

Singing for Justice: **Joel Thompson's** **Seven Last Words of the Unarmed**

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On Friday, October 4th, Providence College hosted composer and activist Joel Thompson for a talk on music as a force for social change. Thompson, who is from Jamaica originally, grew up in Atlanta and is currently pursuing a doctoral degree at the Yale School of Music. He is perhaps best known for his 2014 composition, *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, a fifteen-minute piece for men's chorus and chamber orchestra. In *The Seven Last Words*, Joel sets to music the last words of seven unarmed men who died as a result of police violence in the Black community.

As the new Director of Choral Activities at Providence College, I was thrilled to be able to bring Joel to campus for a talk with our students. Although the unexpected closure of our campus earlier this semester made it necessary for us to present Joel's talk virtually, we nevertheless had an enlightening discussion and Q&A session. The event was co-sponsored by the Music Department, Homecoming 2020, and PC's Institution for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

I first learned about *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* in 2017, when I was a research assistant at Boston University. At that time, I was helping BU professor André de Quadros with his book on global choral music in the 21st century. *The Seven Last Words* is featured in de Quadros' book as a compelling example of choral music that challenges us to rethink our paradigms around issues of racial justice. I was immediately struck by the power, elegance, and sensitivity of Joel's music. I first contacted Joel in 2018, and we had several opportunities to speak on the phone. When I was brought on to the faculty at Providence College this summer, I decided it would be important to give our choral students an opportunity to interact with Joel. I knew that this experience would help our students to see choral singing in a new light; *The Seven Last Words* demonstrates that choral music has the unique potential to engage with difficult issues in a way that touches our common humanity.

The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed is based on the 16th-century liturgical form *Seven Last Words of Christ from the Cross*. This liturgical devotion has been used as the basis of choral works by many European composers, from Heinrich Schütz in the Baroque period to Joseph Haydn in the Classical era. In this form, the "seven last words" of Christ are not single words per se; they are actually seven statements, such as "Father, forgive them" and "I am thirsty". By taking this antiquated liturgical form and injecting it with the last words of seven unarmed Black men, Thompson has accomplished a remarkable synthesis. Not only has he revived this somewhat obscure liturgical form by injecting it with new vitality and purpose; he also highlighted his own identity as a maverick Black composer within an overwhelmingly White space.

The seven movements of *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* reflect the dying statements of seven unarmed members of the Black community: Kenneth Chamberlain, Trayvon Martin, Amadou Diallo, Michael Brown, Oscar Grant, John Crawford, and Eric Garner. Their words are sung by a men's

chorus, accompanied by a string quintet and piano. Over the course of this fifteen-minute piece, the composer creates music that is by turns gripping, haunting, reflective, and heartbreaking. He is able to use sophisticated compositional techniques to great effect, as in the second movement, when he incorporates the Baroque musical form of *fugue*. Fugue (which comes from the word “to flee”) involves multiple musical voices “chasing” one another. Here, Thompson depicts a harrowing chase by using this compositional device, as the chorus sings Trayvon Martin’s final words: “What are you following me for?” The effect is absolutely chilling.

Throughout *The Seven Last Words*, Thompson creates profound parallels between the last statements of Jesus Christ and the last words of these seven unarmed men. The composer has stated that he was drawn to *The Seven Last Words of Christ From the Cross* because he felt that its content humanized the figure of Christ. For example, Jesus’s utterance of “I am thirsty” is something that everyone can relate to. In my discussion with Joel, I remarked that I found the opposite to be true as well: *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* elevates the last words of these unarmed men so that the audience is forced to confront their own complicity in racial injustice. Just as the crowds stood by as Jesus was unjustly put to death, so many of us remain passive in the face of injustice in our own time. By drawing the parallel between Jesus’s life and the lives of these seven men, the composer reminds us that divinity resides in every human life.

One of the most poignant moments of *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* occurs in the third movement. Here, the last words of Amadou Diallo are sung as a baritone solo: “Mom, I’m going to college.” This echoes Jesus’s last words to his own mother, which occurs in the third part of *The Seven Last Words of Christ*. The tender melody of this section gradually rises upward, creating a sense of hope, a yearning for the chance to transcend our present circumstances. The melody is taken up by the entire chorus, resulting in a stirring emotional climax. But the music winds down, and the chorus gradually recedes into the background, ending on a somber hum. We realize that Amadou Diallo’s full potential will never be realized; the flame has been extinguished.

“As choral musicians, we are experts on what the world needs.” This was the statement that Joel used to conclude his talk. He reminded us that choral singers are uniquely positioned to grapple with these difficult issues because each week we gather in a nurturing environment designed to unify people and lift them up. If we have the courage to engage with the pressing issues of our day, our voices can be a powerful tool for positive change, and our art can promote healing in a broken world.

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