

BACKGROUND - on composing *“Tenebrae – The Passion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer”*

1965: I was a student at Florida State University when I first learned of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was during the time when college students were demonstrating for civil rights throughout the United States.

I lived in a men’s residence sponsored by the Episcopal Church. As residents we were required to meet weekly to discuss a topic chosen by the house chaplain. The life, theology and martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the subjects.

The example of Bonhoeffer’s faith and sacrifice struck me with the profound realization that I had been born into a culture of racism.

1995: Thirty years later, I attended an evening candlelight service of “Tenebrae” – the 4th century monastic ritual held on the eve of Good Friday, where the Gospel account of the Passion of Jesus was read, accompanied by Gregorian Chants, as twelve candles were extinguished, leaving the church in total darkness. I was deeply affected by this service and imagined how this ancient service of “Tenebrae” might be viewed in a contemporary context relevant to our own times.

I shared these thoughts with a graduate of Union Theological Seminary, where Bonhoeffer resided during the times he spent in America. During one of our conversations, my friend casually mentioned that there was a room in the seminary dedicated to the memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I immediately recalled that earlier student discussion on the profound importance of Bonhoeffer’s life example and the challenges to place the ancient service of “Tenebrae” in Berlin’s Tegel Prison became evident to me as I began to consider a musico/dramatic treatment of the story for a one-hour performance piece.

After several years of extensive research on Bonhoeffer’s life and work, I began to compose a dramatic oratorio for baritone (Bonhoeffer) and mezzo soprano (Maria von Wedemeyer), a narrator, chorus and chamber orchestra. My sources were Bonhoeffer’s personal correspondence where he shared the deeply felt thoughts and struggles of his imprisonment. In addition to the original musical score, I included a Bach choral and Negro spiritual – music that Dietrich loved – that also underscores the profound the spiritual legacy and a critical warning for the world today.

A final personal note:

The Cornell University performance in 2018 was funded by a legacy gift I received from a friend who companioned me through the many years of composing. For this reason, I have decided not to accept compensation, but rather to pass the legacy in support of future performances. Therefore, the script and music are offered freely for use, with hope that this will inspire further understanding and more critical action.

(The production was produced and mounted by graduate students of media and film at Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York.

Hugh M. McElyea

Composer/Librettist



Check also the “About” video on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_ISGc8_0_0