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[00:00:00] After a tragedy, there are certain tropes that reappear in conversation. For example, it's too soon. It may be time to retire that one. I'm Colleen Phelps and this is classically speaking. It wasn't too soon for Joel Thompson to compose the seven last words of the unarmed. He wrote the piece inspired by the Pictogram series by journalist Shirin Baaghi, depicting the last words of unarmed black men. Thompson, a young black man himself, found a connection between these statements and the biblical seven last sayings of Christ on the cross.

[00:00:59] It was a way for me to process my own grief and pain response to that.

[00:01:04] Then Freddie Gray died. It was 2015.

[00:01:07] I figured maybe I could do something as an artist. There's a certain futility that one might feel that you're dedicating your life to this craft. Yet it's not actually changing something. I decided to challenge that assumption and try and see it through.

[00:01:28] So a few months later, the Men's Glee Club at the University of Michigan premiered the piece. And it's been leading to performances and conversations ever since. So that you can find the connection between the two texts. I asked two members of our newsroom to read the biblical seven last words alongside the last words of these unarmed men.

[00:02:02] Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

[00:02:06] Officers, what do you have your guns out? Kenneth Chamberlain, 66.

[00:02:11] Today you will be with me in paradise.

[00:02:13] What are you following me for? Trayvon Martin, 16.

[00:02:17] Woman. Behold thy son. Behold thy mother.

[00:02:22] Mom, I'm going to college. Amadou Diallo. Twenty three.

[00:02:27] My God. My God. Why has thou forsaken me?

[00:02:31] I don't have a gun. Stop shooting Michael Brown, 18.

[00:02:35] I thirst.

[00:02:36] You shot me. You shot me. Oscar Grant 22.

[00:02:41] It is finished.

[00:02:43] It's not real. John Crawford, 22.

[00:02:47] Into thy hands. I commend my spirit.

[00:02:50] I can't breathe. Eric Garner, 43.

[00:02:54] We invited Joel Thompson to participate in a panel over Zoom to discuss his piece and the role of the arts in activism. We were joined by Lauren Fitzgerald.

[00:03:03] I'm an artist activist and I am the founder of Strategize six one nine.

[00:03:08] Pastor John Faison.

[00:03:09] Senior pastor of Watson Grove Baptist Church here in Nashville

[00:03:13] Margaret Campbell Holeman.

[00:03:13] I'm the executive director of Choral Arts Link and the founder of the MET singers.

[00:03:18] Kelly Corcoran.

[00:03:19] I'm the artistic director and conductor of Intersection

[00:03:22] and Patrick Dailey

[00:03:23] I am a professional opera singer based in Nashville and serving on the voice faculty of Tennessee State University and founder of the Big Blue Opera Initiatives

[00:03:32] Pastor Faison, could you give us some background on the seven last sayings of Christ on the Cross?

[00:03:37] These sayings really point to Christ's final moments and final words, the final chapter, if you will, of Christ's human story. These powerful words, though small and seeming to be concise, they carry so much weight. Each phrase has a story in and of itself.

[00:03:58] Choir: What are you following me for?

[00:04:05] They've really become this consistent reminder of something bigger, something greater is happening. We don't skip all the way to a triumphant moment of the resurrection without really sitting in Christ's blood stained rags.

[00:04:20] Joel with that in mind, can you talk about relating this text you had seen to Christ's seven last words?

[00:04:27] My affinity to those words, that liturgy, due to the fact that I feel that they illuminate the humanity of Christ. And for that reason, the liturgy was a template for me to humanize these men. It's sort of gone in the opposite direction for these men and make them seem less than human in order to justify their deaths, in order to make it seem as if they were supposed to die and therefore not examine our complicity. I used the liturgy to to organize the last words of the unarmed man. But not to deify them in any way, but to... to make them human again, to to honor their legacy. It's really about them and their families and that loss that we all see.

[00:05:23] Patrick, you performed the piece from the chorus. You're a young black man. Tell us about the experience.

[00:05:29] Not often as a classical artist do you get to perform something that is so fit for your body. Leontyne Price often talked about when she portrayed the role of Aida. It was the first time that she could actually step into the role. I actually was the soloist for the third movement. I would do it in rehearsal and I thought I was getting my mind wrapped around this, that I was fine. Fine. It's very long. It makes you really stretch into the body, into the singing. To do it, to sing. Mom, I'm going to college. That was me, my impetus for studying music and for going this route was the Jubilee Singers and to stand in the chapel at Fisk, what has inspired me, and to say, mom, I'm going to college, and then to have gone, that's something that our dear brother, who is now an ancestor, can't say. It was such a buckling experience. Like I was literally shaking and I could not stop shaking. And I think to this day, it haunts me in a beautiful way. I don't want to say I don't want it to sound like it's a scary thing. It haunts me. It follows me because it actually informs the work that we do in this community. Did I do with that we're passionate about?

