

Such Another Sleep

Lisa Bielawa

WWW.LISABIELAWA.NET

Note

Premiere: April 20, 2013, Concert Hall of the Helsinki Music House. Commissioned by Akademiska Sångföreningen

Duration: 8'

Instrumentation: Men's double chorus (TTBB TTBB), Soprano, optional bass drum

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is among his most stylized plays, using language that coils meanings within meanings in a kind of ritual language-theater experience that seems at first to distance us from the tragedy, but then somehow seems to open up many layers of poignancy and grief within us. Most even hesitate to call the play a tragedy, since these characters are devastatingly human rather than epic or classically heroic. I suppose this is what makes it even more heartbreaking when Cleopatra describes her lost Antony in such elevated images at the end of the play, as Caesar's men approach her with self-consciousness and nervous awe, even though they are the victors. They may have vanquished her lover and seized her kingdom, but through Shakespeare's eyes they seem more emasculated than triumphant in her presence.

In the selection I've chosen, we find Cleopatra addressing these many men who were responsible for her lover's demise, describing the god-like Antony – matchless in beauty, power, virility, kindness and ferocity – that appeared to her in her dream and asking them if any man like this could possibly exist, so far greater than any other man is he in so many aspects. But through her vivid images I feel I am witnessing not Antony's greatness, but the greatness of her love for him. Isn't any man just "such an Antony," to one who loves him? I see the men's chorus here in several roles at once – they could be Caesar's men, to whom Cleopatra is speaking; but they could also be so many Antonys, a whole chorus of living answers to her question, "Think you there might be such a man as this?" These multiple, coiled identities allow the chorus to give voice – and face – to both Cleopatra's lover and her captors.

– Lisa Bielawa

Publishing & Management: Daniel Brodney | 917.676.1858 | brodney@prodigy.net

Press Contact: Christina Jensen PR LLC | 646.536.7864 | christina@christinajensenpr.com

Text

William Shakespeare, from *Antony and Cleopatra*

I dreamt there was an emperor Antony.
O, such another sleep, that I might see
But such another man!...
His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted
The little O o'th'earth....
His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
Crested the world; his voice was propertied
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,
There was no winter in't; an Antony it was
That grew the more by reaping. His delights
Were dolphin-like; they showed his back above
The element they lived in. In his livery
Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands were
As plates dropped from his pocket...
Think you there was or might be such a man
As this I dreamt of?

Antony and Cleopatra, V.2.76-94

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