BACKGROUND TO LAMENTATIONS

For this year's award, composers are required to submit settings of extracts from the Lamentations of Jeremiah for unaccompanied voices. Lamentations is a deeply mournful text, which has become embedded within some of the most solemn and poignant ceremonies within Judaism and Christianity.

Despite its antiquity, the text's theme has contemporary resonance, particularly in relation to the current unrest across much of the Middle East and the Arab world, resulting in loss of life, displacement of large numbers of people and serious damage to sites important to different faith groups.

Background to the text

The text comes from the book of the Bible known in English as 'Lamentations' (Latin: Lamentationes, Greek: Threni). In the Jewish Bible (Tanach) the title of the book is 'Eikhah', meaning 'How', which is the first word of the book. In the Christian Bible, 'Lamentations' immediately follows the book of Jeremiah. In the Tanach, it is considered one of the 'Five Scrolls' (Hamesh Megillot) which form part of the Ketuvim, or 'Holy Writings'.

The book contains five poems, which were traditionally thought to be by the prophet Jeremiah, although today this is generally accepted not to be the case. They are inspired by the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BCE, when the city and the Jewish temple were attacked and utterly destroyed by the Babylonians, and many prominent citizens were taken into captivity in Babylonia (part of modern day Iraq).

In the gospels Jesus describes himself as a temple, so within Christianity the temple and city of Jerusalem are often seen as a metaphor for Christ himself and the poems are regarded as a lament for the Crucifixion.

Lamentations within worship

Within Judaism, the book is read on the fast day Tisha B'Av, which mourns the destruction of the first temple (by the Babylonians) and the second temple (by the Roman army in CE 70), as well as other tragic events both ancient and modern, including some that took place during the holocaust. Tisha B'Av is the ninth day of the month of Av, which falls in July or August. It is the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. Many practising Jews not only fast, but refrain from enjoyable activities such as listening to music. The Book of Lamentations is read in the synagogue in the evening. Worshippers sit on the ground or on low stools or cushions and remove their shoes (as a symbol of mourning). The book of Lamentations is then chanted in Hebrew. The whole book may be chanted by one leader, or five different people may chant each of the five chapters. Notation above or below the printed words shows the leader how to sing the chant. The book is chanted using a traditional melody, which is repeated for each verse. This melody is especially mournful and is reserved almost exclusively for the book of Lamentations, making it very special. You can listen to Eikhah being chanted here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIZ2CSeyjsw

Within Christian traditions, the book of Lamentations has been read, chanted or sung in services during Holy Week, particularly in Roman Catholic liturgy, where the Lamentations formed part of the dramatic ceremony known as Tenebrae. Tenebrae was celebrated until the 1970s, when revisions in the liturgy resulted in the Office being abandoned.

Tenebrae (Latin for 'darkness' or 'shadows') was the name given to the combined liturgical Offices of Matins and Lauds on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Saturday (which were usually held

in hours of darkness, either late at night on the previous day or during the early hours of the morning). Different extracts of the Lamentations of Jeremiah formed the lessons of the first 'Nocturn' of Matins on each day (Matins is divided into different sections, called 'Nocturns') and the many Renaissance and Baroque settings of the Lamentations were written for performance during this Office. The first recitation of the Lamentations began with the words 'Incipit Lamentatio Jeremiae Prophetae' (Here begins the Lamentation of the Prophet Jeremiah) and subsequent recitations with the text 'De Lamentatio Jeremiae Prophetae'. The recitation ends with the words 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum' (Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord thy God). These words are not actually from the Book of Lamentations, but come from the Book of Hosea (Chapter 14, verse 1).

Before the Office of Tenebrae began, fifteen lighted candles were placed on an inverted-v-shaped candlestick before the altar. After the singing of each Psalm and the Canticles, one candle was extinguished, until only the candle at the top remained alight. During the Benedictus, six additional candles on the altar were also extinguished one by one, and any other lights were put out. The remaining lighted candle from the top of the candlestick was removed and hidden behind the altar. The final part of the Office is said 'in tenebris' (darkness). At the end of the final prayer of Lauds, a loud noise was made by slamming a book shut, knocking on the choir stalls or by the stamping of feet (representing the earthquake reported at the time of the Crucifixion); the remaining lighted candle was then, once again, revealed, symbolising the Resurrection, and the congregation stood and left in silence.

The Poetry and its Settings

The book of Lamentations is made up of five acrostic poems (one per chapter). Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 have 22 verses, each beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 has 66 verses; where three verses begin with each letter. The Latin (Vulgate) translation of the Bible retained the name of the Hebrew letter at the beginning of each verse. Plainsong versions of the Lamentations set these letters very melismatically (i.e. with several syllables per note), in contrast to the rest of the text, which is set syllabically. Many Renaissance polyphonic settings of the Lamentations continue this tradition, with very elaborate settings of the Hebrew letters that begin each verse.

There are many settings of the Lamentations from the Renaissance, the Baroque and more recent times. Notable versions include those by Tallis, Palestrina, Gesualdo, Charpentier (*Leçons de* ténèbres) and Stravinski (*Threni*).

Requirements for the NCEM Young Composers Award

There was no 'standard' division of the text of Lamentations. Different composers set different amounts of the text, depending on the requirements of the particular liturgical context. For the purposes of the Award, it is recommended that you set the text for the first Lamentation as used by Tallis –see the Terms and Conditions.