

Sanctuary Songs

Lisa Bielawa

WWW.LISABIELAWA.NET

Note

Premiere: March 31, 2018, National Sawdust, Brooklyn, NY. Commissioned by Arco Collaborative, Inc. with the generous support of Augusta Gross and Elizabeth and Julius Schlichting.

Duration: 13'

Instrumentation: Violin & Soprano

Sanctuary Songs utilizes texts by American women poets writing between the wars, in the 1920's: "Broken" (text by Virginia Stait), "Speak Softly" (text by Elise M. Baker), and "My Marvelous Wall" (text by Elinor Wylie). They are part of a growing collection of songs I am writing for Jennifer Koh and myself to perform together. Each text has the word "Sanctuary" as its title or in its first line.

Sanctuary is a word that carries significant political weight today in the discussion around immigration; I wanted to find instances of its use within a broad range of American writings, in order to reach a greater understanding of its layered meanings within American consciousness. Definitions of "sanctuary" center around sacredness (a spot where something holy happened, a building or container within which something sacred is held, often on one of these holy spots) and also around safety (a place where one can be safe from danger, take refuge). The word has new prominence and resonance as various cities and schools take a stand on whether or not they will protect members of their communities from deportation.

The music community itself emerges, then, as a kind of sanctuary itself. In the case of Jennifer Koh, whose parents are Korean refugees, or others in our major symphonies and orchestras who are themselves immigrants and, in some cases, refugees, a life in music has been providing a kind of sanctuary (sacredness, a refuge) all along. We are newly aware, however, in the current political climate, of the specificity of our individual paths to get here, and also of the powerful potential for sacredness and refuge that we can create through our work.

— 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

From “Broken” by Virginia Stait (1924)

The sanctuary made for me

Is broken, wall and roof and stone;
And where we stood, with oath to oath,

I stand alone.

For now that love's dear things have ceased,
The past outlived is more than dead,

The stained glass splinters into points,
And pierces red.

It is like solemn candles out,

A crucifix that is all cross;
A bell whose silence rings and rings

To just a loss.

The rosary of faith to faith

Has broken slowly all its beads;
It is as if the soul of me

Disowned its creeds.

And nave and transept, arch and aisle,

Are ruins; yet my feet must go:
But where stood corner-stone and spire

I do not know.

From “Sanctuary” by Elise M. Baker (1928)

Speak softly! we are nearing hallowed ground
Of nesting birds and fragile blooms. Stir not
The twisted roots nor any leafy mound:
For there may dawn arbutus' stars that dot
The turf for trusting souls who understand
The voice of gentle things in every land.

From “Sanctuary” by Elinor Wylie (1921)

This is the bricklayer; hear the thud
Of his heavy load dumped down on stone.
His lustrous bricks are brighter than blood,
His smoking mortar whiter than bone.

Set each sharp-edged, fire-bitten brick
Straight by the plumb-line's shivering length;
Make my marvelous wall so thick
Dead nor living may shake its strength.

Full as a crystal cup with drink
Is my cell with dreams, and quiet, and cool....
Stop, old man! You must leave a chink;
How can I breathe? *You can't, you fool!*

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

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