

The



Rood Song

SAB choir with Bass Solo arranged for organ
A work based on a portion of "The Dream of the Rood"
Arranged by John Doe
& commissioned by Our Lady of the Mountains Catholic Church
in Jasper, Georgia.

Upon me the Wielder's corpse did hang (9)
Abandoned then, now came forth men (8)
Their noble chieftain to see again (9)
So weighed down with sorrow was I (9)
That at last I bowed with heavy sigh (9)
The warriors then took down their king (8)
Pierced, limb-weary, and startling (9)

The Women: Ooooo

The Chorus: Let all Creation now weep (7)
For the Lord of Life doth sleep (8)
Lamentations let us now sing (9)
for Christ our great and fallen King (8)
Yet this is wondrous victory (8)
To him who died upon this tree (8)

The Chorus: Gloria. Gloria. Gloria.

THE COMPOSITION

This might be envisioned to be a part of the Good Friday chants, or perhaps a Tenebrae Service, or perhaps on Sundays during Lent. This should be arranged for parish choirs, and if it goes into parts at all, it should be SAB. The idea here is something practical and useful. If there is any accompaniment it should be sparse, spare and minimal: a chime or hand bell tolls to give the pitch now and then, and the organ base note might provide a drone. The poet Caedmon would have known the music of a Anglo-Saxon lyre and drum, so honestly a distant drum might work if it were arranged to be almost not heard.

This text cries out for (and we would expect) a very simple arrangement. The music needs to feel as old as the text. A simply melody line for the chorus might work, something like a memorable Ambrosian hymn melody. I would image the Rood voice to be a heroic bass voice. His is a more melismatic solo voice ... the poet voice telling his legendary story. This is an Old English poem, so what we might think of as a Celtic or Norse sound would be appropriate. I am letting the men's voices alone sing one line in the Old English ("Krist waes on rodi" or "Christ was on the Cross"). We might employ a bit of organum with the indicated drones "ums." I imagine that the women's voices (SA) might do our lamentation "oos." If there is SAB polyphony anywhere it should be in the last Gloria section.

Inspiration

THE MUSICAL FEEL

How does one express in words the sounds one imagines this music being like? I have only to say that it should be mystical, primal, ancient, and otherworldly without being precious or difficult. Sadly the phrase “New Age” comes to mind, though I should say I object to the notion that the recycled music of my ancestors should be championed by those who too easily forget their ancestors were Christians. For musical inspiration of the solo Rood, consider Killmore Carol “The Darkest Midnight” by the Pro Arte Singers and the old Roman chant “Qui habitat in adiutorio altissimi Part II” by the Ensemble Organum. For a musical context for the brief section of wordless lamentations by the women, consider “Awakening” by Aine Minoque from her “Celtic Lamentations” recordings. For the musical inspiration for the Gloria section at the end, consider a sober version of “The Christ Theme” from the soundtrack of Ben Hur by Miklos Rozsa. I realize all of these pieces don’t work together, but I believe by referencing them you can get a sense of the atmospherics of what we’re looking for.

et Sources



THE RUTHWELL CROSS

Today, in a village church in the south of Scotland, there stands a stone cross (or rood) nearly 18 feet tall that dates back to the 8th century. The cross was broken up and pushed down in dark days by proud men who called it idolatrous, but generations later the parts that could be found were restored. The town of Ruthwell was not always Protestant of course, for Catholicism had been in Scotland for over a thousand years before the rebellion against the old religion, and before so many of these stone crosses were pushed down. This stone cross has not always been indoors. Once it stood like a totem pole in the village to depict the Gospel in bas-relief and to act as a landmark for preaching. Lastly the town of Ruthwell has not always been in Scotland. There was a time when it was part of the ancient Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria, and that takes us back to a time when Old English sounded nothing like what we speak today.

On the rood of Kirk Ruthwell, we have along with the carved bas reliefs are Latin inscriptions, but there are also carved upon this standing stone cross a verse that is likely the oldest written text in Old English. Carved in runes, the text is taken from lines 39-64 of “The Dream of the Rood,” which is one of the oldest poems in Old English. Historians tell us the Ruthwell Cross was erected around A.D. 650 - 700, during the lifetime of a bard named Caedmon.



THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

“The Dream of the Rood” is one of the earliest Christian poems in Old English, and it is visionary’s tale. While the poem is in Old English, the oldest codex that contains the poem is in Vercelli, Italy and dates to the 10th century. Characteristic of the Middle Ages, the author of the poem is anonymous, but tradition has long held it to have been the 7th century herdsman Saint Caedmon, the Father of English Sacred Song. The Venerable Bede tells us that Caedmon was the foremost Christian poet, and that his dreams led way to his verses. Caedmon was a lay brother in the Abbey of Whitby and he drew the attention of the Abbess St. Hilda who saw to it that his dreamed verses were recorded. “The Dream of the Rood” is long with 156 verses. Of those verses, only 26 are carved into the Ruthwell Cross (taken from the middle section of the poem). There are two voices in the poem. There is the voice of the dreamer who narrates his vision, and there is the voice of the Holy Rood, who recalls the heroic struggle of the Crucifixion of the Lord.

