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Cenotaphs in Sound: Catastrophe, Memory, and Musical Memorials

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the peculiar status of musical compositions that are intended to serve as memorials of victims of political violence. It considers four examples of this genre: John Foulds' *World Requiem* (1923), Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988), and John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2002).

A Survivor from Warsaw opens with an apology and an explanation: "I cannot remember ev'rything. I must have been unconscious most of the time." In the seven-minute work that follows, Arnold Schoenberg's narrator struggles to recapture experiences that have been erased from conscious memory by connecting them to the one thing that has escaped forgetting: "the *grandiose moment*, when they all started to sing, as if *prearranged*, the old prayer they had neglected for so many years — the *forgotten* creed!" The difficulties confronting Schoenberg's narrator are familiar themes in the literature tracing the complex process by which historical experience is inscribed into cultural memory. For *Survivor from Warsaw* is a monument, of sorts, constructed not of stone, but rather in sound. Like other monuments, it seeks to preserve an event by investing it with a particular significance. But unlike other, ostensibly more durable monuments, it also offers a glimpse of the torturous process by which the stuff of brute experience is shaped into a coherent memory. It recalls not only the "grandiose moment," but also the trauma that threatens to erase it from memory.

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For all of the novelty and audaciousness with which *A Survivor from Warsaw* goes about its task, it is but one example of a broader category of musical compositions that, for lack of a better term, might be called “musical memorials.” Such works occupy a peculiar place in the repertoire. While fulfilling no liturgical function, their performances — as we shall see — sometimes take on the trappings of religious rituals. Unless they are lengthy enough to occupy the entire program (as is the case with one of the more successful examples of the genre, Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*), they make their way onto concert programs only with difficulty: consideration has to be given as to what can be performed before or after them.¹ Sometimes the link to the event they memorialize is explicit: Penderecki’s *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* announces its connection in its title (though the title, as it turns out, was an afterthought). In other cases, the tie is more covert. Karl Amadeus Hartmann’s dedication of his *Miserae* (dated “Dachau 1933/34”) to “my friends, who had to die in the hundreds and who are sleeping in eternity, we shall not forget you” was, at the time of its premiere, visible solely to the conductor Hermann Scherchen (the words appeared only on the conductor’s score).² Finally, whether explicit or covert, it is often difficult to know what to make of the connection between these compositions and the catastrophes they commemorate: what, after all, does this least referential of all art forms have to do with events that have taken place outside the confines of the concert hall? At best, titles like the one Penderecki added to a work that originally had been designated (with a nod to John Cage) as *8’37”* might be viewed as simply irrelevant; the presence or absence of such titles, it could be argued, is of no significance for the work itself. At worst, such compositions might be seen as attempting to steal, by means of a gesture to catastrophes that elude their grasp, an attention they have not earned on their own.

What follows explores how a few examples of this genre go about their

¹ This is a particular problem for performances of *A Survivor from Warsaw*: the unwritten rule that prohibits placing a Schoenberg composition at the *end* of a program (in order to prevent a wary audience from decamping early) forces the question of what could possibly follow this work (the less-than happy answer seems to be Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*).

² Michael H Kater, *Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89, 93.

work. The first section discusses one of the more self-conscious attempts at constructing a musical memorial: John Foulds' *World Requiem*, a work composed to honor the dead of the first World War that was performed on successive Armistice nights between 1923 and 1926. The second section contrasts two responses to the Holocaust, focusing in particular on the relationship of text and music: Arnold Schoenberg's *Survivor from Warsaw* (1947) and Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988). The final section is concerned with *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2002), John Adams' memorial composition for the victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

I. Rituals of Commemoration: John Foulds' World Requiem

The cover of the program book for the first performance of John Foulds' *World Requiem* consisted of a white cross on a dark background.³ The words "In Memory 1914-1918" were written across the base of the cross. In larger letters on the horizontal bar of the cross stood an inscription that drew a parallel between the work premiered that evening and the memorial that had been designed four years earlier by the noted architect Edwin Lutyens, an acquaintance of Foulds.⁴ It read: "A Cenotaph in Sound."

Modest in size, austere in design, and devoid of any overt religious symbolism, Lutyens' Cenotaph had been initially conceived as a temporary structure, constructed of lath and plaster, with a relatively minor role in the ceremonies that had been planned to mark the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. But it rapidly established itself as the site around which a grieving public could pay homage to their fallen comrades, friends, and children, somewhat to the consternation of public officials, who found themselves faced with problem of maintaining order at what had now become

³ For a wide-ranging discussion of the work and its performance history, see James G. Mansell, "Musical Modernity and Contested Commemoration at the Festival of Remembrance, 1923-1927," *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (June 2009): 433-454. The 1923 program cover is reproduced on p. 440.

⁴ Foulds instructed Lutyens' daughter Elisabeth in composition and both were involved (Lutyens more hesitantly than Foulds) in London Theosophical circles. See the brief (and quite bitter) discussion in Elisabeth Lutyens' memoir, *A Goldfish Bowl* (London: Cassell, 1972), 26-7.

a site of spontaneous public grieving. In the end, the public's response to the Cenotaph outweighed official misgivings about the wisdom of placing a permanent stone monument in the middle of a busy thoroughfare. It was, as Lutyens later wrote, "what the people wanted."⁵

As Jenny Edkins has observed, the Cenotaph leads a double life. Once a year, it functions as the focal point for the highly-scripted ritual that now marks the anniversary of the Armistice; the rest of time, it stands in the midst of the stream of traffic moving down Parliament Street, where it stands "as the stumbling block, the hindrance that reminds us of the impossibility of closure."⁶ In contrast, Foulds' "Cenotaph in Sound," like all musical monuments, can carry out its memorial function only by being performed: in its case, the memorial object and the ritual associated with it are one and the same. For this reason, Foulds was not entirely indifferent to the question of where the work was to be performed: the "Notes for the Producer" on the published vocal score specify that the work was "intended for performance in a cathedral or other consecrated building on a national occasion (such as Armistice Day, November 11th)."⁷ The request to perform the *World Requiem* at Westminster Abbey was rejected on the grounds that its text — which had been constructed by Foulds' wife Maud MacCarthy (a former concert violinist, expert on Indian music, and avid Theosophist) using passages from the Bible, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the sixteenth-century Sufi poet Kabir — was "not liturgical."⁸

⁵ For discussions of Lutyens' Cenotaph, see Eric Homberger, "The Story of the Cenotaph," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 12, 1976; Allan Greenberg, "Lutyens's Cenotaph," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 48, no. 1 (March 1989): 5-23; and especially Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58-72.

