

# Songs of Ashes

'Songs of Ashes' is a setting of fifteen poems by the Polish poet Jerzy Ficowski, its subject being The Holocaust. It was completed in February 1991 and is dedicated to all those who suffered and died during the Holocaust, and also to Rabbi Louis Jacobs in recognition of his considerable impact on me. It was first performed at The Spiro Institute on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1992, the eve of Yom Hashoa, Holocaust Memorial Day. Since then, it has received a number of performances in London, as well as in Manchester and Oxford, and has been broadcast three times to wide acclaim in Israel. It was the central work in a concert before an invited audience at the Polish Embassy in London, to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, and at the Czech embassy on Holocaust Memorial Day 2007.

The poems set out to give a human face to The Holocaust, and the song-cycle symbolises man's right to live in a just world. I was attracted to the poetry for its ability, in the words of the poet, to give the subject 'a human face'. This was an important element in coming to terms with the enormity of the Holocaust, and I hope contributes to a healing process. For me, it also helped me face the challenge to faith that the Holocaust presents, and in this regard it was important to write a work that, for all its subject matter, leaves the listener with some sense of hope.

Recorded at



7 Exton Street  
London SE1 8UE  
United Kingdom

**Hayley Swanton** *soprano*  
**Jonathan Fisher** *piano*

## SONGS OF ASHES

Poems by Jerzy Ficowski – Translated by Keith Bosley

### The Wailing Wall

for nineteen hundred years  
they threw their sobs  
at a wall

so for them  
four wailing walls were raised

and within four walls  
the wails of all were  
utterly wiped out  
and the wails of those wails  
and the tenth teardrop after Jankiel  
unto the last generation  
of tears

so the mole  
is still in mourning  
and stirring up molehills  
a weight of earth

### The Assumption of Miriam from the Street in the Winter of 1942

Snowflakes were teeming down  
the sky was collapsing in shreds

so she was being assumed  
she passed unmoving  
whiteness after whiteness  
mild height  
after height  
in an Elijah's chariot  
of degradation

above the fallen angels  
of snows  
into a zenith of frost  
higher and higher and  
hosanna  
lifted  
right to the bottom

### The Seven Words

Mummy! But I've been good! It's dark!  
-words of a child being shut in a gas chamber  
at Belzac in 1942, according to the statement  
of the only surviving prisoner.

Everything was put to use  
everyone perished but nothing was lost  
a mound of hair fallen from heads  
for a Hamburg mattress factory  
gold teeth pulled out  
under the anaesthetic of death

Everything was put to use  
a use was found even for that voice  
smuggled this far in the bottom of another's memory  
like lime unslaked with tears

and Belzac opens sometimes right to the bone  
and everlasting darkness bursts from it  
how to contain it

and the protest of a child who was who was  
though memory pales  
not from horror  
this is how it has paled for thirty years

And silences by the million are silent  
transformed into a seven-figure sign  
And one vacant place is calling calling

Who are not afraid of me  
for I am small and not here at all  
do not deny me  
give me back the memory of me  
these post-Jewish words  
these post-human words  
just these seven words

### I Did Not Manage to Save

I did not manage to save  
a single life

I did not know how to stop  
a single bullet

And I wander round cemeteries  
which are not there  
I look for words  
which are not there  
I run to help where no one called  
to rescue after the event

I want to be on time  
even if I am too late

### The Book

in the childless book  
in the synagogue loft  
as in an empty hive  
in every syllable  
Yahweh is silent for ever

the god-bearing letter  
no longer struggles  
closed evermore  
in shape not in meaning

silence turns  
its wax pages  
edged with ashes  
overlooks the barren sign  
their vain honey  
their word of words  
with the torn out tongue  
of fire

### A Girl of Six from the Ghetto Begging in Smolna Street in 1942

She had nothing  
but eyes to grow up to  
in them quite by chance  
two stars of David  
perhaps a teardrop would put them out

and so she cried

Her speech  
was not silver  
worth at least  
a spit a turning away of the head  
her tearful speech  
full of hunch-backed words  
so she fell silent

Her silence  
was not golden  
worth at most  
three ha'pence perhaps a carrot or whatever  
a well behaved silence  
with a Jewish accent  
of hunger

and so she died

### Completion of a Right

The poplar tree with seven branches  
has been blown down by the wind  
the felled sparks of the leaves  
are going out

In the grime of crows  
a smoke of cloud

### The Silence of the Earth

Time here is reckoned only by the woodpecker  
the cuckoo tells out the hours

This way once people passed crying,  
the juniper tugged at their coat flaps

For years those shot have lain here  
in the deep silence of the earth

They do not break the branches of the trees,  
faces do not sprout from boughs.

Eyes do not burst from buds.

