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Resounding Through the Ages: The Seven Last Words of Christ

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has served as the source and inspiration for innumerable musical creations spanning the centuries. Ranging in scope, style, form, and instrumentation, prime examples include masterworks from around the world: *St. Matthew Passion*, Johann Sebastian Bach (1727), *Stabat Mater*, Giovanni Pergolesi (1736), *Messiah*, Georg Friedrich Handel (1742), *The Crucifixion* by Sir John Stainer (1887), *Symphonie-Passion* by Marcel Dupré (1921/24), *The Debrecen Passion* by Kati Agócs (2015), and many others. This sacred music, stemming from Gregorian chant, Protestant hymnody, and beyond, attracts musicians and listeners alike due to its inherent versatility and depth.

For the Christian faithful, perhaps the most significant words uttered on this earth were those of Jesus as he hung upon the cross. Arnold of Bonneval encapsulates what lies at the core of Christ's final pronouncements within his *Tractatus de Septem Verbis Domini in Cruce*:

When Christ had reached the time of His passion He recapitulated the whole essence of His teaching, saying with great succinctness things He had expounded at much greater length during His preaching. Thus it is that the last words of Christ offer a mystical compendium of the entire Gospel. These words are radiant with the splendor of the totality of the Christian faith. They are, indeed, like small seeds which, when sown in suitable soil, bring forth an immense and wonderful harvest for all the faithful¹.

These “small seeds” – *The Seven Last Words of Christ* – are scattered throughout the four canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but not found in any

¹ Saint Bonaventure, A. Bonneval, *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, transl. by R. Nixon OSB, TAN Books, North Carolina, Gastonia 2023, 33.

single Gospel. It was during the 12th and 13th centuries that spiritual commentators such as Arnold of Bonneval and St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (the Seraphic Doctor) began to harmonize the Gospels, resulting in a narrative to be used as a vehicle for meditation and prayer.

The first major music-setting of this divine narrative came in 1645 at the hands of prolific German composer and organist Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672) – *Die Sieben Worte Jesu am Kreuz* SWV 478, scored for choir SATTB, five instrumental parts and continuo. With the groundwork being laid over 350 years ago, these “words” have yielded a bountiful musical harvest well into the 21st century.

The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ by Pamela Decker represents the latest major work based on the final proclamations of Christ from the cross. Published by Wayne Leupold Editions in 2018, this formidable work for organ solo is divided into two parts. Part I consists of seven meditations corresponding to the seven “words,” and Part II includes the procession to the tomb (passacaglia) and the resurrection (toccata).

By no means exhaustive, this musico-theological analysis will describe how Part I of Decker’s programmatic music artfully communicates the power, depth, and beauty of Christ’s timeless words by way of pitch, rhythm, texture, registration, and use of pre-existing melody.

1. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34 – KJV²)

For this first piece in the cycle, the texture and musical materials suggest elements of both ‘song’ and ‘dance,’ giving a very human, emotional, and somewhat secular feeling to the evocation of a community that is of this world, often unaware of spiritual matters – and in need of forgiveness. Although the language is of this time, there is a subtle homage to Johannes Brahms in the textural weaving of the counterpoint; there is a representation of life as an earthbound dance and a plaintive song, offering the human presence as a spirit in need of both love and forgiveness³.

Beginning with an ethereal registration of strings and flutes, mm. 1–5 suggest the descent of God’s mercy into a fallen world as the initial chord, comprising perfect intervals, dispatches into a chromatic descent toward the primary theme that begins in m. 6 [Figure 1].

² King James Version (further: KJV).

³ P. Decker, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ for Organ*, Part 1: *The Seven Last Words*, Wayne Leupold Editions, North Carolina, Colfax 2018, 2.

Sw. *legatissimo*

This musical score is for Movement I, measures 1-5. It features a piano accompaniment and a string section. The piano part is written in a 3/4 time signature and consists of two staves. The upper staff contains a melodic line with various intervals and accidentals, while the lower staff provides harmonic support. The string section is indicated by a single staff with a flat sign, suggesting a key signature of one flat. The tempo marking is 'Sw. legatissimo'.