⁶ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 66.

⁷ John Foulds, *A World Requiem, for Soprano, Contralto, Tenor and Baritone Soli, Small Chorus of Boys and Youths, Full Chorus, Orchestra and Organ; Opus 60* (London: Paxton, 1923). The recommendation repeats a letter dated April 29, 1921 from the British Music Society in the Foulds Papers at the British Library [Ms. 56482], which suggests a performance in "St. Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey." See also Malcolm MacDonald, *John Foulds and His Music: An Introduction with a Catalog of the Composer's Works and a Brief Miscellany of His Writings* (White Plains, New York: Pro/Am Music Resources, 1989), 31. Foulds, nevertheless, had no objection to performances in other locations or, indeed, performances with reduced forces.

⁸ For arrangements for the first performance, see MacDonald, *John Foulds and His*

Nevertheless, the work's eventual premiere in the Royal Albert Hall was clearly intended as something more than an ordinary concert.⁹ The performance was presented "under the most gracious patronage" of the King and Queen and was described as a "Festival Commemoration for all those who fell in the Great War." Surveying the forces assembled (over a thousand singers drawn from a host of London choirs) and noting the solemnity of the occasion (the Prince of Wales was in attendance), the correspondent from the *Musical Times* asked, "Was ever a musical work so grandly launched?"¹⁰ The ritual would be repeated on successive Armistice nights — in what was billed as a "Festival of Remembrance" — until 1926, at which point the work disappeared for eight decades.¹¹ As a consequence, the performance history of the *World Requiem* resembles something from the realms of myth: this Cenotaph appeared once a year, and always on the same night. Then it vanished.

While the work appears to have been enthusiastically received by audiences, it was handled much more roughly in the musical press. The reviewer from the *Musical Times* found the occasion more impressive than the music: "It would be great music indeed that could augment such heights of feeling, and if Mr. Foulds's music itself seemed to gain more than it gave, it means only that he is not one of a half-a-dozen prime geniuses." MacCarthy's text — though not liturgical enough for the stewards of Westminster Abbey — struck the reviewer as *too* religious: "It uses the words of Scriptures, with expansion and commentary, exhortation and ejaculation, and is more akin to a form of service for the dead than an oration to a

Music, 31; for discussions of MacCarthy's career, see Mansell, "Musical Modernity," 438-441 and MacDonald 21-22.

⁹ For arrangements for the first performance, see MacDonald, John Foulds and His Music, 31; for discussions of MacCarthy's career, see Mansell, "Musical Modernity," 438-441 and MacDonald 21-22.

¹⁰ "London Concerts," *The Musical Times* 64, no. 970 (December 1, 1923): 864. The Foulds Papers at the British Library (MS 56482) contains a letter, dated November 19, 1923, written on behalf of the Prince of Wales, explaining that the Prince had been unable to visit with Foulds prior to the performance because the crowd at the concert delayed his reaching the Royal Box on time.

¹¹ The first complete performance of the work since 1926 took place on November 11, 2007, with Leon Botstein leading the BBC Symphony Orchestra, soloists, and choruses. A recording of this performance has been released (Chandos CHSA 5058(2)).

nation's sacrifices in war."¹² Even the considerably more favorable assessment by the musicologist W. H. Kerridge, which appeared in the program for subsequent performances, betrayed what might — at least in retrospect — be seen as some uncertainty as to what exactly Foulds was trying to achieve. Kerridge observed that the *World Requiem* was neither “a distinctively national work, which should stir the British imagination alone” nor “an emotional work, calculated to work upon the feelings of people who are already overwrought.” While conceding that Foulds' composition “must be judged upon its musical merits,” he nevertheless insisted that, “it is not to be regarded solely, or even primarily, as a contribution to the musical literature and aestheticism.” Finally, he cautioned that, because it was a work addressed to “the spiritual rather than to the emotional in man,” those who “do not breath easily in a more rarefied atmosphere” might find much of the music “remote, bleak, lacking the human touch and the personal appeal.”¹³ A half-century later Foulds' advocate Malcolm MacDonald speculated that the discrepancy between the reactions of the public and the critics may have stemmed from the work's having “offered itself as a ‘monument’.” The audience, which included many who had lost family or friends in the war, projected their emotions onto the composition — just as others had invested Lutyens' Cenotaph with a significance that few could have anticipated prior to its construction. Meanwhile, the critics, “well aware of this fact, were on guard not to be so easily moved, and suspicious of the feelings that were aroused all about them.”¹⁴

The work opens with solemn brass, tolling orchestral bells, and a choir intoning the words “Requiem eternal, Lord grant them rest.” The baritone soloist asks for rest for those “who have fallen in battle,” for those who have “perished by pestilence and famine,” and — in a gesture that, true to work's title, expands the scope of mourning beyond those assembled in the Albert Hall — for “Men of all countries who died for their cause.”¹⁵

¹² “London Concerts,” 864; for a discussion of the critical response, see MacDonald, *John Foulds and His Music*, 33-36 and Mansell, “Musical Modernity,” 451-2, which sheds new light on the political context of the work's reception.