While little more is known about Caedmon, we do know more about Saint Hilda the Abbess (d. 680). She had been baptized by the hand of St. Paulinus the Roman around the year 627 together with her great-uncle Edwin, the first Christian King of Northumbria. Northumbria’s kings called for St. Aidan (d. 651) from his monastic isolation on the holy island of Iona to become the Apostle of Northumbria people, and the first bishop of the new holy island of Lindisfarne. It was St. Aidan who directed Saint Hilda to found her monastery in Whitby where a great library was acquired, and it was to this abbey that the young Caedmon had been drawn. It was undoubtedly disciples of St. Aidan, then, who would have erected the stone cross in Ruthwell (some 15 years after the saint’s death) and who would have preached the Gospel there so near the Irish Sea. And so clearly, the Caedmon’s poem became an essential and even monumental part of the proclamation of the Gospel in the Kingdom of Northumbria.



THE RUTHWELL TEXT

This is a modern adaptation of that portion of the “The Dream of the Rood” that is found on the Ruthwell Cross. It is divided into two voices (the Dreamer and the Rood), and I have suggested a verse for the chorus which is that line in the middle of this section of the poem “Christ was on the Cross” (perhaps let the choir chant that part in Old English). The Runic symbols may thus be translated:

The Dreamer: *God Almighty stripped himself,
when he willed to ascend the gallow;
bold he was before all men.*

The Rood: *I dared not bend; I stood fast and firm
as I held high the Mighty King ~ Heaven's Lord.
I dared not tilt.*

*They mocked us both together.
I, drenched slick with blood
gushing from his side.*

The Chorus: *Christ was on the cross / Krist waes on rodi*

The Rood:

*From afar they hastened
to the noble prince.*

All this I beheld.

*Terribly afflicted with sorrow was I;
as I bowed to warriors' hands.*

*With spears wounded,
they laid him down, limb-weary.
and standing about his body.
they gazed with grief at Heaven's Chieftain.*

This text is my own compilation drawing from various translations available online. The poet here sees the heroic Lord in his supreme act of condescending self-sacrifice. God stripping himself and wishing to mount the Rood is a reflection of the hymn found in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians 2:6-11.

THE VERSES IN TRANSITION

Ideally, I would like our text to be as much as possible a received text recognizable as Caedmon's, but by contextualizing the verses, we might make the lyrics more logical. So to take us nearer to our text, I looked past that portion of the text of "The Dream of the Rood" found on the Ruthwell Cross in its abridged form to the text we find in the Vercelli Book. In that more complete version, we also find other verses to try to round out and contextualize the final verses expanding the role of the chorus. Clearly, this laying out of the text demonstrates we willing to take some liberties with our ultimate text. This is an interim state of composition that moves us closer to our ultimate lyrics, but I included it here to show the composer these steps.

The Chorus: *Listen to this vision long told¹
of the young hero of ancient times²*

The Dreamer: *God Almighty stripped himself,
when he willed to ascend the gallow;
bold he was before all men.*

The Dreamer: *Then the best wood spoke these words:³*

The Rood: *I dared not bend; I stood fast and firm
as I held high the Mighty King ~ Heaven's Lord.
I dared not tilt.*

*They mocked us both together.
I, drenched slick with blood
gushing from his side.*

The Chorus: *[Darkness wound round with clouds
the corpse of the Wielder⁴ ...
and shadows darkened bright heaven.
All Creation Wept, lamenting their Fallen King] ⁵*

¹ Adapted from verse 1 of the Vercelli Book

² Adapted from verse 39 of the Vercelli Book

³ Verse 27 of the Vercelli Book

⁴ Wielder is an Old English word meaning ruler

⁵ Adapted from verses 52b-56a of the Vercelli Book

The Chorus: *Christ was on the cross / Krist waes on rodi*

The Rood: *From afar they hastened
to the noble prince.
All this I beheld.*

*Terribly afflicted with sorrow was I;
as I bowed to warriors' hands.*

*With spears wounded,
they laid him down, limb-weary.
and standing about his body.
they gazed with grief at Heaven's Chieftain.*

The Chorus: *See the Wondrous victory beam ... Glory's tree honored⁶*

⁶ Adapted from verses 13-14 of the Vercelli Book