



cultivating hope in an era of uncertainty...

The Age of Catastrophes

by Shawn Brogan Allison

In Memory of Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf

Premiere Performance

December 6, 2013

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Movement I: “Cry with Full Throat”

Movement II: “The Age of Catastrophe”

Interlude: “The Orchard”

Movement III: “Make the World Shine Again”

Benediction

running time is 19 minutes.

The composer writes:

Commissioned by the Arnold Jacob Wolf Memorial Committee at KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation of Chicago, *The Age of Catastrophes* is inspired by Rabbi Wolf’s recorded sermons, and features them prominently in a chamber music context. Scored for string quartet, piano, mezzo-soprano, and baritone, the work explores the feelings of profound uncertainty that are part of the fabric of everyday 21st-century life. Combined with the roughly 12 minutes of sermons featured in the piece, sung scripture from Isaiah and Job (in English and Hebrew) create a rich listening experience for the audience, with Rabbi Wolf’s text often superimposed on the scripture, which can reveal new observations with repeated listening. By weaving these strands of text and ideas together, I hoped to create the sensation I experienced when listening to Rabbi Wolf’s sermons while doing research for the piece: it was as if there was a constant river of Hebrew and English scholarship running under his words, sometimes harmoniously supporting what he was saying, but often in challenging counterpoint. For me, the experience of studying his sermons was akin to listening to not just one very wise man sharing spiritually and intellectually challenging ideas—it was like hearing a *conversation* of scholars, at times cacophonous, at times beautifully set against each other.

The title for this piece comes from Rabbi Wolf's 1998 Yom Kippur sermon, where he cites the historian Eric Hobsbawm, who referred to the 20th Century (particularly the middle of the 20th Century) as the "Age of Catastrophe." In Rabbi Wolf's words: "It is a time when our worst dreams come true. Our worst fears are in the headlines." In essence, he says that living in this time is about living with fear, about living with uncertainty. It was true in 1998, and, I believe, it becomes more and more true every day. Along with our infinite access to worldwide information comes infinite access to the minutia of daily horrors enacted on humans by fellow humans, as well as the minutia of the immense suffering caused by natural disasters. With this in mind, my title implies that we no longer live in the Age of Catastrophe; we, in the information age, live in the Age of *Catastrophes*. We invariably have to numb ourselves against them, and every time we do so, we risk losing some of our humanity.

In the first chapter of the book of Job (sung in Hebrew in movement II of the piece), one messenger after another comes to tell Job that another horrific tragedy has befallen his family. By setting Job against Rabbi Wolf's discussion of "The Age of Catastrophe," I sought to draw comparisons between our daily parade of catastrophes and Job's archetypal one. Here, the singers operate as a Greek chorus, dispassionately presenting the disasters, like an ancient news anchor, but eventually becoming involved and emotionally connected to them.

This parade of catastrophes forms the crux of the piece, creating the need for the balm that is the third movement. Here Rabbi Wolf suggests that part of the answer to the spiritual crisis of losing hope in a time of profound uncertainty is to make peace within yourself—to know "That God is God, and you are not." Movement III, "Make the World Shine Again" deals with the only things that are in our control: our own choices, our own thoughts, and our actions.

The Isaiah texts in movements I and III are taken from Yom Kippur readings. This piece's connection to the Day of Atonement is quite deliberate.

Texts and Translations

Movement I

Fanfare: Cry with Full Throat

Isaiah 58:1 (sung in English and Hebrew)

¹*Kra v'garon al tachsoch, kashofar harem kolecha,
v'haged l'ami pish'am, uleveit ya'akov chatotam.**

Cry with full throat, without restraint; Raise your voice like a ram's horn!
Declare to My people their transgression, to the House of Jacob their sin.

Movement II

The Age of Catastrophe

Job 1:13-19 (sung in Hebrew only, with English interjections)

¹³ *Vayhi, hayom; uvanav uvnotav ochlim veshotim ya(y)in, beveit achiem habechor.*

One day as his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their eldest brother,

¹⁴ *Umal'ach ba el iyov, vayomar: habakar hayu chorshot, vaha'atonot ro'ot al yedeyhem.*

a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the she-
asses were grazing alongside them

¹⁵ *Vatipol shva vaticachem, ve'et hane'arim hiku lefi charev; va'imalta rak ani levadi,
lehagid lach.*

when Sabeans attacked them and carried them off, and put the boys to
the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you."