¹³ MacDonald, *John Foulds and His Music*, 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ The opening passage was later used at the start of Foulds' “Music Poem for Orchestra,” “Mirage” (op. 20)

A children's chorus enters at the words "And Thy Light perpetual shine down upon them," the baritone responds with words from the Twenty-Third Psalm, and this brief movement concludes with a reprise of the *Requiem aeternam*. After this rather conventional opening, matters become progressively stranger, both in the music and in the text. The opening *Requiem* is followed by a *Pronuntiatio*, a *Confessio*, a *Jubilato*, an *Audite* (in which separate brass sections, scattered to the four corners of the hall, summon the peoples of the earth), and a *Pax* (in which a distant choir of boys and youths implore these peoples to live in peace). This bizarre procession of Latin titles — which, at first glance, look like parts of a long-forgotten religious ritual — marches onward for another fourteen movements. Despite the massive forces deployed (a "chorus and orchestra of twelve hundred" was promised on the flyer announcing the concert), there is little in the way of contrapuntal interplay. As MacDonald observes, "the piece is a seamless, slow-wheeling interplay of orchestra, soloists and chorus, an ebb and flow of accumulating and receding textures, articulated by certain motifs which as often as not are basically harmonic in their appeal..."¹⁶ The use of quarter tones in the setting of the Kabir poem in section XII (*Elysium*) provides an otherworldly touch for a portion of the work that Maud MacCarthy claimed (in notes added to the copy of the orchestral score now in the British Library) had been "heard in a psychically objective way — listened to clairaudiently and recorded as faithfully as possible."¹⁷ Likewise, the scoring for section XIV (*Angeli*) called for a new instrument — the so-called "Sistrum" — that was supposed to reproduce a sound that Foulds and MacCarthy had heard (once again "clairaudiently") that resembled "a soft backwash of waves ... a breathing through

¹⁶ MacDonald, *John Foulds and His Music*, 28-9.

¹⁷ The full explanation reads as follows, "Parts of the work were heard in a psychically objective way — listened to clairaudiently and recorded as faithfully as possible, as, for instance, the 'washing away' orchestra passage in ELYSIUM and in the music of 'the elect of angels.' The whole of THE SONG OF THE REDEEMED was heard like this, and many other passages. The elect angels passage was heard by me, as it were enfolding our entire house. I was at the top of the house; and John was in his study two floors below. I went down to tell him, and found him writing the same passages in the same keys! Sometimes the house seemed to be shaken by this heavenly music, and angelic choirs sang, and angelic musicians played to us. "

myriads of gossamer”¹⁸

Foulds had a long-standing involvement in the various spiritualist and occultist movements that flourished in England during the first quarter of the twentieth century.¹⁹ An early photograph shows him seated in front of the ornate mantle he had carved to surround the fireplace in his Manchester home (in addition to his musical talents, he was a skilled woodcarver). As Malcolm MacDonald notes, it is “intricately inlaid with strange designs and mystical symbols,” a testimony to Foulds’ search for an alternative to the strict form of evangelical Christianity in which he had been raised (his family were members of the Plymouth Brethren).²⁰ His interests were shared by Maud MacCarthy, who had been a close associate of Annie Besant, the former socialist and feminist activist who, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, was a central figure in the dissemination of the ideas of Helena Blavatsky, one of the founders of Theosophy. Theosophy offered a non-denominational form of spirituality coupled with an allegedly scientific approach to occult phenomena that proved attractive to a broad spectrum of British intellectuals and artists during the period.²¹ Because of the prominence it gave to music as a means of apprehending higher spiritual truths, it held a particular appeal for musicians — including, most famously, the composer Gustav Holst.²²

Such concerns loom large in *Music To-day*, Foulds’ 1934 account of contemporary compositional practice, a peculiar text in which discussions of the technical aspects of modal scales and quarter-tone composition (areas in which Foulds can justly be regarded as an innovator) sit side by side with

¹⁸ Maud MacCarthy, “X. Note on the ‘Sistrum,’” annotation to orchestral score, British Library. See Mansell, “Musical Modernity,” 442 for a description of the instrument.

¹⁹ On this point, see, in particular, Mansell, “Musical Modernity.”

²⁰ MacDonald, *John Foulds and His Music*, 15, the photograph is reproduced on p. 16.

²¹ For the role of Theosophy in shaping responses to World War I, see J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 103, 146–7, 150–2; for Besant and her impact, see Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); for MacCarthy, see MacDonald, *John Foulds and His Music*, 21–27 and Mansell, “Musical Modernity,” 436–9.

²² See, for example, Mansell’s discussion of Besant’s 1908 lecture on “Religion and Music,” “Musical Modernity,” 438.

speculations on the relationship of music and color (e.g., “From a scrap of occult lore I will cite the following: ‘In the beginning was the sound. This ... gives rise to the basic forms. ... The primal light of the universe playing in the interstices between the forms gives rise to the phenomenon which you call ‘colour’”), the evolution of “devic” beings from lower forms, such as gnomes and fairies, up to angels (e.g., “What is now widely accepted as a fact is that side by side with human evolution ran another — that of the deva”), and the relationship of music to sexual arousal (e.g., “Any operation that brings rarefied, exalted — and therefore unusually rapid — ‘spiritual’ vibration to play upon the physical body may ... heighten sex, as well as produce other collateral results”).²³ Indeed, the third part of the book, which carries the title “Towards a Musical Aesthetic,” draws on Foulds’ interpretation of Indian philosophy to construct an ordering of all reality into progressively ascending spiritual planes and then proceeds to interpret forms of musical composition as a “physical-plane expression of vibrations constructed upon one or other of our postulated five planes.”²⁴ Foulds assigns the musical imitation of physical sounds — e.g., Antonio Vivaldi’s evocation of the cuckoo in his Op. 6 violin concerto or Richard Strauss’ imitation of bleating sheep in *Don Quixote* — to the lowest level.²⁵ At the highest level stand those rare works that are capable of bringing into “waking consciousness” an impression of “contact with a rate of vibration so rapid, so rarefied, as that which obtains at such a super-normal level.” The attainment of this level was the unique achievement of Palestrina, “the loftiest, grandest, and purest composer the Western World has ever known.”²⁶ Foulds rejects the idea that “we should permit ourselves to praise only music of the ‘higher’ planes,” just as denies that works inspired by the contact with those spiritual emissaries from these higher levels of reality — the *devas* or “shining ones” — who provide human beings with a glimpse of “glories unimaginable in the terrestrial realms” is “more beau-

²³ John Foulds, *Music To-day; Its Heritage from the Past, and Legacy to the Future* (London: I. Nicholson and Watson, limited, 1934), 105, 279, 178. Contemporary reviewers were not sure what to make of the book; see, for example, F. Bonavia, “Review of John Foulds, *Music To-day*,” *Music & Letters* 16, no. 2 (April 1935): 153-154.

