

Bonhoeffer

[2015 revision]

a choral-theater piece

*for men's chamber choir,
trio of women soloists,
four players,*

by Thomas Lloyd

*texts adapted from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer
and Maria von Wedemeyer*

*“I often wonder who I really am: the one always cringing in disgust,
going to pieces at these hideous experiences here,
or the one who whips himself into shape, who on the outside
(and even to himself) appears calm, cheerful, serene, superior,
and lets himself be applauded for this charade – or is it real?”*

*- Dietrich Bonhoeffer
from letter to Eberhard Bethge, December 15, 1943*

Bonhoeffer

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Bonhoeffer

performers

*men's chamber choir of nine or more singers
trio of women soloists (soprano, mezzo, alto)*

violin

cello

piano / organ (one player)

vibes / tom-toms (3) (one player)

*two dancers (optional when space and visibility allow)
(one male, representing Bonhoeffer;
one female representing Maria von Wedemeyer)*

*approximate duration – 70 minutes
to be performed without intermission*

*first performed by The Crossing
Donald Nally, conductor
with Tim Early and Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch, dancers
Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral
March 10, 2013*

*second production by The Crossing
Donald Nally, conductor
at James Memorial Chapel, Union Theological Seminary, New York
September 12, 2015
and Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral
September 13, 2015*

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was one of the most influential Christian theologians of the 20th Century. He abandoned what would have been a secure academic position at Union Theological Seminary in New York to return to Germany as an active leader of the Confessing Church, which actively resisted the capitulation of the establishment Lutheran and Catholic churches to the fascist leadership of Adolf Hitler.

Bonhoeffer also became a double agent for the *Abwehr* military intelligence agency through family connections, and was ultimately involved in the unsuccessful “July 20 Plot” (also known as the “Stauffenberg Plot”) to assassinate Hitler. This involvement led to his being imprisoned and subsequently hanged at Flossenbürg Concentration Camp a few weeks before the surrender of Germany. In the midst of all this underground political and religious activity, he fell in love with Maria von Wedemeyer, the granddaughter of an important supporter of the Confessing Church, and subsequently became engaged shortly before being arrested and interned in Tegel Prison for a period of 18 months leading up to his death.

Bonhoeffer is conceived as a concert work in a theatrical context. The movements alternate between eight reflective meditations, several of which are based on Bonhoeffer’s poetry, and seven dramatic scenes highlighting emblematic incidents in the theologian’s life. The casting of singers and instrumentalists is mostly symbolic rather than literal. Bonhoeffer himself is not represented by a particular singer, but by various combinations of solos, duets, trios, or the whole men’s contingent. They also represent Bonhoeffer’s community of underground seminarians.

In contrast to the male-dominated culture in which Bonhoeffer primarily lived and struggled, three female soloists represent the centrality of several important women in the development of his spiritual life. They sing primarily the words of his fiancé Maria von Wedemeyer, but they also represent the probable feminine influence on his spiritual life of Bonhoeffer’s mother (his only connection to Christian tradition as a child), his twin sister Sabine (who married a Jewish lawyer), his grandmother Julie (who proudly defied the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses), and his fiancé’s mother Ruth-Alice von Bismark (an important supporter of the Finkenwald seminary).

Music in the life of Bonhoeffer

Music was a constant part of Bonhoeffer’s life and imagination. He was a highly skilled pianist who could have considered a career as a musician. Beginning in his youth, Bonhoeffer played piano trios with brothers and cousins, including late in his life with his brother Klaus and cousin Rüdiger Schleicher, both of whom were also martyred co-conspirators by the end of the war. For this reason, the core accompanying ensemble in *Bonhoeffer* is a piano trio. The occasional sound of the organ represents the established church and its traditions, the drums the relentless pressures of the war, and the vibraphone the spiritual and domestic ideals that Bonhoeffer longed for but rarely experienced as an adult.

Bonhoeffer’s letters are filled with references to specific songs, hymns, and piano repertoire. *Bonhoeffer* incorporates many of these individual works and composers through a combination direct quotation, variation, and formal modeling. In addition to being steeped in the music of the Austro-German Baroque, Classical, and Romantic era composers, Bonhoeffer was also deeply influenced by the Negro Spirituals he encountered in Harlem during his first visit to America for post-graduate study at Union Seminary in 1930. He found a direct correlation between the suffering of the Africans under slavery in the United States with the suffering of the Jews under Nazism in Germany. Bonhoeffer frequently played recordings of the spirituals as part of the daily rituals of the underground seminary at Finkenwalde. He had brought these recordings back with him from Harlem during his year studying at Union Seminary in 1930. The central scene of this work (*VIII. Scene - Finkenwalde*) incorporates short excerpts from recordings of Paul Robeson and Hall Johnson’s choir that could have been among Bonhoeffer’s collection.

