into the form from the bottom. A sharp golden light pierces down from above. The gong bangs, the golden meets the black in a sharp contrast.

## YET I KNOW ABOUT MY TRANSGRESSIONS, MY SIN IS ALWAYS IN MY MIND

It is not feelings of guilt that I know, but the knowledge of guilt; the knowledge of the reality of evil that I have caused. It is the knowledge of who I am through the experiences of those who have been hit by my evil, the knowledge of how guilt is related. Does my guilt tie me to someone? To a person whom I have hurt? Have I betrayed a goodness in me – God's image in the depth of my being – the goal of my existence? Have I betrayed the higher, real Self, which I should really become?

Compassion is the relation of guilt towards a person whom I have hurt. Conscience is the relation of guilt towards myself whom I have betrayed. Sin is the relation of guilt towards God whom I have denied. Freedom, freedom, freedom! Only when my guilt finds the relation to

You, God, can the path to freedom be opened, because in You there is the gate of mercy, which is the only way to the future. Only in God is my story eternally opened. God is the Father of existence, the source of change and growth. God carries all my seeds in God's mind.

## DIES IRÆ, DIES ILLA

Eight parts: Eight repetitions of a chorale from beyond. The dismay of death mixes here with the glory of eternity, the pain of finality with the longing for immortality, and the world of space and time. The phenomenal world of colours, sounds and shapes, falls apart. It is crushed under the sudden dart of eternity. Eight monumental forms, eight staircases crowded with calling multitudes, are elevated through a crimson span towards the gates of dawn.

*Dies* (1): soft bells ring; the whole chorus sings; brass instruments blow in the distance. "When the Earth dissolves like ashes..." *Quantus* (2): bass vocals come to the front. *Tuba* (3): male vocals grow less strong, female vocals increase along with high-pitched brass tones." The voice of the trumpet will sound over graves in every land." *Mors* (4): ringing bell increases in its intensity. The tower, lost in the distance before, suddenly appears right in front of you. "Death stands aghast in astonishment."

*Liber* (5): the rhythmical and melodic pattern slows down, as if we observed the act again, close-up and in slow motion. *Iudex* (6): a blow of timpani. "All hidden things will be disclosed." *Quid* (7): a long golden tone of a trumpet, high up over the calling of the vocals, like a lone ray piercing through the wall of clouds from the other side of being.

*Quem* (8): the climax – the fabric of resurrected bodies is taken by the whirlwind of the spirit off into the distance. The thunder-like ramble of the drums and the ringing bell fade away in a deep sigh of the gong. "*Tibi soli peccavi.*" Bass organ pedal; bass brass instruments; bass vocals – grey in grey on a greyish background. The singing develops. Darkness is tangled with light: Do not be afraid: "I am." Instrumental interlude: A funeral march in a grave-



yard at dusk over which the sound of an oboe flies like a sudden passage of an angel. The vocals double: light – shade, icons of human figures, ink, pastel and gold. Bass tones – interlude. A rhythmical pattern. Gradation.

#### HIDE YOUR FACE AWAY FROM MY SINS AND WIPE OUT ALL MY GUILT!

Everything in space and time exists eternally in God's mind. Only if my trespasses are obliterated from Your mind, God, can they be erased forever. How can You, Almighty God, hide Your face? How should the One Who sees everything not see? David, you ask God for the inconceivable! You ask God to sacrifice the Omniscience! You ask God to sacrifice the Omnipresence! You ask God to cease having been there where sin was conceived, cultivated, and completed! "Yet only things that are known and seen by You exist". Is what you ask for, David, the death of God? All that I have thought, wanted, and done makes an inseparable part of that which I am. Only if God wipes me out, can God erase my sin.

The death of God and the death of the person meet in a single arm movement that hides God's face and wipes out the guilt of the person. The omnipresent altar is the Cross. On it the mystery of salvation is completed. The relationship of God with a human being, through the death of God – Man in Christ. The seed of a new birth, the seed of resurrection. Only in a world that is created are death and resurrection possible. That which has been created can also be changed.

