

Program notes for *Epistulae ex Ponto* at Hartt on March 31

The composer, Larry Alan Smith, writes:

The great “Roman poet” Ovidius (AKA Ovidio in Italian or Ovid in English) was born in Sulmona, Italy (not Rome!) on March 20, 43 BC. Despite my quintessential Anglo-Saxon name (which is most likely an Americanization of a Swiss-German name), I am half Italian. My maternal family (Di Pietro) is from a small village in the Abruzzo Region of Italy just a short distance from Sulmona . . . an area where I try to spend as much time as possible. Ovidio is Sulmona’s favorite son, and it is impossible to be there without feeling a connection. Sulmona and my family’s village are in the Peligna Valley surrounded by the magnificent Apennine Mountains. The people of the valley are descendants of the ancient Peligni (or Paeligni) tribe, and this romantic would like to think that some DNA unites us. Clearly, my passion for Ovidio is personal.

Ovidio is one of the greatest literary figures of Western Civilization, and his works such as *Metamorphoses* and *Amores* are recognized masterpieces. We know his writings, but relatively little is known about the details of his life. After spending most of his adult life in Rome, he was exiled by Emperor Augustus in 8 AD to Tomis, the present-day Romanian city of Constanta on the Black Sea. Ovidio died there in 17 AD without ever returning to Rome. The circumstances involving his exile by Augustus are unclear. He writes that it was the result of a *carmen et error* (a poem and a mistake). Ovidio identifies the “poem” as *Ars Amatoria* (“The Art of Love”), and he indicates that the “mistake” was not a crime . . . nor was it intentional. Although he alludes to the mistake often, he never offers a detailed explanation. It was obviously serious enough for Augustus to take strong action. Even following the death of Augustus in 14 AD, his successor, Tiberius, did not allow Ovidio to return to Rome. It remains one of the great mysteries of literature, and it is easy to understand why so many theories have surfaced over the centuries.

Imagine what it meant for Ovidio to be exiled from Rome to a place that was very much at the extreme edges of his world. He loathed being there . . . something that is very clear in his writings. While in Tomis, Ovidio wrote *Tristia*, *Epistulae ex Ponto* and *Ibis*. His poems take the form of letters to his wife and friends, but in the case of *Ibis*, he is cursing someone, an unnamed former friend. The letters include descriptions of his surroundings, a running commentary on his deteriorating health and passionate pleas to be able to return to Rome. He frequently asks for intervention on his behalf, and his emotions range from resignation to melancholy to raging anger. He has been sent away, and there is nothing he can do about his circumstances. It was this tragic state of affairs that has inspired my work for soprano and orchestra.

As a tribute to Ovidio on the 2000th anniversary of his death in exile, I chose to use one of his titles for the work. *Epistulae ex Ponto* (“Letters from the Black Sea”) consists of eight movements, and it has a duration of 27 minutes. The first movement, “The Journey to Tomis,” is an orchestral introduction that depicts the terror Ovidio must have felt being physically removed from Rome. The six orchestral songs that follow are the primary focus of the work (Movements II, III, V, VI, VII and VIII), and the soprano represents Ovidio’s third wife. He never mentions her by name, but we know that she remained in Rome . . . dealing with his affairs and advocating for his return. The words we hear (sung and read in the original Ancient Latin) are from the poems (letters) that Ovidio wrote to her in *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*.

Movement IV (“Memories of Rome”) is for orchestra alone, although the soprano joins the ensemble by playing finger cymbals . . . instruments that would have been common in Ancient Rome. The movement makes use of a melody I discovered in January 2017 during my residency as a Visiting Artist at the American Academy in Rome. A book by John G. Landels, *Music in Ancient Greece and Rome*, contained a melody (Athenaios’ *paian*, Section I) that is generally recognized as one of the very first fragments of notated music. Ovidio’s memories of Rome must have included music, and my goal was to evoke those memories using music that he might have heard during his lifetime. His wife’s participation in the orchestral interlude places her far away in Rome . . . but in his thoughts.

The final movement brings the work to a dramatic conclusion as Ovidio’s wife is reading what she realizes must be his final letter to her, while the poet, lonely and distraught in distant Tomis, is dying. The tragedy is complete.

As is noted in the score, the work is “dedicated to those past and present who have been forced to live in exile far from family, friends and the places they know and love.” The idea of being able to present Ovidio’s dilemma to a 21st-century audience in his own language was a challenge that I found fascinating, and in addition to embarking on the study of Latin last fall, I also had assistance regarding the pronunciation of Ancient Latin from Dr. Randolph Ford, a Classical scholar who is currently the Moreau Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Notre Dame.

Epistulae ex Ponto is the third Ovidio-related work that I have written during the past 15 months. In early 2016, choreographer Lucy Bowen McCauley and I created a 45-minute ballet based upon *Ars Amatoria*. The premiere of that work took place in the Terrace Theatre of the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. *Ille ego qui fuerim* is a work for three-part female choir that uses an excerpt from *Tristia*, in which Ovidio writes about being born and raised in Sulmo (Sulmona). The music highlights the phrase *Sulmo mihi patria est* (Sulmo is my homeland). It was premiered in Sulmona in March 2016, and is dedicated “to the Citizens of Sulmona, Italy.”

There are commemorations of Ovidio’s death taking place throughout the world during 2017. For information about what is happening in Sulmona, please visit www.bimillenariovidiano.it. Tonight’s performance is being presented as one of the **Ovidio 2017** celebrations in cooperation with Sulmona’s primary music presenting organization, Camerata Musicale Sulmonese.



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