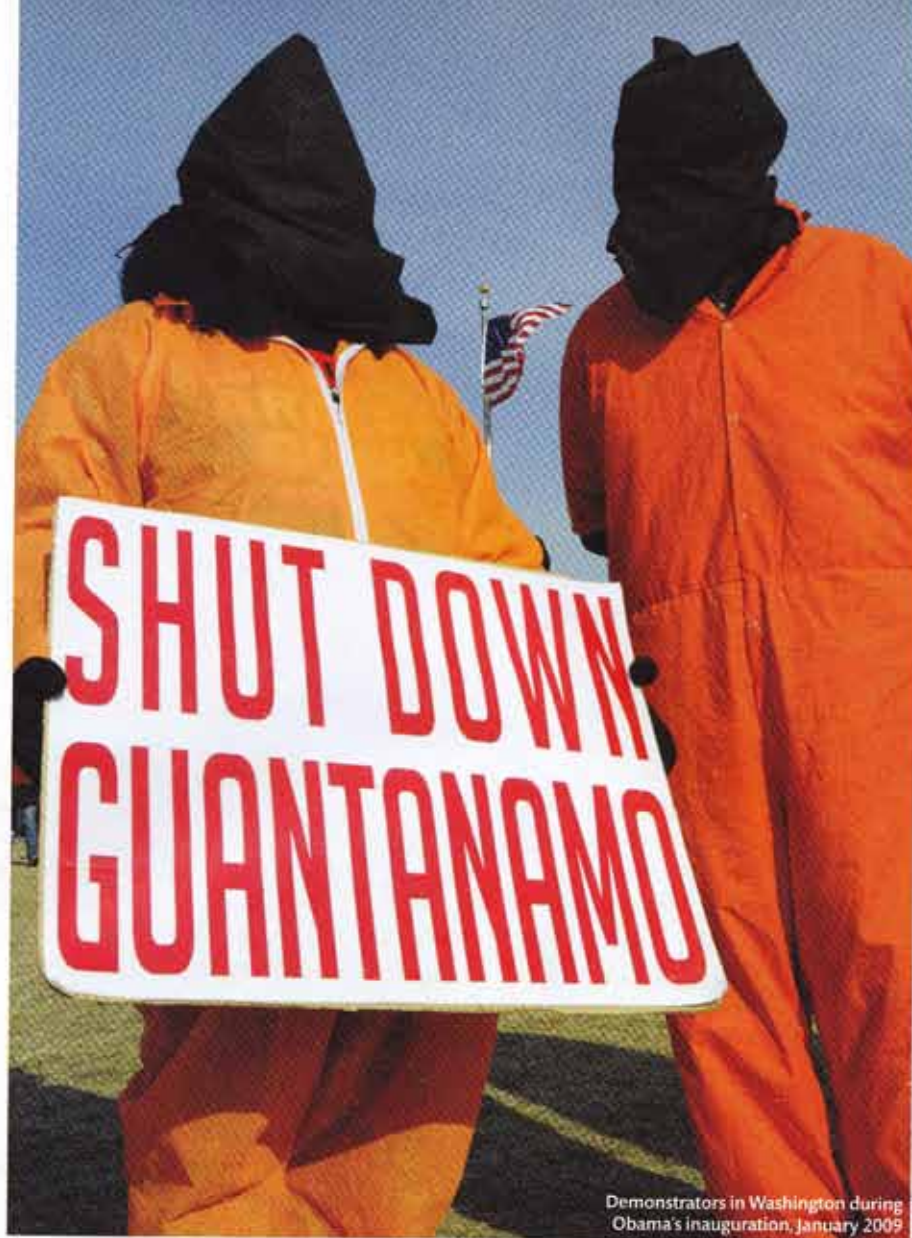


Within days of taking office, President Barack Obama promised to close the US detention centre at Guantánamo Bay. As the world waits, a new choral work setting texts by its prisoners is to be premiered, fittingly, on Good Friday, writes