²⁴ Foulds, *Music To-day*, 165.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 174-5.

tiful, more valuable, or in any way preferable” to the works of composers who made do without such inspiration. After all, Bach, Foulds explains, “never touches devic realms at all: Palestrina rarely foresakes them.”²⁷

Such speculations, however foreign they might be from established conventions of musical analysis, were central to Foulds’ understanding of his art. The closing pages of the section on musical aesthetics observes that there are those

who deny that behind the panoply of the sound art is any what at all of inner import, of soul-substance, who assert that the be-all and end-all of music is a mere sound and rhythm patter, an unsubstantial mirage, a local and ephemeral vortex of no provable cause and of briefest effect; an improbable ripple that appears out of Nothingness, for a moment troubles the air and ... is gone.

His response to such views was blunt and unequivocal: “It cannot be so.”²⁸

This commitment means that despite its use of chord progressions that cannot be mapped onto standard conventions, its innovative use of quarter-tones, or its “counterpoint of timbres” (Foulds’ term for shifting colorations that, as MacDonald observes, resembles the *Farben* movement of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Five Orchestral Pieces*), the *World Requiem* remains, in at least one important aspect, a profoundly anti-modern work.²⁹ In a pithy characterization of the peculiar status of modern artworks, Theodor Adorno observed, “Art is magic, delivered from the lie of being true.”³⁰ By surrendering their claim to provide an account of the world that is instrumentally effective, modern works of art are able to preserve something of that mimetic relationship with the world that had been the foundation of magical practices. Foulds, in contrast, believed that his magic was, in some sense, still true. Stressing the importance of timbre in *Music To-day*, he explained,

²⁷ Ibid., 177, 279-283. Foulds himself characterized parts of the *World Requiem* as attempts to reproduce “deva music,” see Ibid., 281.

²⁸ Ibid., 214.

²⁹ For the parallel between Schoenberg and Foulds, see MacDonald, *John Foulds and His Music*, 29; for a differing assessment of Foulds’ modernity from that offered here, see Mansell, “Musical Modernity,” 434.

³⁰ Theodor W Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1978), 222.

I am not speaking here of aesthetic values, or of effects upon the mentality of listeners, but of what I can only call magical effects. And by magic — it is a word the use of which here is sure to be misunderstood by some — I mean a change in the vibration of a listener effected by means whose manner of operation is at present unknown.³¹

Because music works with what, for Foulds, was the fundamental constituent of the universe — “vibration” — its magic yields actual results. It creates a rapport between performers and audiences that binds them together and offers a glimpse of a realm that transcends the mundane.³² For that reason, the yearly performances of the *World Requiem* might be understood as an attempt to forge a ritual that had the capacity to transform the grieving public who assembled in the hall: the first part of the work joins them together in mourning, while the second part gives them a glimpse of the peace that the departed have found in the land where, in the words that MacCarthy took from Kabir, neither “sorrow nor doubt have rule, where the terror of death is no more.”

Among those attending the 1923 performance of the *World Requiem* was Geoffrey Hodson, a veteran of the western front who went on to spend the rest of his life producing accounts of his encounters with devas, angels, and fairies. He had also been present, earlier that day, at the 11 AM ceremonies at the Cenotaph, and in the sky above it, he reported seeing “tens of thousands of the dead ... assembled in a widening circle ... just above the heads of those who mourned; some were in uniform, some in mufti, others in flowing robes. ... Many of the departed saw the earthly ceremony, recognised their friends, and responded to their loving remembrance, loved them for their pain.” That evening, as he sat in the Albert Hall listening to the *World Requiem*, he experienced something similar.

Once more we were lifted up into Heaven, Devachan, the place of the angels, yes and even higher, for inspired genius brought near,

³¹ Foulds, *Music To-day*, 22. Foulds also observes that “The moment we discern the mainspring of a piece of music to be a mere intellectual device, its magical spell is broken” (55).

³² See Foulds' discussion of the way that music is "ensouled" in performance, *Ibid.*, 180-2.

very, very near again the vision of the Lord. ... Before the performers there appeared to stand the figure of an angel, through whose aura all the music passed ere it reached the ears of the audience. Massed in great numbers, angel children, their winged faces everywhere, were singing, for the whole of that beauty of sound was not physical. The physical sound awakened, evoked the Heavenly Chorus, and, under the genius of one man, the music of the spheres seemed to be sounding forth indescribably sweet and with an all-compelling beauty. ... Compassion and consolation came to us in colour and in sound.³³

Texts like Hodson's lend support to Jay Winter's insistence that not all the responses to the carnage that enveloped Europe followed the trajectory plotted in Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Through the lens provided by the works of Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, and Wilfred Owen, Fussell saw World War I as the catastrophe that inaugurated modernism. The "high diction" used to record victories and sacrifices — a diction in which, as Fussell sketched with a biting irony that matched that of his soldier-poets, horses were always "steeds," the enemy is a "foe," danger is "peril," and the dead are "the fallen" — was supplanted by bitter and ironic modes of expression, better suited to responding to the wholesale slaughter into which Europe had descended.³⁴ But while Fussell explored the chasm that had opened between the world before the war and the world that was to follow, Winter emphasized the continuities that remained: high diction, he noted, continued to survive in the ceremonial practices by which the dead were mourned and, far from vanishing in the face of the mass slaughter on the continent, new forms of spirituality — including those forms that appealed to Foulds — proliferated as loved ones sought to find some way of coming to terms with their losses.³⁵

³³ Geoffrey Hodson, *The Kingdom of Faerie* (London: Theophilosophical Publishing House, 1927), 102-104.

³⁴ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

³⁵ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 2-8, 54-77, 204-222; Mansell questions whether Winter's account can do justice to what he sees as Foulds' "modernism." See Mansell, "Musical Modernity," 433-4. Much here turns on the vexed question of what, exactly, "modernism" is supposed to designate.

When the *World Requiem* returned to the Albert Hall on November 11, 2007, it was unlikely that there were many in the audience who saw angels joining the assembled choirs. Those who entered the hall, eight decades after the end of the first of the previous century's great cataclysms, to hear the first performance of the *World Requiem* since 1926, had rather different expectations about what Foulds' work might achieve. They were attending a concert, not participating in a memorial ritual. Whatever magic Foulds' music might still possess was now, with the passing of time, at last free from the burden of being true.