A cry does not shatter the veins of the wood,  
the earth does not tear up the grasslands,  
does not fling off its sheets of wild thyme.

The lime-trees do not shut off their fragrance,  
the grains are not afraid to grow,  
the roads do not run off into the fields.

The roadside stones do not whine,  
the smooth air does not crumble,  
the wind breathes no sigh.

And they utter not a word  
nor a leaf nor a sand grain

who are devoured by the roots of the pines

## Jewish Effects

she has a wardrobe which dresses  
still had time to go out of  
but anyway they would have gone out of  
fashion

an armchair someone some time got up from  
just for a moment  
but it was enough for the rest of his life

dishes pots full of hunger  
but they will serve  
the appetite

a portrait of a little girl killed  
in lifelike colours

so she could have had a black table too  
in good condition  
but it did not appeal

a sad one somehow

## 5.8.42 (In Memory of Janusc Korczak)

What did the Old Doctor do  
In the cattle wagon  
bound for Treblinka on the fifth of August  
over the few hours of the bloodstream  
over the dirty river of time

I do not know

What did Charon of his own free will  
the ferryman without an oar do  
did he give out to the children  
what remained of gasping breath  
and leave for himself  
only frost down the spine

I do not know

did he lie to them for instance  
in small  
numbing doses  
groom the sweaty little heads  
for the scurrying lice of fear

I do not know

yet for all that yet later yet there  
in Treblinka  
all their terror all the tears  
were against him

oh it was only now  
just so many minutes say a lifetime  
whether a little or a lot  
I was not there I do not know

suddenly the Old Doctor saw  
the children had grown  
as old as he was  
older and older  
that was how fast they had to go as grey as ash

so when he was struck  
by the guard or the SS man  
they saw the Doctor  
had become a child like them  
smaller and smaller still  
until he had not been born

from now on together with the Old Doctor  
they are all nowhere

I know

## Epitaph for One Who Died Alive

Cornered  
he was scared to death  
for five whole years  
of that liver moon  
which lit him  
from within  
with cold

of that dead sea  
of breaths  
in which not sinking  
he became coated with the salt  
of unfulfillment

he was scared to death  
of the book of Moses  
his own ten fingers  
and the curly Mount Sinai of fear  
yet he survived

yet he survived  
himself

## A Reading of Ashes

On Friday in the street behind the church  
Jerusalem swells  
candle Isaiahs  
with golden lips rise up

below the sign  
Satan cinnamon & co  
Sarahs Malkas Judiths  
lie down to sleep

on the twin humped  
camels of their breasts  
they carry stars to be sown

a little tethered goat  
says negev negev  
and they all get out in the middle of the desert  
by Sochaczew they will be sowing their stars

## Lamentation

They caught flakes in the air  
Riding on the roundabout  
The girls' dresses billowed out  
In the wind from the burning houses  
Oh they were fun-days  
Those lovely Warsaw Sundays.  
(Czeslaw Milosz, 'Campo di fiori')

There was also weeping  
the blackmailers wept  
the gendarme wiped his eyes on his sleeve  
the stormtrooper buried his head in his hands  
and the police dog with hair  
in mourning from the soot whined

Smoke rose  
the enormous shadow of fire  
the stinking smoke of Krochmalna Street  
Gesia Nalewski Zamenhof Streets  
smoke with a red beard a caftan

the wind blew it all the way  
here straight into the eyes

## The Way to Yerushalaim

and the way to Yerushalaim  
was long  
striped like a prayer shawl  
now in light now in darkness  
for the days and nights

the brightness of Yerushalaim  
stood behind the longest of the nights  
and fiddles ripened  
unlikely as pears on a willow

but in Berdyczow a babble  
an inn a waggoner  
both pogroms and candles  
kindled by a star

and devoutly recited  
salt verses of herring  
with a commentary of onion  
for the forgiveness of hunger

through the wooded rivers  
through the autumn of bowed candlesticks  
through gas chambers  
graveyards of air  
they went to Yerushalaim  
both the dead and the living  
into their returning olden time

and that far they struggled  
a handful of willow pears  
and for a keepsake  
a herring bone  
that sticks to this day

## A Throng of Stones

Stones are thronging

But who would come here  
when no stone is left standing  
it was through acquaintance

Here a stone recites  
kaddish  
with its weight  
with its numbers  
and in its painless grass  
it stones the place

Stones are thronging  
Sometimes an old man  
drags here within himself  
feldspar quartz and weight  
and a handful of greenery  
bloodied with a rose

he will lay it down precisely  
anywhere and he knows  
he has placed it straight into the hands  
of his daughter Rachel  
for here his daughter Rachel's hands  
are everywhere

But even if Miriam gets the flower  
so be it she too deserves  
a petal of memory  
albeit by mistake

The old man walks away  
A stone rears up