David Wordworth



Demonstrators in Washington during Obama's inauguration, January 2009

Out of the depths

Many composers would agree that the biggest difficulty when writing a choral or vocal work is finding a text that might be suitable for a musical setting and sets off their imagination – the two don't always appear at the same time. Ed Hughes, who is writing a new work, *A Buried Flame*, for the Bath Camerata's Good Friday concert in Wells Cathedral, explains his most recent find: 'I knew that I wanted to write something with a contemporary relevance, rather than just set a liturgical text. I discovered a wonderful anthology of poems written by the detainees of Guantánamo Bay – *Poems*

of Guantánamo, edited by Marc Falkoff – which I knew on the one hand might be considered a controversial choice, but was nevertheless one that certainly spoke to me and very quickly opened up all sorts of musical possibilities; in fact, a composer's dream. I wrote to Professor Falkoff, who was enthusiastic and supportive – and that was all the encouragement I needed.'

Of the hundreds of men that have been, and still are, detained since 2002 at the US detention centre at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, fewer than half are accused of planning or committing 'hostile acts' against the USA or its allies: and indeed

in most cases even the circumstances of their detainment are at best questionable. *Poems from Guantánamo* is a collection of moving, harrowing and at times desperate poems by these detainees trapped in a sort of appalling legal limbo. The poems were written on anything to hand, even scratched on paper cups, smuggled from cell to cell in secret; they tell of the torments of injustice, shattered dreams and fading hope.

Hughes has chosen two poems from the collection – 'Ode to the Sea' by Ibrahim Al Rubaish, which begins with the evocative line 'O sea, give news of my loved ones' ▶

◀ and which continues to liken the shifting moods of the ocean to the constantly changing feelings of the anger and resignation of incarceration. The other text, 'Homeward Bound' by Moazzem Begg, brings the work to a touchingly hopefully conclusion – 'As dreams begin and nightmares end / I'm homeward bound to beloved tend'.

Hughes explains, 'I was attracted to both the spiritual and emotional tone of the poems, obviously written in such a dark time in the writers' lives, but also wanted to place these remarkable texts in a context that underlined their much wider relevance'. To do this, he also chose an accompanying text from the Judaeo-Christian tradition reflecting a similar message: Psalm 69, a Psalm used on Good Friday, also speaks of the desperation of imprisonment and a longing to be free – 'Reproach hath broken my heart / and let me not sink / let me be delivered from them that hate me, and out of the deep waters.' Hughes continues, 'We are all used to reading and hearing of the differences between the Islamic and Christian worlds:

but I really feel that these texts, both the Psalm and the poems, cross boundaries and illustrate what is common, rather than what is not. It is really that "common element" that I am seeking to highlight. There is also a fascinating contrast between the ancient and the contemporary which I'd like to highlight in the music in some way'. One of Hughes's favourite composers is William Byrd, whose ability to write complex counterpoint and then suddenly illuminate the text with moments of great clarity is something that he admires very much – 'with these texts', he says, 'clarity is everything!'

The completed work will be in three linked movements (which the composer hopes may also be performed separately), lasting about 15 minutes. The first sets Psalm 69, while the remaining sections jump thousands of years to the Guantánamo poems. Hughes has written several works for both amateur and professional choirs, but sees no huge difference in his approach. 'The new piece will certainly stretch the choir,' he says, 'but I'm doing everything I can to make it gratifying to sing. With all my music, choral or instrumental, I try to get the greatest possible contrast between powerful blocks of sound and more intricate part-writing; the poems I've chosen to set, with their conflicting thoughts of introspection and cries of anguish, will heighten these contrasts even more.' One interesting development during the early stages of composition came about when Hughes asked some of his students to sing through some of the parts. The only readily available instrument to help with pitch was a bass guitar, but Hughes says, 'What struck me was that in the hands of a good player

the bass guitar is an incredibly versatile instrument. On the one hand it can be very expressive, but it's also capable of cutting through thick textures, especially in a big, resonant acoustic.' As a result of this discovery, the bass guitar has become part of the piece, a practical help to the choir but also another link between the ancient and the contemporary, that is a central concern of the work.