Fig. 1. Movement I, mm. 1-5, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

6 Fa - ther, for - give them, for they know (not) what they do.

Gt.

10 Fa - ther, for - give them, for they know not what they

14 do. Fa - ther for - give them...

This musical score is for Movement I, measures 6-17. It features a guitar (Gt.) and piano accompaniment. The guitar part is written in a 3/4 time signature and consists of two staves. The piano part is written in a 3/4 time signature and consists of two staves. The vocal lines are written in a 3/4 time signature and consist of two staves. The lyrics are: 'Fa - ther, for - give them, for they know (not) what they do.' and 'Fa - ther, for - give them...'. The tempo marking is 'Sw. legatissimo'.

Fig. 2. Movement I, mm. 6-17, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

The composer constructs the primary theme (top voice, mm. 6–24) upon prosodic characteristics of the first “word” as it relates to syllabic rhythm and pitch contour [Figure 2]. This technique not only binds the voice of Jesus to the melodic content throughout the first movement, but it also generates a collaboration between the worldly “song” and “dance” of the intricately woven counterpoint and the “divine” melody that soars from above. This interaction intensifies as the tonal-center shifts in an upward stepwise motion [Gm → Am → Bbm → Cm] and the melody becomes increasingly more elaborate and chromatic.

The conclusion of Movement I includes a modified restatement of the introductory measures followed by a final appearance of the primary theme; divine mercy and the need for forgiveness coalesce as the piece resolves in the key of G major [Figure 3].

The image displays a musical score for Movement I, measures 116–124. It features a vocal line (top staff) and piano accompaniment (middle and bottom staves). The score is divided into two systems. The first system, starting at measure 116, includes the lyrics "Fa - ther, for -" and "Sw.". The second system, starting at measure 121, includes the lyrics "give them, for they know not what they do." The piano accompaniment consists of a right-hand part with intricate counterpoint and a left-hand part with a steady bass line. The key signature changes from G minor to G major at the end of the piece.

Fig. 3. Movement I, mm. 116–124, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

2. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:34 – NRSV⁴)

Movement II is partially a toccata on the chant *Christus vincit*, celebrating the ultimate victory over death; the lyrical sections of the piece are an homage to J.S. Bach, in that they call upon a signal rhythmic figure from the bass aria of Cantata 106⁵.

Characterized by the juxtaposition of contemplative lyricism and ecstatic virtuosity, this movement guides the listener from a moment of conversion to the promise of future glory. As indicated by the composer, Johann Sebastian Bach’s Cantata 106 *O Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* (God’s time is the very best time) serves as the basis for melodic content within the lyrical sections of this piece. The dissonant harmonic language serves as a backdrop that evokes a scene filled with pain and despair, and the gentle registration of the accompaniment generates a dimly lit halo around those who are speaking: The Repentant Thief (harmonic flute 8’) and Jesus (reed 8’ or cornet). The pitches personifying the voice of Jesus reflect the contour and rhythmic/intervalllic motifs of Bach’s cantata where the text reads, “Heute wirst du mit mir im Paradies sein” (Today you shall be with me in Paradise). The quality of mercy expressed within these passages is but a foretaste to the supreme power of victory over death [Figure 4].

The image displays a musical score excerpt. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Heu - te, heu - te wirst du mit mir, heu - te, heu - te wirst du mit". The middle staff is for guitar (Gt.) and clarinet (Ch.). The bottom staff is for piano accompaniment. The score is in a minor key and features a complex, dissonant harmonic language.

Fig. 4. Bass aria from Cantata 106 “O Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit” by Johann Sebastian Bach (excerpt). Movement II, mm. 62–65, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

⁴ New Revised Standard Version (further: NRSV).

⁵ P. Decker, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ for Organ, Part 1: The Seven Last Words*, 2.

