

## Music Alive: New Partnerships

A Residency Program of

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### By the Streams of Babylon (2008)

Kati Agócs

Program Notes

*By The Streams of Babylon* was commissioned by the Albany Symphony for their Dogs of Desire ensemble, and written in January and early February, 2008. I created a version for larger orchestra during the summer of 2008, and that version was premiered in October 2008 by the Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra in St. John's, Canada. For this piece I have set the Latin version of Psalm 136 ("How can we sing the lord's song in a strange land? .. ), perhaps the most ecumenical of the psalms. Running about five minutes, my setting opens gently with the recalled music of the lost homeland--which I hear as innocent, pious, and sensual all at once. Infused with a gentle exoticism, the sonic image of the flowing river appears as a lyrical, asymmetrical figure of running eighth notes. The evocation of the hymns, envisioned by the rivers of Babylon--tributaries of the Euphrates--gives way to a chain of suspensions that evokes their weeping as the singers recall the glories of their past homeland. The music pauses symbolically when, realizing that they cannot anymore sing their old hymns, they hang their lyres from the branches of the willows beside the rivers. As their captors torment them by demanding the words of their songs and by trying to force them to sing their hymns, they are prompted to demand rhetorically: "How can we sing the lord's song in a strange land?" Leading up to this, the work's dramatic and musical climax, is a transformed version of the opening eighth-note idea; at the question, the chains of suspensions are picked up and extended by the orchestra. The hymns fade, echoed and transformed by the geographical and temporal distances of exile, but traces of their purity still resound in memory at the very end of the piece.

#### *By the Streams of Babylon: Text (psalm 136)*

Super flumina Babylonis,  
Illic sedimus et flevimus,  
Dum recordaremur tui, Sion.  
In salicibus in medio ejus,  
Suspendimus organa nostra:

Quia illic interrogaverunt nos,  
Qui captives duxerunt nos,  
Verba cantionum;  
et qui abduxerunt nos,  
Hymnum cantata nobis de canticis Sion.

Quomodo cantabimus canticum Domini  
In terra aliena?

By the streams of Babylon  
We sat down and we wept  
When we remembered you, O Zion.  
Among the willows on its banks  
We hung our harps;

For there they asked us,  
those who took us captive,  
for the words of our songs,  
and those who had wasted us,  
Asked us to sing out hymns from Zion.

How shall we sing the song of the Lord  
In a strange land?

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To inquire about a residency, please contact:  
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