In addition to the seven-part choir (SSAATBarB) and bass guitar, the work also has an electronic element. The composer credits the idea for this to Nigel Perrin, the Bath Camerata's conductor, who comments: 'I find that (when) listening to just an unaccompanied choir for a long time I often yearn for a different colour. One of our most successful commissions was from Antonin Tučapský, whose *The Seven Sorrows* for choir and violin worked wonderfully well. I knew of Ed's interest in electronics and thought, quite apart from being something rather unusual, it would work marvellously in the cathedral.' Electronics are nothing new for Hughes, who has used them in many of his previous works, both for the stage and the concert hall. 'I just look on electronics as an extra colour,' he says. 'I never think about using them just for the sake of it. In this piece they will not only play an important dramatic role, but a structural one too, providing a sort of montage of sea-sounds linking the choral movements.'

Before every choral conductor runs for the hills at the mention of the word 'electronics', have no fear! Eager to ensure that the new piece should have a life after the premiere, both composer and conductor are anxious to create maximum effect from relatively simple technology, so huge vanloads full of expensive equipment isn't the answer. 'I really don't want the electronics to get in the way,' says Hughes, 'either musically or from the point of view of intimidating future performers; but I feel it's a wonderful opportunity to explore the fantastic acoustic of the cathedral, take soloists out of the choir and give them extra life, as well as heighten the climaxes in some way, adding a sort of ambient layer to the texture that will float around the choir and the audience.' Hughes

Nigel Perrin will conduct the Bath Camerata (below) in the premiere of *A Buried Flame*



COURTESY NIGEL PERRIN



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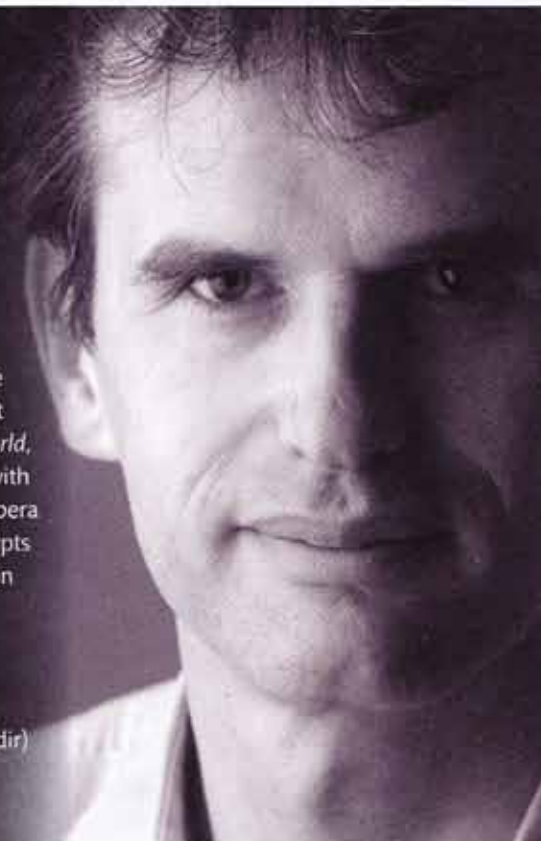
mentions his admiration for Jonathan Harvey's iconic electronic piece *Mortuos Plango Vivos Voco*, in which the sound of Harvey's son floats away from the central fixed bell sounds. This image of the soul freeing itself and flying into the ether is one that seems to fit the atmosphere of these texts perfectly.

The final form the electronics take will only become clear as the composition progresses; at the time of writing Hughes is keen to explore the idea of Gabrieli-like antiphonal exchanges between the live element (the choir) and the electronics – microphones/speakers and the like being hidden from the audience, who hopefully won't be able to work out where the sounds are coming from. All in all it promises to be a fascinating juxtaposition of sound worlds and cultures, as well as a new work that has particular relevance for the fractured times in which we find ourselves. ■

www.edhughes.org.uk
www.bathcamerata.org.uk

Ed Hughes is Lecturer in Music at the University of Sussex and has recently completed commissions for the City of London Festival (an opera *The Birds*) and the Brighton Festival (a new score for Eisenstein's classic film *Battleship Potemkin*). These works were toured to the Salamanca Festival and the Sydney Opera House. Ed's next opera, *Cocteau in the Underworld*, is currently being developed with the Royal Opera House and Opera Genesis programme and excerpts were performed at the Brighton Festival in 2009.

Ed Hughes: *A Buried Flame*
 (world premiere)
 Bath Camerata / Nigel Perrin (dir)
 Good Friday, 2 April 2010,
 Wells Cathedral



Scattered leaves ... from our Letter File

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