

Lament for Our Times is my response to the death of George Floyd and is further fueled from years of black and brown lives lost to brutal police suppression and racial violence stemming from the systemic and racial injustices legislated into the very beginnings of the colonization of America.

Judith A. Saxton, Winston Salem, NC. June, 2020.

I. I can't breathe/S.O.S.

The trumpet is the wordless voice of sorrow and lament, with the underlying cries from George for his mother and "I can't breathe" palpably heard throughout. Relying heavily on the "devil's interval" of the tri-tone portending death, the haunting melody weaves precariously throughout the range of the trumpet ending softly in its lowest register. The viola unexpectedly bursts into the Lament with a frenzied S.O.S. call, the naval "Save our Ship" signal representing the many bystanders filming, calling for help, and yelling at the police to stop. The S.O.S. continues insistently throughout, gradually slowing with the realization that no help is coming. Assuming a resigned tone, the S.O.S. eventually breaks down into the final 3 longer "dashes" of the Morse code command, corresponding to "I can't breathe", echoing the trumpet's realization, with the viola voicing the final words of Mr. Floyd.

- II. 2'53"** is the length of time the police officers persisted in holding George Floyd down after he stopped moving and struggling for air. When transcribing my improvised melody from the recording, I was surprised to learn it was literally 2'53" and that the meter of the piece, 8/4, uncannily corresponded to the 8'46" of his prone neck choke-hold which ended his life. When fleshing out the piece and bringing it to life for two instruments, it increased in length, but the 8/4 remains.

To start, the haunting quality of the flugelhorn intones the same pitch and tonal center of the previous movement, deepening the feeling of lament and futility. Following this brief opening chant, there is a switch to cup-muted trumpet sounding a long note representing the breath of Floyd for the duration of the movement. It's significant to note that the roles of the trumpet and viola are intentionally reversed. The normal 'leading', heroic trumpet timbre is reduced to holding a static, low, continuous pedal throughout the remainder of the movement while the pleading, melodic victim's voice is given to the (usually) softer string instrument. This unusual voicing reflects both the flexibility and listening essential in those seeking a departure from the societal status quo.

Additionally, the physical demands of a trumpet long tone exceeding 3 ½ minutes results in ragged and jagged breaths – which realistically symbolize Mr. Floyd's struggle for breath in his final minutes of life. A few other parallels between the trumpet part and Mr. Floyd's demise: the necessity of lifting the mouthpiece from the lips (knee from the neck) for the muscles to receive the oxygen is as imperative as the breath required to maintain the sound/life.

Following a funeral-march section in the viola, the movement closes with the final, squeezed exhalation from the muted trumpet.

- III. Resolve** combines two tunes woven into the fabric of the nation – 'America the Beautiful' and 'Amazing Grace'--with jazz and blues elements for a synergistic pairing enabling each voice to find their resolve to push forward with needed reforms. The familiar tunes are at first halting and minor; the harmon-muted trumpet interrupting -- not yet over the anger, grief and S.O.S. of the earlier movements. Gradually coming together with new connective tissue of rhythms and blue notes integrated from the Black community, the music dances between the two melodies, soon resolving in the major mode. The work's resolution comes with the second, final, hopeful statement of Amazing Grace in the viola's low register – and movement two's lingering trumpet note indicating the work yet-to-be-done for the long push towards justice and equality for ALL.

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