II. Text, Context, and Memory: Arnold Schoenberg and Steve Reich

In the face of a conflict of unprecedented destructiveness, the *World Requiem* sought to create a ritual that would offer mourners and survivors comfort and consolation. To that end, MacCarthy composed a text that had been drawn from a variety of sources, but which conformed to no existing liturgy, while Foulds crafted a score that moved from mourning to reconciliation. In contrast, Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* recalls the performance of a ritual associated with one particular tradition — the singing of the *Sh'ma Yisroel* — in a context that offers neither comfort nor consolation. In Schoenberg's work, ritual is recollected, rather than performed, and the recollection is carried out by a narrator who has been shattered by the brutality that he struggles to recount. And, in contrast to Foulds' "Cenotaph in Sound," Schoenberg's work is less concerned with offering the assurance that those who have been slaughtered are at last free from the "terror of death" than with seeking to recapture something of that terror and the act of faith that, however impotently, sought to resist it.

A note to the score for *A Survivor from Warsaw* explains, "This text is based *partly* upon reports which I have received *directly* or *indirectly*."³⁶ Though it would difficult to think of a more evasive explanation of the events to which the work refers, listeners have, from the start, assumed that they know what it was about. A brief note in the *Los Angeles Times*,

³⁶ *A Survivor from Warsaw* viii [emphasis mine].

which appeared shortly before the work's premiere in Albuquerque, New Mexico in October 1948, explained that the composition "describes life in a concentration camp." The article, however, was concerned less with the work's subject matter than with the peculiarity of its first performance being given by Kurt Frederik and the Albuquerque Civic Symphony rather than the conductor (Serge Koussevitsky) and the orchestra (the Boston Symphony) that had commissioned it. According to the *Times* the location of the premiere was "a surprise even to Serge Koussevitsky," who was, nevertheless, reported to be "very 'pleased' when the news was relayed to him."³⁷ Perhaps the "pleasure" Koussevitsky felt upon being told that a work he had commissioned was being performed, without his consent, by an orchestra on the other end of the American continent had something to do with the fact that two decades would pass before the Boston Symphony got around to performing it.³⁸

It has proven difficult to square the narrative that unfolds in this work with any of the reports that Schoenberg could have received — either "directly or indirectly" — of the catastrophe that had engulfed Europe. The idea that it is concerned with the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto — a conclusion that flows almost inescapably from its title — does not jibe with the images that fill the work, which point to extermination camps rather than to Warsaw.³⁹ Indeed, Camille Crittenden concludes an exhaustive survey of Schoenberg's alleged influences by suggesting that what the text resembles most closely is not a survivor's report at all: its narrative parallels that of a screenplay about the Warsaw ghetto that Schoenberg's wife Gertrud had circulated, without success, among contacts in Holly-

³⁷ Ross Parmenter, "The World of Music: Schoenberg in Albuquerque," *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1948 X7.

³⁸ The first performances were given on April 18, 1969 under Erich Leinsdorf, in a program that concluded with the Beethoven Ninth Symphony. For a discussion of the issues surrounding the commission and expectations about who would give the first performance see Michael Strasser, "'A Survivor from Warsaw' as Personal Parable," *Music & Letters* 76, no. 1 (February 1995): 53-57.

³⁹ For a discussion, see Strasser, "'A Survivor from Warsaw' as Personal Parable," 58-59; David Isadore Lieberman, "Schoenberg Rewrites his Will: A Survivor from Warsaw, Op. 46," in *Political and Religious Ideas in the Works of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Charlotte M. Cross and Russell A. Berman (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 2000), 214.

wood.⁴⁰ Even before Crittenden's study appeared, the idea that *Survivor* might owe more to Hollywood than to history had already been broached in an article that had a very different agenda. In a discussion of Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, the critic Richard Taruskin took a passing swipe at Schoenberg's "B-movie clichés — the Erich von Stroheim Nazi barking 'Achtung,' the kitsch-triumphalism of the climactic, suddenly tonal singing of the Jewish credo." Taruskin praised *Different Trains* as a work that, in contrast, "has no villains and no heroes" and "no bathetic glory to comfort you with a trumped-up Triumph of the Human Spirit."⁴¹

The search for the historical referents of Schoenberg's work has tended to divert attention from an aspect that is of greater importance in comprehending the intersection of historical fact and artistic artifice that marks this peculiar composition. This memorial does something that stone memorials cannot do: in addition to remembering the dead, it probes the workings of memory. As Amy Lynn Wlodarski has observed, Schoenberg's drafts indicate that, from the outset, he was "less concerned with mapping the textual narrative than with probing or attempting to articulate the sonic possibilities of the narrator's experience."⁴² In this process, the orchestra functions as an "unconscious memory for the narrator," recalling those events that he is unable to remember and, by doing so, allowing him to bring them to speech. For example, Wlodarski notes that when the opening trumpet figure reappears at measure 25 — the point at which the survivor begins to tell his story — the narrator "names it as a textual component of his narrative ("Reveille")."⁴³ The words of the narrator lag behind the music, struggling to fit the orchestral fragments together into a narrative that — delivered in *Sprechstimme* — hovers between speech and music. Text and music are at last united only with the entry of the chorus at the close of the work, that "grandiose moment" when those who are about to be executed begin to sing — "as if prearranged" — the *Sb'ma*

⁴⁰ Camille Crittenden, "Texts and Contexts of A Survivor from Warsaw, Op. 46," in *Political and Religious Ideas in the Works of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Charlotte M. Cross and Russell A. Berman, 232-241.

⁴¹ Richard Taruskin, "A Sturdy Musical Bridge to the 21st Century," *New York Times*, August 24, 1997, sec. Arts and Leisure.

⁴² Amy Lyn Wlodarski, "'An Idea Can Never Perish': Memory, the Musical Idea, and Schoenberg's A Survivor From Warsaw (1947)," *Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 4 (2007): 587.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 588.

Yisroel. And as Wlodarski also notes, this moment has, indeed, been “pre-arranged”: the chorus’ singing of the hymn represents the first time the 12-tone row, which has provided the musical material for the composition, appears in its prime form.⁴⁴ What Taruskin dismisses as “suddenly tonal singing” turns out not to be sudden at all: the tone row that generates the *Sb’ma* theme has been there all along.