Proclaimed since the 8th century, *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat* (Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ commands) is an acclamation that asserts Christ as the king of kings. The composer not only elicits the spirit of this triumphant chorus within the toccata-like sections of this movement by way of tempo and meter but uses the chant melody itself to form the subject of the fugal sections within. Beginning with a full-bodied registration and a single voice, the music gathers energy like an unrelenting force as each exhortation of the subject is layered with a countersubject and additional voices [Figure 5]. Movement II ends in the key of A major with a sonorous restatement of the chant in the pedal-voice.

The figure displays a musical score for the 8th-century chant "Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat". It is divided into two systems. The first system, labeled "Schola" with a large "C" symbol, shows a single melodic line on a five-line staff with a treble clef. The melody consists of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. Below the staff, the Latin text "Hristus vincit Christus regnat, Christus íperat." is written. The second system, starting at measure 9, is a piano accompaniment in 8/8 time. It features three staves: a right-hand treble staff and two left-hand bass staves. The right-hand staff contains the vocal melody from the first system, with the text "Christus vincit", "Christus regnat", and "Christus imperat" placed above it. The left-hand staves provide harmonic support with chords and moving lines. Measure numbers 9, 14, and 19 are indicated at the beginning of their respective lines.

Fig. 5. *Christus vincit*, 8th century chant (excerpt). Movement II, mm. 62–65, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

3. “When Jesus therefore saw his mother and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, ‘Woman, behold thy son!’ Then saith he to the disciple, ‘Behold thy mother!’” (John 19: 26–27 – KJV)

In this work, the intention is to evoke the intensely spiritual. The Gregorian chant presented in the pedal part is *Ave Maria* (Antienne), which is appropriate for the text of this quote⁶.

Movement III is centered on the intimate exchange between Jesus and those who were closest to Him in this world: Mary, his mother, and John, the beloved disciple. Springing forth from the shadows of the cross, the shimmering chordal texture sets the tone for this exchange as Jesus speaks to Mary first, referring to the beloved disciple by way of an 8’ principal stop in the tenor voice. He then turns to John regarding Mary His Mother as the Gregorian chant, *Ave Maria* (*Hail Mary*), surfaces in the soprano range with a principal or flute stop at 4’ pitch in the pedal. The intertwining of these two melodies in mm. 5-9 reflects the bond of a new-found filial relationship commissioned by Jesus [Figure 6]. *Ave Maria* is presented in the pedal-voice in its entirety before the movement concludes with an ‘Amen’ sounding at 16’ and 8’ pitch in the pedal.

⁶ P. Decker, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ for Organ*, Part 1: *The Seven Last Words*, 2.

Manual

Sw.

Gt.

Pedal

Jesus speaking to Mary about John

4

(Sw.)

Gt.

7

Jesus speaking to John about Mary: A - ve Ma - ri - a, gra ti - a ple - na,

Do - mi - nus te - cum, be - ne - di - cta - tu in mu - li - e - ri - bus.

Fig. 6. Movement III, mm. 1–9, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

4. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46 – NRSV)

The hymn tune “Bangor” [Figure 7] appears as a recurring theme for a set of variations that depict powerful emotions stemming from the exclamation about feeling forsaken. At first there is something resembling acceptance, then deep sorrow, and finally a cry of pain⁷.

⁷ P. Decker, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ for Organ, Part 1: The Seven Last Words*, 2.

1 A - lone thou go - est forth, O Lord, In sac - ri - fice to die;
 2 Our sins, not thine, thou bear - est, Lord, Make us thy sor - row feel,

Is this thy sor - row naught to us Who pass un - heed - ing by?
 Till through our pi - ty and our shame Love an - swers love's ap - peal. A - men.

3 This is earth's darkest hour, but thou 4 Give us compassion for thee, Lord,
 Dost light and life restore; That, as we share this hour,
 Then let all praise be given thee Thy cross may bring us to thy joy
 Who livest evermore. And resurrection power. Amen.

PETER ABELARD, 1079-1142; Tr. F. BLAND TUCKER, 1938

Fig. 7. *Alone Thou Goest Forth, O Lord*. Text: Peter Abelard; tr. F. Bland Tucker. Tune: *Bangor*, William Tans'ur, *A Compleat Melody or Harmony of Zion*, 1734.

