

PROGRAM NOTE

Kati Agócs was born to an American mother and Hungarian father in Windsor, Canada, across the border from Detroit. *The Debrecen Passion*, commissioned by the Jebediah Foundation for Boston Modern Orchestra Project and the Lorelei Ensemble, represents a coming-together of several artistic and cultural concerns, including her Hungarian heritage, the art of raising her daughter, and various musical ideas, which extend back through the polytextual motet *Vessel* to *By the Streams of Babylon*. *The Debrecen Passion* expands upon her earlier works in scope, breadth of character, and emotional intensity. The title refers both to the generic definition of “passion” and specifically to the Christian Passion—the story of the persecution and death of Christ—and to its musical settings, some of which (particularly those by Bach) are among the most important works in music history.

Debrecen is Hungary’s second largest city and the home city of the poet Szilárd Borbély (1963-2014), whose humanist-Christian poems are the foundation of Agócs’s setting. Borbély was one of the most significant Hungarian poets and essayists of the present era. Interspersed with Borbély’s poetry are religious texts from ancient Christian (Latin, Hungarian, and Georgian) and Jewish traditions, which expand Borbély’s poems to the realm of the universal. Each of the poems and religious texts speaks of a different kind of love and devotion, individual or transcendent, personal or collective.

The Debrecen Passion begins with Borbély’s “If I could,” on the fragility of love and its expression. A gradual vocalized gathering of energy, expanding in small, rising scalar motives in layers, precedes the setting of the text proper in imitative phrases. Agócs sometimes blurs the distinction between the vocal group and the instrumental ensemble, employing subsets of singers to increase the textural and harmonic richness of the accompaniment.

The text of the second section is a parody of the familiar Stabat Mater, which is the Virgin Mary’s lament at seeing her son on the cross. The parody text reverses the tone and intention of the original, focuses on the intense, even painful love the mother experiences in being with her newborn baby. The setting begins in unison before dividing into individual parts; the mood is joyous with dancing rhythms and leads to an ecstatic climax.

This is followed by a vocalise building up a pointedly rhythmic fabric.

Borbély’s “I can’t...”, fragments of Ferenc Molnár’s Hungarian version of the Lamentations of Mary (originally in old Hungarian, the oldest extant Hungarian poem), and the millennia-old Kabbalistic prayer “Ana B’choach” are set as a trio of vocal lines in overlapping contrapuntal phrases, sparsely accompanied; we hear the distinctive sound of the cimbalom particularly clearly. The second half of “Ana B’choach” is set as a powerful unison chant with significantly increased orchestral presence. The final phrase, “Blessed is your glorious name...,” is spoken, with members of the orchestra joining in. Borbély’s “Aeternitas” is a highly melismatic setting beginning with three contrapuntal voices and expanding to the rest of the vocal ensemble. The return of a particular motive refers back to the opening of the piece. At its intense and unison climax, the Georgian “Thou Art a Vineyard” interrupts in a majestic chorale with a solo violin descant. The broad chorale gives way to a passage for orchestra alone. Voices rejoin for a great, glowing, concluding chord.