Further, as Steven J. Cahn stresses, it is also far from clear that *Survivor from Warsaw* ends on a “note of triumph.” The first part of the work contains not only the musical materials which will be used for the setting of the *Sb’ma*, it also prefigures textual elements of the prayer as well, though in a horribly twisted form. Where the *Sb’ma* specifies lessons that must be taught each day upon awakening, the trumpet fanfare at the opening of the work brutally rouses the imprisoned community from “the natural beginning of the day with its necessary obligations.” Its conception of the oneness of God and the unity of those creatures made in his image is negated by the counting off of certain members of the human community for delivery to gas chambers. And in the closing measures of the composition the “operations governing the unfolding of the *Sb’ma* melody, leading to the word ‘*uvkumecho*’ [rise up] collide directly with a forbidding signal from the trumpets,” whose reveille had opened the work.⁴⁵ There is, then, no triumph here: only a brutal beating down of the *Sb’ma* melody. Drawing on Gabrielle Spiegel’s discussion of the tensions between the concepts of memory and history, Cahn argues that Schoenberg’s invocation of the *Sb’ma* parallels conventions of interpretation in medieval Judaism that viewed sacred texts as offering a means by which recent events can be “transfigured, ritually and liturgically, into repetitions and reenactments of ancient happenings.”⁴⁶ *A Survivor from Warsaw* ends, then, not in triumph, but rather with the image of “a community engaged in an act of faith for its own sake, demanding no reward, free from any conventional

⁴⁴ Ibid., 590.

⁴⁵ Steven J. Cahn, “On the Representation of Jewish Identity and Historical Consciousness in Schönberg’s Religious Thought,” *Journal of the Arnold Schönberg Center* 5 (2003): 105–6.

⁴⁶ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time,” *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (May 2002): 152.

theodicy.”⁴⁷

Finally, Taruskin’s contrast of *Survivor from Warsaw* with *Different Trains* also underestimates the extent to which these two works are engaged in a similar enterprise. Perhaps overly influenced by Reich’s characterization of his composition as a sort of “music documentary,” Taruskin sees Reich’s juxtaposition of testimonies from Pullman porters with those of Holocaust survivors as offering listeners something far different from what he saw as the banal theatrics of Schoenberg’s composition. According to Taruskin, Reich’s work presents its listeners with the bare fact that “just while this happened here, that happened there” and leaves them with “a stony invitation to reflect.”⁴⁸ But, despite his use of recorded testimonies, Reich is no more engaged in the task of historical documentation than Schoenberg was. The emphasis, as in *A Survivor from Warsaw*, is on the musical potential these narratives contain. The opening measures of *Different Trains* — when a brief melodic fragment is tossed out by the cello and then repeated by a recorded voice (“from Chicago”) that traces the same pattern — are no less “pre-arranged” than what occurs in Schoenberg’s work. The cello appears to anticipate the voice of the Pullman porter only because the notes that Reich gives it have been derived from the vocal inflections on the recordings.

The relationship of speech and music in Reich’s work is, however, considerably more complex than these opening moments suggest. As Naomi Cumming argues, *Different Trains* draws its force from the inherent duality of speech: we can hear spoken words either as conveying meanings or as sound, rhythm, and pitch.⁴⁹ At the beginning of the work, the voices on the tape repeat the melodic fragments of the quartet, in effect reprising the leap that we have all made when, as infants, we first came to find meanings in the sounds that those around us were making. But as the work proceeds, the process starts to run in the other direction: words dissolve into pitch and rhythm as they are echoed by the string quartet. As a result *Different Trains* offers listeners something more than a “stony invitation to reflect” on the fact that the trains on which the young Steve Reich was

⁴⁷ Cahn, “On the Representation of Jewish Identity,” 107.

⁴⁸ Taruskin, “A Sturdy Musical Bridge to the 21st Century.”

⁴⁹ Naomi Cumming, “The Horrors of Identification: Reich’s “Different Trains,”” *Perspectives of New Music* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 129-152.

riding were bound for very different destinations than those onto which young Jews in Europe were being herded. For something is also taking place, here and now, as the work is being performed: its audience is being presented with a moral dilemma of sorts.

To the extent that listeners allow themselves to hear what is unfolding simply as music, the words of the Pullman porters and survivors will slip back into pitch and rhythm and their significance as testimony will be lost: the almost irresistible appeal of *Different Trains* is that it offers its audience the chance to become infants again. Words, even words charged with horror, become simply sounds, divorced from all semantic content. But if listeners recognize that something important is being uttered and focus not on the music but instead on what the words are telling them, they must struggle to isolate the text fragments in the swirling maelstrom of sounds that are being thrown at them and to assemble them into a coherent testimony. They are placed in a position that mirrors that of the narrator at the start of *A Survivor from Warsaw* as he struggles to recall what has been forgotten by piecing together the fragments he can still remember. No less than *Survivor from Warsaw*, *Different Trains* is both a memorial and a reflection on the labor of memory itself.

At the end of *A Survivor from Warsaw* the narrator's recollections give way to a mimesis of the critical event: first the narrator drops from English *Sprechtstimme* into German speech and, in a Berlin dialect, mimics the words of the German officer. Then the chorus enters, singing the *Sb'ma*, the "grandiose moment" that has served as the one secure memory since the opening of the composition. But as *Different Trains* moves from the America of Part I to the Europe of Part II, it becomes more and more difficult to determine what is being said, even for those staring at the printed list of the text fragments Reich used. As the words become more weighted with horrible revelations, they are increasingly submerged in the music. And when the European trains arrive at their destinations at the close of Part II, the music (like the trains) slowly grinds to a halt and we are left, in Naomi Cumming's words, with an "abject voice, obsessed with the image of flames, and the sounds of hoots and sirens, slow and strangely empty without the motion of the train."⁵⁰ Then the silence is broken by

⁵⁰ Ibid., 147.

the cello, playing a fragment that is echoed by the words “The war was over.” Part III begins, and soon the trains are running again, this time to American cities.

