

THE MIXED BLESSINGS by David Avshalomov (Program Note by the composer)

This piece is a ritualized, dramatic dialectic which highlights emotionally the paradoxical contrasts within and between the two sets of blessings (and corresponding woes) attributed to the Christ in two Sermons (Mount and Plain). The work has the effect of a Lesson, an emotional Interpretation, and a Blessing. Stylistically it moves gradually from ancient to Romantic modern. The form is episodic, in 8 distinct sections, starting with a dialog between Cantor and chorus and building successively to two big climaxes, the first bitter, the second sweet.

Along the way, the handbells provide altar-bell-like punctuations (one almost expects to smell incense), cadence-markers, and short transitions at the start and very end, plus extended walking-line ostinato accompaniment under two perorations in the middle, the second becoming thick and dissonant, and a burst of clangorous, continuous light at the second climax on the word “God”.

Much of the choral texture is homophonic (thus, all voices singing the same words and rhythm together) to project the pithy text with maximum clarity. This is because the intent of the work is to stimulate the listener both to think and to feel about Christ’s words and their mystifying implications. Is it not perhaps frightening to hear that we shall consider ourselves blessed by or through these afflictions and misfortunes, even with the promised vision of heavenly rewards hereafter? Surely sensible people might ask, “How are poverty and grief, pain and struggle a blessing in this earthly life?” Hence the title. The composer’s “liberation theology” bias, projected in the music, is that the blessings, taken all together, are focused not just on accepting suffering now in order to be rewarded later, but—righteously—on *seeking social justice now*. But that is just one view. These texts have inspired a thousand sermons . . .

The Musical Form

The sections are:

1. A formalized, almost didactic, quasi-Medieval, quasi-Anglican-style start, alternating Cantor and homophonic open-harmony choir, simply laying out the blessings per Matthew. It has two subsections delineating contrasting basic melodic shapes, the first restrained and square/symmetrical, the second opening up emotionally. Then the chorus alone repeats the originally fragmented phrases of the first section, now linked seamlessly to create a single, dignified hymn-like melody, more richly harmonized.
2. Pause, with a brief recitative-like unison announcement pointing us next to Luke.
3. A more dramatic contrast-dialog first alternating meek, simple statements in the women (“blessed”) and forceful, ominous outbursts in the men (“but woe”) on the successive phrases of the version from Luke. This dynamic unfolds until, with the men joining the women, the longest blessing—for being Hated by Men and Rejoicing in that Day—becomes almost madrigalistic in its word-painting.
4. After a pause, a relentless overlapping sequencing of all 12 “blessed are” incipits (Matthew plus Luke). Over a mid-pedal G, with continually shifting substitute harmonies, this builds up to a disturbing, increasingly dissonant, continuing peak where the women are repeating almost hysterically that we are Blessed, Blessed, while the men and Cantor hammer away on how Men Hate Us, Despise Us, and the bells become almost menacing. This cuts off abruptly, and after a nervous “prayer cloud” in the choir (each singer chanting individually) on two whispered chant tones, gives way to
5. A gentle, reassuring, sweetly tonal, song-like homophonic section first listing all the promised rewards for suffering, then developing energy again on “your reward shall be great in Heaven” (led in by the Cantor), rising through a quasi-contrapuntal section that builds up some mystical harmonies which lead to
6. A sweet floating vision of Heaven on static high harmonies in the women’s voices, subtly modified from phrase to phrase and echoed by the men very low, that spreads to a broad, deeply romantic climax in the unified massed chorus on “You Shall See God,” the Cantor overlaying a high soaring counterline, then dissolves into a whole-tone-scale harmony as inscrutable as the face of a Deity.
7. The bells wind down, and the work finishes with a quiet, simple, sweet, yet unexpected blessing.