

The largest work of Tom Johnson, premiered by the orchestra and chorus of the Dutch Radio in September 1996, and had its German premier in Berlin in November of 1998. The text comes from various books, sermons, and letters of the controversial German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-44), who took part in the resistance against Hitler. Two hours and 15 minutes of music. Orchestra material on rental.

Score available in four versions:

Complete score in hard cover, € (Euros) 350

Vocal score in hard cover, € (Euros) 100

Vocal score in spiral binding, € (Euros) 60

A capella score of the seven choruses of Part IV (with texts from the prison letters), which can be presented outside the context of the oratorio as a whole, € (Euros) 6

Bonhoeffer Oratorium : program notes

For a long time Dietrich Bonhoeffer was little more than a name I had heard mentioned in sermons. I knew something about "cheap grace," and I knew that this pastor and theologian worked in the German resistance and was hung by the Nazi government for high treason in 1945, but not much more. Then, in February of 1986, I happened to be in Berlin, where I came across an announcement that there would be a gathering in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Memorial Church to recognize what would have been the theologian's 80th birthday. I decided to attend. A former student of Bonhoeffer, Otto Dudzus, gave a stimulating informal talk, but everything was new for me, and I didn't understand a lot. I became interested, however, bought some books, and began the most extraordinary reading experience of my life: the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the original German. A week spent in Amsterdam in 1988 for a colloquium of the International Bonhoeffer Society provided an opportunity to meet and hear Bonhoeffer specialists, and gave me a more solid understanding of this man and greater appreciation of the seven or eight volumes of theology he wrote before his death at the age of 39.

Bonhoeffer's theology brought about not only a renewal and deepening of my own Christianity, but gave me a desire to respond in my professional work as a composer as well, and for four years, from 1988 until 1992, I devoted most of my composing time to setting Bonhoeffer texts in what was to become my Bonhoeffer Oratorium. Finding an orchestra and a sponsor to perform this massive work was more difficult than I had expected, and in fact, I had to wait another four years before the Dutch Radio orchestra and chorus presented the world premier in Maastricht in September 1996. The reception was quite positive, however, and the German premier in Berlin two years later provided another fine performance.

This oratorio was the longest and largest work I had written, and also the most special. From the simple directness of Part One, to the dissonant political expressions of Part Two, to the praise-God-together joy of Part Three, to the monophonic gospel moods of Part Four, I found myself writing a kind of music I had never written before. The orchestra, the chorus, the soloists, and the formal structure all followed the German classical oratorio tradition, but other things did not. The four saxophones in the orchestra suggest jazz, the score sometimes suggests Kurt Weill and other German musicians of Bonhoeffer's generation, and at times one can hear Black American gospel music, and hints of the spirituals that Bonhoeffer was so fond of. At the same time, the work seems to be speaking for the present in a way that my operas and instrumental works never have - perhaps because the texts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer continue to be so vital today.