

Könnyek, Almák és Kövek (Tears, Apples and Stones)

Vocalise for Somorja

(SSA, chorus or solo trio)

Duration: 6'-7'

Commissioned by Zsuzsanna Ardó for the eponymous installation for the At Home Gallery/Synagogue Šamorín, Slovakia

I met artist/poet/novelist Zsuzsanna Ardó in London in June 2012. About a month later she asked if I would write a piece to accompany, on tape loop, an installation she was planning for a gallery in Šamorín, an ethnic Hungarian city in Slovakia. The date of the opening was September 2, somewhat ambitious given my existing commitments. But I figured if I jotted down some ideas I could let them ferment over the next 6 busy weeks, leaving 2 weeks for writing, rehearsing, recording and mixing. The Mp3 was delivered the day before the opening!

The gallery is housed in a former synagogue, and this particular history, a tragic one, determined the subject matter of the installation. The concrete materials of tears, apples and stones reflect different vantage points into this history. Dozens of glass tears, a symbol of profound loss, hang from the ceiling. Apples, also of glass, are placed all over the floor, spaced tightly enough together that walking through them requires real care. Apples are a traditional food of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, and are also metaphors of hope and future. Stones carry a dual meaning as instruments of death but also of building blocks. Real stones from the Danube river are placed in a mound at the front of the room. At the opening visitors were asked to participate in a ritual in which each person takes two stones, places one next to an apple, and take the other home to be placed on a shelf as a symbol of memory.

The concept for the piece emerged firstly out of necessity, the need to find a framework quickly. I chose a popular Jewish high holiday melody, altered slightly, to use as a cantus firmus. The piece is structured as an elaborated isorhythmic motet, Jewish wine in a Gentile bottle, so to speak. The overall texture speaks of the early Renaissance...though the harmonies and ever-present glissandi would have rather alien to 15th-century ears! The tune emerges only reluctantly, unable to fully express itself. It appears clearly in the top voice only in the final iteration, and here it is accompanied by the piece's first out-of-key note, a sort of modal phantom.

The work is a "vocalise", the text consisting solely of vowel sounds, taken from the Hungarian words of the title. The lack of consonants lends the piece some of its haunting quality. But it also expresses a sense of rootlessness, of a home that's been lost.