If, however, the world were identical with God, it would be unchangeable. It would exist from eternity to eternity. Salvation would be based on the rearrangement of what exists (which cannot be changed) to a conflicting constellation. In this case death would not exist. It would be only a rearrangement of the same cards in the hand of the sole player. A type of desperation belongs to the world in which there exists nothing but death – where everything is mortal. Another type of despair belongs to the world, where everything is immortal. There is hope only for a world where both death and immortality are possible.

Organ interlude: Rich and crystal-like. The fragile tones of pipes, like drops of dew. Swaying bass, wide space, like an ocean illuminated by the evening sun. The theme grows, multiplies and intensifies. A dancing oboe joins the organ, decorating the swinging waves with a slim thread of light. Woodwind instruments are accompanied by brass. The space of music spreads from high-pitched to low-pitched tones. The bass tones deepen the depth of swaying. The tune descends, but simultaneously ascends towards the surface, and higher than the surface, even higher than the level of all surfaces. The triangles and tambourines sparkle like drops of foam scattered over the crest of a wave. After a short pause bronze fanfares shine on top like the sun poking out from behind a cloud.

#### CREATE A PURE HEART IN ME, OH GOD!

If my deception, my pride, my ill will are at the core of my Self, what is then going to be left when I take off all the roles, all the masks, and all the false attributes of my dignity? Nothing will remain. But not completely: nothing shall be left with intention, nothing with the potential of a new creation. Emptiness before the beginning, full of hope. When I root out weeds in my garden, what remains is naked soil that

is ready to accept new seed. My spirit is an empty field. Your Spirit is the seed. Come to me, strike roots in me, pierce me, re-create me, blossom in me and bring sweet fruit.

#### QUONIAM SI VOLUISSES SACRIFICIUM

The pirouette of vocals is absorbed by a whirlwind into silence. Red, golden, black, purple: fragments of a fresco in the cupola of a dilapidated chapel. The voices of the organ pipes sink into immeasurable depths, like the cargo of a sunken ship. From time to time their metallic lights – golden, silver and bronze – glitter in the depths. Space is full of glaring flames: the fireworks of the universe light a fire without an end.

#### REX

Transparent bodies fly through a pellucid uncovered distance. Reverse movement; the *Dies Irae* tune moves backwards. The end returns to its beginning. The bells, chorales, oboe, heaven, gold, peace, distance, fragility, silent height. "You Who give salvation as a gift to those who are saved, the source of Mercy, save me." A bass pedal of the organ, the bell, the end, peace, peace, shalom.

#### ARTISTIC APPROACH

The word drafts gradually yielded artistic ideas. The symbol of an egg with the potential for death and resurrection: the eggshell must break so that the bird inside can fly. The egg as eggshell; the egg as light, the seed of a bird, of a heavenly being.

I attempted to take three different approaches, which are linked only by the experience of the same music. The images may represent only drafts on their way towards a better solution.

The first one was *conceptual*. Out of an empty area, like probes in plaster in the walls of a chapel, fragments of images emerge like quotations of various artefacts of early Christianity: hands of praying devotees from the Priscilla catacombs, a motif, eternity beyond the frontiers of the created world, from the maze in the Tapestry of Creation in Gerona Cathedral, Adam, Eve, the angel, trees of Eden, the serpent from the whole page illumination of Carolline Codexes, lambs from Ravenna's Sant'Apollinare in Classe, and peacocks as symbols of eternal life from the catacombs in Kallixt.

The second approach was *abstract*. Although this composition of PÄRT is mainly choral, some parts are instrumental. In the abstract approach I attempted to reflect the instrumental sections of the composition. I based it on the motif of graves dug out into the walls of catacombs.

The third approach was *intuitive*. I let myself be led by the theme of death, its irrevocability and dreadfulness, as well as by the theme of desire for immortality and resurrection with the aim to link both in an artistically intensified tension between the finite and the infinite, between the mortal and immortal.



Daniel PASTIRČÁK (1959) is a poet, prose-writer and essayist. He graduated in Protestant theology in Bratislava, Slovakia and works as a preacher of the Free Evangelical church (Bratská cirkev). His book "Damian's river" (1995) was on the List of Honor of International Board of Books for Youth and he is also engaged in art and exhibited in galleries in Slovakia and abroad. His email address is [pastirco@internet.sk](mailto:pastirco@internet.sk).