¹⁶ *Od ze medaber, veze ba vayomar, esh elohim nafla min hashama(y)im, vativ'ar batzon uvan'arim vatochlem; va'imalta rak ani levadi, lehagid lach.*

This one was still speaking when another came and said, "God's fire fell from heaven, took hold of the sheep and the boys, and burned them up; I alone have escaped to tell you."

¹⁷ *Od ze medaber, veze ba vayomar, kasdim samu shlosa rashim vayifshotu al hagmalim vayikchum, ve'et hane'arim hiku lefi charev; va'imalta rak ani levadi, lehagid lach.*

This one was still speaking when another came and said, "A Chaldean formation of three columns made a raid on the camels and carried them off and put the boys to the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you."

¹⁸ *Od ze medaber, veze ba vayomar, baneicha uvnoteicha ochlim veshotim ya(y)in, beveit achihem habechor.*

This one was still speaking when another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their eldest brother

¹⁹ *Vehine ruach gdola ba'a me'ever hamidbar, vayiga be'arba pinot haba(y)it, vayipol al hane'arim, vayamutu; va'imalta rak ani levadi, lehagid lach.*

when suddenly a mighty wind came from the wilderness. It struck the four corners of the house so that it collapsed upon the young people and they died; I alone have escaped to tell you."

Movement III

Make the World Shine Again

Isaiah 58:8, 11 (sung in English only)

⁸Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly;
Your Vindicator shall march before you,
The Presence of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

¹¹The Lord will guide you always;
He will slake your thirst in parched places
And give strength to your bones.
You shall be like a watered garden,
Like a spring whose waters do not fail.

Text is taken from Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 1985 by the Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia.

*Hebrew transliteration prepared specifically for the score by Israeli composer
Osnat Netzer.

About the composer:

Shawn Brogan Allison's music has been described as "playful and inventive" (Chicago Sun-Times), "vividly imagistic" (Lucid Culture), "smartly crafted," and "intriguing" (Chicago Classical Review). The composer and saxophonist has worked with ensembles and organizations such as eighth blackbird, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble), Spektral Quartet, the New Fromm Players, Cadillac Moon Ensemble, the Esoterics, and Cantus. His awards include a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Tanglewood Fellowship, the 2009 Polyphonos competition (U.S. Composer category winner), a Javits Fellowship from the U.S. Department of Education, a Jerome Commissioning Award, and the Max Janowski Young Artist Award. His work, *Towards the Flame*, performed by the Cadillac Moon Ensemble, has been released on the album *Atlas* on New Dynamic Records. Shawn Allison became involved with the KAM Isaiah Israel community through his wife, Abbey, who has been working for KAMII since 2006. In addition to directing and playing saxophone with the KAMII Klezmer Band for three years, he was also selected as KAMII's 2011 Janowski Young Artist, which culminated in a premiere of three of his works at KAMII.

Shawn is from Newport News, Virginia, where he began his musical education as a saxophonist. He holds degrees in composition and saxophone performance from St. Olaf College and Ithaca College. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Composition at the University of Chicago, where he has studied composition with Augusta Read Thomas, Shulamit Ran, and Marta Ptaszynska.

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by Shawn Brogan Allison

Performed by:

Julia Bentley, mezzo-soprano

Alan Dunbar, baritone

Spektral Quartet

(Aurelien Fort Pederzoli and Austin Wulliman, violin;

Doyle Armbrust, viola; Russell Rolen, cello)

Nolan Pearson, piano

Ryan Ingebritsen, sound designer and engineer

Michael Lewanski, conductor

Recorded December 6, 2013

at KAM Isaiah Israel Sanctuary, Chicago, Illinois

Recording Engineer: Isabel Olive

Producer: Shawn Allison

Audio Mixing: Ryan Ingebritsen and Isabel Olive

CD Insert Design: Abigail Allison

The Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf Memorial Committee

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