Variation I (“acceptance”) features an interaction between the pedal-line on beat one, and the three-voice texture in the manuals accentuating beat two. This synopation, paired with the rising/falling contour in the four-voice texture, produces a sense of motion that recalls Christ’s movement toward the will of His Father. *Bangor* is stated in the pedal voice [Figure 8].

Fig. 8. Movement IV, mm. 11–15, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

Variation II (“deep sorrow”) is a development of the first variation as the right hand and pedal share permutations of *Bangor* [Figure 9]. Decker suggests a cor-net-like registration for the melancholic recitative in the right hand that is reminiscent of the voice of Jesus in Movement II.

Fig. 9. Movement IV, mm. 26–29, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

Variation III (“cry of pain”) is a toccata that involves an electrifying manual-figuration flashing above a thunderous statement of *Bangor* in the pedal [Figure 10]. Following a complete statement of the hymn-tune in the pedal, the manual and double-pedal voices stretch toward the outer limits of the keyboard compass as the piece reaches climactic proportions. A torrential pedal cadenza in m. 53 surges into a set of crashing chords that pierce the heart, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”.

43

53b

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 72$

fff

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

fff

add 32'

Fig. 10. Movement IV, mm. 43–44 / mm. 53b–58, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

5. “I Thirst” (John 19:28 – KJV)

This piece has a contour that emulates the flow of water, which is represented as sweet, uncomplicated, and continuously in motion. The solo lines evoke the bitter aspect of thirst, where water is greatly desired, but remains inaccessible. The language of the solo lines is more acerbic, while the line depicting water remains sweet and desirable⁸.

The trio texture of this movement comprises layers that depict the physical thirst of Jesus, as well as the spiritual paradox of the Son of God who, while being “the font from which clear, living water flows [...] and shall never run dry”, thirsts for our redemption, “that verdant charity may bloom within your heart”⁹.

⁸ P. Decker, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ for Organ*, Part 1: *The Seven Last Words*, 2.

⁹ From Arnold of Bonneval’s, *Tractatus de septem verbis Domini in cruce tractatus pius iuxta & eruditus*, Apud Martinum Caesarem, Antuerpiae 1532; Saint Bonaventure, A. Bonneval, *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, 74.

Fig. 11. Movement V, mm. 1–4 / mm. 15–18, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

6. “It is finished” (John 19:30 – KJV)

The focal point of VI is the sheer power and resolute victory of “triumph” as the overriding *Affekt* of the sixth “word”. The movement combines several dance rhythms and a string of evolving and transforming variations on the primary theme. The text might be “It is finished”, but of course, the resurrection means that the story is not at all “finished”, and we know that the ultimate finish is in triumph, both for the trinity and for humanity¹⁰.

Unrelenting from beginning to end, the gravity of this “word” is duly expressed through technical acrobatics, dense textures, and complicated dance rhythms that permeate Movement VI. The primary theme is formed by two ideas presented in the opening measures: (m. 1) declamatory chordal motif stressing the syllabic rhythm of, “It is finished”, (m. 2) three-layered rhythmic figurations of quarter/eighth/sixteenth notes. After a series of transformative variations, the two motifs are superimposed during a wildly intense finish that concludes with an emphatic restatement of the sixth “word” and a plagal cadence [Figure 12].

¹⁰ P. Decker, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ for Organ*, Part 1: *The Seven Last Words*, 2.

The image displays a musical score for Movement VI, consisting of three systems. The first system (mm. 1-2) features a guitar part (Gt.) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics "It is fin - ished" are written above the first two measures. The guitar part is marked *ff* and includes a section labeled "Multi-layered rhythmic motif" starting in the second measure. The piano accompaniment also has a *ff* marking. The second system (mm. 38-39) is titled "Transformation of rhythmic motifs" and shows a piano part with complex rhythmic patterns. The third system (mm. 70-71) features a vocal line with lyrics "It is fin - ished A - men" and a piano accompaniment. The piano part includes a multi-layered rhythmic motif similar to the first system.

