

TEXT and PROGRAM NOTE

Seven Last Words of the Unarmed

I. "Officers, why do you have your guns out?"

Encapsulating the sense of gloom that arises upon the news of the death of another unarmed black man, the chorus rises from the funereal piano ostinato singing **Kenneth Chamberlain's** last words interpolated with the medieval tune, *L'homme armé doibt on doubter* - "The armed man must be feared." After the final iteration of the 66-year old's dying breath, the chorus repeats one important word: "why?"

II. "What are you following me for?"

This movement uses the classical form of the fugue not only to portray **Trayvon Martin's** last moments trying to escape death, but also to sonically capture the daily paranoia of the black experience while driving on roads, walking on sidewalks, and congregating at various social gatherings. Quotes of *L'homme armé* in the strings underneath the imitative counterpoint in the voices lead to a climactic yell of surprise at the movement's end.

III. "Mom, I'm going to college."

In New York, February of 1999, four police officers fired 41 shots at **Amadou Diallo**, a 23 year old immigrant from Guinea. The undulating pattern in the piano simultaneously yields a sense of calm with its simple harmonic underpinning and unease with its odd 5/4 meter.

IV. "I don't have a gun! Stop shooting!"

Of the seven movements, this one contains the most anger. Through the use of agitated rhythms and multiple harmonic exclamations on the word "stop", the target of the rage is media portrayal of black men on the news, in comedies, and in dramas. Even in the aftermath of such tragedies, the rhetoric and images used to describe the deceased was markedly appalling across all media. This was the case, especially, for **Michael Brown**.

V. "You shot me. You shot me!"

Oscar Grant III's exclamations of surprise and incredulity were caught on several cellphone recordings in the BART station in which he was murdered. The movement honoring his life is a sonic representation of this epidemic. Aleatoric spoken exclamations of the last words crescendo alongside the humming of *L'homme armé* in the style of the Negro spiritual. Underneath the cacophony, the pulsing C of the piano, violin, and viola persist unflinchingly like a heart monitor until the end.

VI. "It's not real."

Although they were referring to the BB gun he was carrying in the Walmart where he was killed, **John Crawford's** last words escape the lips of thousands of African-Americans. Thus, the movement's beginning is the soundtrack to my mental utopia. Saccharine sweet and soaring, the voices and strings are joined by the piano "heart monitor" which persists and gradually infects the strings, like reality interrupting a reverie.

VII. "I can't breathe!"

The decision of a Richmond County grand jury to not indict the officer responsible for **Eric Garner's** death was the impetus for this entire work, and it is only fitting that his last words end the piece. After using a mournful Byzantine texture for the first half of the movement, I tried to capture the panicked death thralls of asphyxiation in the music.

Note by Joel Thompson