

Choral Reviews

Kevin Dibble, editor kevin.dibble11@houghton.edu

Pluies

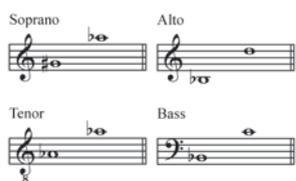
SATB, mezzo soprano solo, string quartet

Sir John Tavener

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\$3.95 (choral), \$11.99 (full), \$11.99 (parts)



Distinguished British composer Sir John Tavener wrote *Pluies* (“Rains”) in 2012, roughly one year before his death in November 2013. Commissioned by Jennifer and Sian Coombs, the work was not premiered until January 2015 at a Service of Thanksgiving for Sian’s father Derek Coombs, a British politician who died in 2014. Based on a poem of the same name by French poet and diplomat Saint-John Perse (1887-1975), *Pluies* is scored for SATB chorus, mezzo soprano solo, and string quartet and lasts approximately five minutes. The poem is considered part of Perse’s *‘Exil’ Continuum*, a group of poems he wrote while living in self-imposed exile in the United States and which represent different emotional states and

experiences associated with his long-ing for France.

The compositional structure of the work is a clear ABAB’ form, punctuated by string tremolos that symbolize rain. The A section presents a melody shared by the choral sopranos and mezzo soloist, doubled an octave higher by the violins, and primarily in the tonality of D-flat major. The length, spacious intervals, and various twists and turns of this melody bear a distinctly neo-Romantic quality, which is characteristic of Tavener’s later music. The B and B’ sections of the piece contain the poem’s two references to laughter, symbolized by the jagged alternations between E major and C major. When the A section returns as A’, the opening melody, now supported by the chorus, takes a dramatic turn as the choral soprano range expands upward, divides into two parts, and moves through a few half-step conflicts while it crescendoes *poco a poco*. Aside from these passing dissonances, the tonal language remains fairly diatonic throughout, within its self-contained sections.

It is interesting to note that while the tremolo passages in the strings are incredibly effective at symbolizing the rain (in diminishing ferocity), musically they function somewhat like a ritornello: a tremolo passage

opens the piece, later signifies the return of the A-section material, and brings the work to its conclusion. Close examination of these tremolos also reveals that they juxtapose references to the important tonalities of the piece: D-flat major in the upper strings and E major (but with a C natural) in the lower strings.

Pluies is a compelling work that has not yet received significant attention among Tavener’s oeuvre, most likely in part because of its origins as a commission specifically for a memorial. In fact, it was only published by Chester Music in 2014—two years after its completion and a year after Tavener’s death. Its French text may present as many challenges as its music, but the piece is eminently performable by a choir of intermediate to advanced ability along with a capable string quartet, whose parts are mostly colla voce in various octaves throughout. Currently, Tavener’s work does not even appear on the composer’s website (the chronological list of works ends with 2011), but hopefully it will soon take its rightful place among Tavener’s many other celebrated choral works.

D. Jason Bishop
West Orange, NJ