Yet, in its closing minutes, *Different Trains*, like *A Survivor from Warsaw*, recalls the singing of a song. About two thirds of the way through its final part, the train sounds break off for the last time and the voice of the Pullman porter (supported by the quartet) intones the words, “But today, they’re all gone.” Voice and quartet tarry over the phrase for a while (allowing the recognition to sink in that just as the trains have passed away, so too will the survivors and, with them, the last living witness to the events they endured). Suddenly the strings launch into what, in contrast to what has gone before, is a rather expansive melody (extended by a pedal point in the cello) and, soon afterwards, a final testimony begins. It is a recollection of a singer and an audience: “There was one girl who had a beautiful voice and they loved to listen to her singing, the Germans, and when she stopped singing they said, ‘More, more,’ and they applauded.” After these words, Reich’s music gradually fades away, and it is time for the listeners in the hall to give the performers the applause that recognizes the performance *as* a performance and frees the audience to leave the world that the work has created.⁵¹

Taruskin saw *A Survivor from Warsaw* as the sort of artwork that Theodor Adorno had in mind when he issued — with “famous and flatulent self-importance” — his dictate that “after Auschwitz, poetry was impossible.”⁵² Yet Adorno, in fact, had reservations about Schoenberg’s composition (and he never said it was “impossible” to write poetry after Auschwitz, but rather that it would be “barbaric” to continue to go on writing a poetry that ignored what had happened). What troubled him was the prospect that works like *A Survivor from Warsaw* — however honorable their intentions — might wind up transforming the victims they memorialize into “works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world that did them in.”⁵³ To put it another way: the more successful such compositions are as works

⁵¹ For a somewhat different account of this moment, see Christopher Fox, “Steve Reich’s ‘Different Trains,’” *Tempo*, no. 172, 2 (March 1990): 2-8.

⁵² Taruskin, “A Sturdy Musical Bridge to the 21st Century.”

⁵³ Theodor W Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), II:88.

of art, the more questionable they are as aids to memory. Not the least of the virtues of *Different Trains* is that it leaves the listener wrestling with the question of what it means to find oneself enthralled — and Reich's remarkable composition is nothing if not enthralling — by a work made from words that tell of inconceivable agonies.

III. A Musical Reliquary: John Adams' On the Transmigration of Souls

The close of John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls*, a work commissioned by the New York Philharmonic to mark the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks, confronts its listeners with a challenge not unlike that posed by *Different Trains*. Against a falling motif in the strings we hear the words "I see water and buildings" uttered, without affect, by the recorded voice of one woman and then repeated, almost like a mantra, by another woman. These words, like all the words in this composition — whether spoken or sung — come from texts linked to the attacks of September 11. Their origin is duly noted in the program booklet: "AA #11 flight attendant Madeline Amy Sweeny."⁵⁴ But it is left to listeners to remember, or not to remember, who Madeline Amy Sweeny was and what her words once meant.

Shortly after American Airlines flight 11 was hijacked, Sweeny established contact with the flight services manager in Boston. She informed him that the plane had been taken over and that two flight attendants had been stabbed. She went on to relay a good deal of information about the hijacking, including the seat numbers of the hijackers (which allowed them to be identified and the route that led them to their deadly mission to be reconstructed). As the plane approached lower Manhattan, she notified Boston that it had begun a rapid descent. Asked if she could identify her location, she looked out the window and reported, "I see water and buildings. Oh my God! Oh my God!" At this point her transmissions ended.

⁵⁴ All quotations from the text of *On the Transmigration of Souls* are taken from the *New York Philharmonic Program*, September 2002, 25.

A listener who connects the words spoken at the close of *On the Transmigration of Souls* to the context in which they were uttered may find Adams' use of them more than a little unsettling. For these words carry a particular weight: Madeline Amy Sweeny was the first person, outside the small circle of hijackers, to understand what was taking place that morning. These words, her last, are saturated with that horrible recognition. If listeners are to take them as a benediction, they will have to forget a few things.

Adams avoided terms like "requiem" and "memorial" in describing the composition. His preferred designation was "memory space." His intent, as he explained it, was "to achieve in musical terms the same sort of feeling one gets upon entering one of those old, majestic cathedrals in France or Italy." The analogy to architecture is not without some difficulties. On the one hand, Adams characterized this memory space as "a place where you can go and be alone with your thoughts and emotions," but what he found compelling about European cathedrals was the sense one has, upon entering them, of *not* being alone: they convey the feeling of being "in the presence of many souls, generations upon generations of them."⁵⁵ Further, the memory space that Adams is building is, of necessity, an inescapably public one: his cathedral, like Foulds' "Cenotaph in Sound," is built in a concert hall and, as a result, the act of remembering that takes place must be an act of commemoration: it can only be performed with others. Yet one aspect of Adams' metaphor is strikingly apt: the space he creates is filled with relics. The texts he sets are the remnants of the catastrophe that the work memorializes: words from the signs posted in lower Manhattan by those who searched for loved ones, memorial notices drawn from the *New York Times*, and the final words of Madeline Amy Sweeny. And, as we shall see, an important musical relic also inhabits this space.

Adams begins the construction of his memory space by dismantling the auditory space in which the audience is seated. The first sounds heard are those of a city street (traffic, footsteps, distant sirens, laughter), in effect returning listeners to the world they left behind upon entering the hall. A single, repeated spoken word begins to establish a rhythmic pulse:

⁵⁵ John Adams, "John Adams speaks about the work," *New York Philharmonic Program*, September 2002, 23.

“Missing, Missing.” A wordless chorus enters. A list of names begins to be read. It is not until three minutes into the piece that words and music unite as the chorus intones the word “Remember.” That choice is significant: like the other works we have been discussing, the task of this music is to make its listeners recall what took place, at another time, beyond the walls of the concert hall.

Strict rules appear to govern the treatment of the disparate texts that populate this memory space. The names of the missing are spoken, not sung. Some of the words of those who have lost loved ones are set to music, but often in ways that thwart their comprehension. For example, at about five minutes into the piece the words “You will never be forgotten” are fragmented, repeated, and extended to a point where it is almost impossible, unless one is starting at the score, to realize that they fit together as a coherent utterance: it is as if the listener has, like Schoenberg’s traumatized narrator, lost the capacity to assemble these sounds into a meaningful sentence. These opening moments leave listeners with a puzzle: the names of the missing are clear, but everything else has broken free from anything resembling the speech of human beings.