Fig. 12. Movement VI, mm. 1–2 / mm. 38–39, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

7. “Father, into Your hands I commend my Spirit” (Luke 23:46 – NRSV)

This meditation on the seventh quote is intended as a musical manifestation of the purest beauty that the mind and heart can grasp, in evocation of the reunion of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit. It is hoped that the listener might “rest” in the sensation of time moving more slowly and in a spirit of uncomplicated joy¹¹.

In reference to the final “word” spoken by Christ, St. Bonaventure notes,

They are, therefore, a *summa* of His doctrine and discipline, revealing His perfect and pure reverence and adoration of the unseen Father. For by these words, Christ shows that all His hope is placed in the Father, and He faithfully entrusts Himself to Him completely¹².

The nature of the melody in the right hand (m. 5) aligns with the purity of Christ’s words when played with one of the most poignant stops on the organ (harmonic flute 4’). Homophonic in texture, this meditation includes imitative dialogue between the right hand, left hand, and pedal (i.e., mm. 9–11) that hints at conversation between the Holy Trinity [Figure 13].

¹¹ P. Decker, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ for Organ*, Part 1: *The Seven Last Words*, 2.

¹² Saint Bonaventure, A. Bonneval, *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, 93.

Fig. 13. Movement VII, mm. 5–12, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

Following the third statement of the melody, the composer indicates a soft 32' stop in the pedal-voice as the broadening chordal passage leads toward the concluding chord in mm. 46–48. The use of a 32' stop causes a subtle rumble underneath the radiance of the final chord, calling to mind the aftershock caused by Christ's final proclamation,

Jesus [...] gave up his spirit. And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked, rocks were split, tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised¹³.

¹³ Matthew 27: 50–62, in: *The New American Bible. Revised Edition*, World Catholic Press, New Jersey, Totowa 1987, 1060–1061.

41 **Broaden** *molto rit.*

Ped.: Soft 32' possible

45

Fig. 14. Movement VII, mm. 41–48, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker.

Conclusion

Appropriate for both concert and liturgical use, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker connects the musician and listener alike to the journey from the cross to the empty tomb. The “words” are not only *expressed* through the seven meditations of Part I, but they are also *embedded* within the very fabric of the rhythms, textures, melodies, and registrations found therein. Decker has made Christ’s words her own, as we are all called to do.

Abstract

Resounding Through the Ages: The Seven Last Words of Christ

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has served as the source for innumerable musical creations spanning the centuries, including a colorful array of compositions inspired by *The Seven Last Words of Christ*. This musico-theological analysis is an attempt to describe how Part I of Pamela Decker’s epic work for solo organ, *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ*, artfully communicates

the power, depth, and beauty of Christ's timeless words by way of pitch, rhythm, texture, registration, and use of pre-existing melody.

Keywords: organ music, liturgical music, seven last words of Christ

References

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Jacob Benda, DMA – appointed in 2022 as the Director of Sacred Music, University Organist, and Organ Professor at the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA, Dr. Benda is a published author, editor, organ consultant, and has been featured as a solo recitalist and lecturer at universities, festivals, and cathedrals throughout the United States. Enthusiastic about new music, he has performed premieres by Pamela Decker, James Sclater, Gary Bachlund, James Callahan, and has championed the music of 20th century American composer Clarence Mader. His landmark commercial recording, *Music at Midnight, A Tonal Palette, Organ Music by Clarence Mader*, (Centaur Label, CRC 3361), was applauded by the American Record Guide as: “an important picture of American organ art in the 20th century... talented young American organist Jacob Benda performs with confident rhythmic stability and polished technical assurance”. He earned his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Louisiana State University in 2015 under the mentorship of Professor Herndon Spillman, protégé of Maurice Duruflé. In 2018 he was appointed as the understudy for the world-premiere performance of *The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ* by Pamela Decker, and since then he has performed the piece throughout the United States to wide acclaim.