

Soweto: June, 1976

Arr. Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory

We are delighted with your interest in our arrangement, *Soweto: June, 1976*, commissioned for the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church Senior Choir's tour of South Africa in the June of 2007. These notes outline some background information which we hope will heighten the piece's meaning for you.

On June 14, 1976, black children in Soweto were protesting a new law which mandated Afrikaans as the language of instruction in black schools. Afrikaans, remember, was the language of the politically dominant (and white) minority, not one of the native languages of the black majority. The protests were planned and organized by the children; their parents and teachers were unaware that they were happening. And they began peacefully. The children sang traditional songs in the street. One of these was *Senzenina*. The text is translated: "What have we done?" A subsequent verse (not included in our arrangement) goes on: "Our crime is that we are black."

Police opened fire, turning the protest dark and bloody. Riots ensued. The official death toll was 23. Eyewitnesses, however, consistently report that over 200 children died. Hospital records indicate that nearly all the fatalities were from bullet wounds. This event is known as the Soweto Uprising.

Thereafter, *Senzenina* became the quintessential protest song in South Africa. For the next twenty years, it would hold a national significance comparable to that of *We Shall Overcome* in the United States. There would likely be no one in a South African audience who does not know the song and immediately understand its importance.

As there are many parallels between the struggle to end apartheid and the American Civil Rights Movement, the pairing of *Senzenina* with *We Shall Overcome* seemed to be a logical project for an American choir's South African sojourn.

The opening section does not quote *Senzenina* exactly. Rather, it is a meditative remembrance of the 1976 event. It is intended to create the same effect, perhaps, as that of Samuel Barber's *Adagio* in the movie *Platoon*. The tune enters more plainly at measure 57, although it is always wrapped in or around its American counterpart in some way.

Later, the introduction of the text and (a hint of the) tune of the spiritual *How I Got Over* allowed us to explore the idea that, in both countries, music was an integral tool...for the struggle itself as well as for the reconciliations that followed. Some opinions hold that the "getting over" would have been impossible without the songs.

The title is a reference to Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. The work was commissioned by Clare Frances Mackie in honor of the 70th birthday of James Wilson Mackie for the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church Senior Choir's tour of South Africa, 2007. The first performance was conducted by Jeffrey Brillhart, Music Director.

Below, you will find excerpts from an email Mr. Brillhart sent the arrangers the morning after the piece was premiered in Kwa Thema, a township just outside of Johannesburg.

I cannot begin to adequately describe to you how Soweto: June, 1976 is going over here in S. Africa. We did the premiere on Saturday evening. We had a packed house. The air outside was so grimy with coal fires that we could scarcely breathe. No running water or electricity, just coal fires.

We closed the concert with Soweto. I get chills just thinking about this. As the piece built, people got more and more frenzied. With the last modulation, people were cheering, standing, crying. I don't know how Kevin (our soloist) was able to keep singing. The poor boy, as the piece went on, kept walking closer and closer to the audience. Eventually, he was singing 1/3 of the way down the aisle of the church! Anyway, the whole experience was nothing short of miraculous. I hope you're well. My gratitude to both of you knows no end.

This arrangement is available from Caldwell and Ivory.

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