The work is punctuated by two great orchestra crescendos: the first at about eleven minutes, the second at about sixteen minutes. In the interval between them music and text suddenly cohere with settings of sentences taken from remembrances published in the months after the attacks in a section of the *New York Times* entitled *Portraits of Grief*. It is as if that first crescendo forced the process of mourning and remembrance onto a different plateau. The list of the missing and the scattered descriptions of them that had been separated in the first section of this memory space begin to move towards each other: we now hear accounts of lost brothers, children, and lovers. Yet though we learn of attributes and relationships within this space, we no longer hear proper names. The words that the chorus sings are easily comprehended, but both the speakers and those they mourn have now become anonymous: “The sister says: ‘He was the apple of my father’s eye.’” “The father says: ‘I am so full of grief. My heart is completely shattered.’” We go on to hear from a “young man” (a friend, it seems), another sister, a mother, a lover, a man’s wife. The names are recorded in the footnotes to the text in the program notes, but they would not appear to be what the composition wants us to remember. It

is the very anonymity of these friends, children, and lovers that teaches listeners to understand what was lost in the attacks: friends, children, and lovers. But the audience is soon driven from this space by the setting of words that lead directly into the second great crescendo. It is as if this particular memory has triggered a grief so great that it shatters the walls of this cathedral of sound: “The man’s wife said: ‘I loved him from the start ... I want to dig him out. I know just where he is.’” The chorus prolongs those last two words *he is*, just as — a few moments before — it had prolonged the last two words of the friends’ reminiscence “girls never talked to me when he *was around*.” The emphasis records the losses: the friend is, in fact, no longer around and though the woman may think that she knows where her husband is within the vast rubble pile, *he* no longer *is*: at most, all that she would be able to dig out would be a relic.

This second crescendo, beginning with bells and driven forward by agitated basses (which convey the first sense of insistent forward momentum in the piece), reaches its climax with the entry of the chorus repeating the words “light ... day ... sky” and then collapses back into music that recalls the texture of the opening. But speakers now recite the names of relationships, not individuals, “my sister,” “my mother,” “my brother,” “my son” and the composition moves towards its close with Madeline Amy Sweeny’s words alternating with the words: “I love you.” Gradually both the words and the sonic landscape that sustains them fade into silence and the street noise returns. Then silence. And, at the New York premiere, an intermission, after which the audience heard the Beethoven Ninth, pressed into service, yet again, as a sort of all-purpose purgative.⁵⁶

“Music,” as Arnold Schoenberg reminds us, “uses time.”⁵⁷ The same is true of musical memorials. Adams’ memory space differs from those cathedrals that inspired it in that its listeners proceed through it at a pace they have not chosen. The same is true of mourning: it too uses time and its progress is not something that those who mourn can control. In an interview given at the time of the premiere of *On the Transmigration of Souls*, Adams rejected the notion that a work of art could bring about

⁵⁶ See James Schmidt, ““Not These Sounds”: Beethoven at Mauthausen,” *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (2005): 146-163.

⁵⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 116.

“healing.”

The event will always be there in memory, and the lives of those who suffered will forever remain burdened by the violence and the pain. Time might make the emotions and the grief gradually less acute, but nothing, least of all a work of art, is going to heal a wound of this sort. Instead, the best I can hope for is to create something that has both serenity and the kind of "gravitas" that those old cathedrals possess.⁵⁸

In search of a music that might provide consolation for those who mourned, John Foulds sought to channel the music of devas and angels. In contrast, Adams turned to a former denizen of lower Manhattan who, at the start of the previous century, worked for an insurance company by day and composed music at night: Charles Ives.

At the very start of the piece, about a minute after the chorus has begun to chant “remember, remember,” the audience hears a trumpet tracing a melody that some of its members may recall from another composition: it is a direct quotation from *The Unanswered Question*. In the program Ives wrote for his so-called “cosmic drama,” the trumpet repeatedly poses “the perennial question of existence” against the background of a slowly moving string chorale that represents “the silence of the Druids.” Responses to the trumpet’s question come in the form of the “fighting answers” of an ever more insistent wind quartet. Only two of Ives’ protagonists are granted entry into Adams’ “memory space”: the trumpet at the start and the string chorale, which comes to dominate the work’s last moments.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the graphic artist Art Spiegelman found himself drawn to another relic from the same New York in which Ives had earned his living: newspaper comics from the dawn of the twentieth century. In these fragile pages Spiegelman found a style in which he could compose his response to the events of September 11: the graphic work *In the Shadow of No Towers*.⁵⁹ The same sort of historical mirroring is at work in *On the Transmigration of Souls*. In the notes to his 1991 recording of *The Unanswered Question*, Adams spoke of how he was struck by

⁵⁸ Adams, “John Adams speaks about the work,” 24.

⁵⁹ Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

“the unmistakably American quality of the ‘elegiac strain’” that the work expresses and by “the extent to which our musical heritage is described by it.”⁶⁰ The lower Manhattan dream-world through which Winsor McCay’s Little Nemo wandered offered Spiegelman a style that could face up to the nightmare that unfolded before his eyes; in much the same way, *The Unanswered Question*, provided Adams with a musical language that had the requisite *gravitas* to withstand the burden of history.

Explaining the title of his work, Adams observed that “transmigration” means “‘the movement from one place to another’ or ‘the transition from one state to another.’” He saw his work as concerned both with the movement of souls from “living to dead” and with “the change that takes place within the souls of those that stay behind.”⁶¹ Of course, the only means that music possesses for tracking the migration of souls is its capacity to shape sounds and words. *On the Transmigration of Souls* traces a path through a space where names and descriptions float apart from one another, finds a way of combining them with music, and, in its final minutes, sets a few of these words free. In *The Ethics of Memory*, the philosopher Avishai Margalit argued that one function of the moral witness is to deliver a testimony to an imagined future.⁶² Perhaps we can understand Adams’ setting of Madeline Amy Sweeney’s words as a kind of witnessing that, while preserving these words, also anticipates a future in which they will no longer carry the weight that they have for those of us who recall what they meant at one particular moment, in one particular place. What Adams has crafted is a peculiar sort of memorial: one that preserves the memory of an event while, at the same time, anticipating a day when those who enter into the memory space it creates will be freed from the compulsion to remember everything.

⁶⁰ John Adams, as quoted in program note to *American Elegies*, Nonesuch 79249-2 (1991).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 23. Adams, “John Adams speaks about the work,” 23.

⁶² Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 158-9.