“Choral-theater”

The idea of imagining a "choral theater" piece was inspired by a concert I attended that left a profound impression on me - a performance of the Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin's *The Sealed Angel*. Performed in open space with steps at one end and the audience surrounding on three sides, four solo dancers and a flutist interweaved themselves among the 80 members of the Berlin Philharmonic Choir. As listeners, there was no option for passivity - we were fully engaged by the physical presence of the singers and dancers, not just by the sounds they made.

The movement didn't obscure the music with busy-ness, but served to *embody* the music and brake through the fabled "fourth wall" to allow listeners to become more fully engaged with the physicality of singing and sound as movement. I believe that chamber choirs, especially those performing at as high a level as The Crossing, are in a unique position to employ the flexibility needed to push the boundaries of the concert experience. And such a theatrical context can create a space for both abstraction and connectivity in a way that allows the expression of strong emotion without sentimentality.

Why Bonhoeffer?

I first became aware of Bonhoeffer when I read *The Cost of Discipleship* during a time in college when I was considering leaving my intensive focus on music to explore a calling to the priesthood, first within the Catholic church I grew up in, and then in the local Episcopal church in Oberlin. I think Bonhoeffer's combination of fervent devotion to Christ alongside iconoclastic defiance of the institutional church and state authority, even to the point of giving up his life and a promising future, seemed like the most courageous, principled life one could live.

My youthful idealism was also stoked by his iconic, short book *Life Together*, where his description of the life of his underground seminary seemed like a moral utopia to me, combining elements of Catholic monasticism with the radical faith commitment of Protestantism. I also discovered people across the theological spectrum of Christianity saw Bonhoeffer as a confirmation of *their* particular model for Christian faith and action.

With time, my obsession with Bonhoeffer changed from “How could he attain faith of such strength that it led him to take such courageous actions?” to “How could he act so resolutely when he questioned his own faith and motivation so profoundly?” Years later, when religious martyrdom took on a very different caste after the events of 9/11, I started asking “Were the choices he made the best choices, not only for himself but for others?” and, “Do his faith and actions still speak to us in today’s world of intense polarization between religious fundamentalism and materialist secularism?”

What happened to Maria?

Maria von Wedemeyer did not learn of her fiancé's execution for two months. She remained close to the Bonhoeffer family. She attended university at Göttingen, where she became engaged to a fellow student, Paul Schniewind, son of a prominent theologian. Maria came to Bryn Mawr College in 1948 to earn a masters degree in mathematics. After their marriage in Germany, Schniewind came back with her to Bryn Mawr. They became members of the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Bryn Mawr, where Maria was baptized. They had their first child, Christopher, shortly after Maria's graduation from Bryn Mawr in 1950.

Not one to stay at home, Maria balanced family life with a position in data processing at Remington Rand. By the time of the birth of their second child, Paul, in 1954, they had settled into “an unpretentious, old house” in Haverford, but shortly afterward, strains in their relationship led to Schniewind returning to

Germany and subsequent divorce. In 1959 she married Barton Weller, a successful businessman, and moved to Connecticut, where she suspended her career and devoted herself to her children, Weller's two children from an earlier marriage, and the life of a socially prominent family. However, this marriage also ended in divorce, in 1965.

Maria moved to Boston with her two sons and one of Weller's children, and returned to her career, this time with the Honeywell Corporation. She was the first woman to attain the level of senior management there, but also belonged to the Boston Industrial Mission, a forum for Christian ethical debate that led her to question Honeywell's involvement in the Vietnam war. As the life, death, and writings of Bonhoeffer received growing international attention, she was at first reluctant to participate, saying "It always surprises me how incredibly sensitive I am in regard to Dietrich and my relationship with him."

Towards the end of her life, she asked her secretary to transcribe their letters and send copies to her sister, Ruth-Alice von Bismarck. The year before her death in 1977 (in Boston), she attended a meeting of the Bonhoeffer Society for the first time in Geneva on the anniversary of Bonhoeffer's 70th birthday. There she was greeted warmly by a number of the surviving Finkenwalde seminarians. Her correspondence with Bonhoeffer was published in 1995 (*Love Letters from Cell 92 – The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer*, edited by von Bismarck and Kabitz (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1995)).

- *Thomas Lloyd*