[00:07:20] Kelly, when you first took this piece on and looked at the score to conduct it with intersection and listened to it, what did you think?

[00:07:27] It's such a powerful work that speaks to the moment of our time, but it's also timeless. Right. And so I thought, my goodness, we have to find a way to share this work with the audiences of Nashville. But we have to do it in a way where the community is a part of that process and has voice within that process and it's able to live with the work for some time. We brought in chorus members from Fisk University, Lipscombe, TXU, the celebration chorus that works on the MLK concert every year at Symphony, the Symphony Chorus. We knew we had to invite a long conversation surrounding this work.

[00:08:06] Margaret. Choral arts link is students - they're GenZ. It's a very activism-centered generation. So what were the conversations like with them while you were preparing the piece?

[00:08:17] You have dreams and you have dreams.

[00:08:20] But the awakening is what I want to speak to. And this is what I saw in the children's comments and the adults in some of the rehearsals.

[00:08:27] You can awake suddenly, you can awake easily and be bright and clear and you can awake as I called in the cloud. You're still not quite ready yet. And you sure you didn't dream up. But you're not sure what that is and don't know if it's going to come back to you or not. I saw those faces in the comments. They were awed by the music. One child said it just surrounded me and it didn't make her feel bad. It's just that she felt immersed in what was going on and try to put together what those words were, especially that their parts. And in some of the movements where there's layering going on and the voices layer and they extend and the children were drawn into that, which I thought was fascinating.

[00:09:32] Another child, young adult youth was interested in. What does that do for me? What how do I take this and use it? So she's trying to figure out this is impacting me in a way, but I'm not sure where to place it in my life. And so she assisted has begun to do other things in other ways and fulfill her life to social justice. There was a gentleman who include his singers. And before he did it, he want to make sure he was on the spot with doing this. It is university. So he called his son up. The son said that you got to do this. So his whole men's group came and performed in this man stood next to his son and saying this was the most wonderful experience he's ever had. It's another group of men who came in and the next time they brought some younger me in. A father had brought his son.

So the context of family being a part of this was to plant seeds that no matter what awakening area they're dealing with, there's someone to converse about, because for me, it has to be at this continued conversation, not what's the hot topic now? It has to continually be discussed. It was not continually done something with words to action that it doesn't do anything. That's what I feel. This piece is done again and again. The whole idea was we have to do this piece. Is it time to do it? And some people said, I'm not sure. Their awakening was cloudy. And I said, we have to do this piece.

[00:11:23] After the break, the panel gets into using the arts to take on difficult issues. And Joel Thompson describes why he hopes his own piece becomes obsolete.

[00:12:40] Sometimes the first place the world can go to take on a difficult issue is the arts. Maybe it's a mural or a piece of music or a novel or a poem. I asked Lauren Fitzgerald, whose arts administration work focuses on supporting marginalized communities, how organizations can best strategize toward their big advocacy goals.

[00:13:00] It needs to be relevant, you know, understanding that in this moment and particularly in history, that, yes, all lives matter. But that's not the relevant conversation. Police brutality, you know, prejudice and power dynamics, particularly racialized situations. That is the major issue. And we have to recognize if brown, black, indigenous voices and lives in a culture are undervalued, underrepresented and disregarded. We are all we're all victims to that oppression.

[00:13:38] Kelly, I'd like to ask you a similar question about intersection, because your seasons always surround a theme of something you're seeking in the community or even the idea of community itself. So tell us about your planning process. It involves a lot of listening. A lot of collaboration. A lot of really relating to our mission for intersection. That's contemporary classical music. So we're saying, OK, who are the contemporary voices of today that have not been heard? And how can we do our part to lift up those voices and share those voices with our community? And then, you know, the other part of our mission is changing and shifting perspective. So how are we doing that? So really looking within our niche and how to work collaboratively.

[00:14:31] In my particular perspective, faith expression, part of the historic black church in America. And man, there is no movement that didn't have music to it. There is there is no no social movement that is not attached to some form of artistry that that really gives life and and breath to to those movements and makes them transcendent. When you think about movements, you don't necessarily think about the actions that took place. But what you do remember are the south. You remember that music. You remember all the ways in which people saying denied it and connected. And those songs become timeless. It is my prayer, Joel, and I'll say this publicly. It is my prayer that one day, man, the last seven words of the unarmed will be out of date.

[00:15:17] Just just like Pastor Faison said, it's it's a peace that I hope that will not be relevant. You know, I want, I will probably have to give the talk to my child about how to survive an encounter with an authority figure. And that child will also have to give the same talk to their child. But I hope that my grandchild won't have to. It might be a pipe dream, but it's still something that conjures a lot of hope for me and focuses my work. We discovered that the piece does start conversation, a necessary conversation that we hope to turn into action in that space. There needed to be guidelines about how to have culturally competent conversations that protect the peace of those who are afflicted by the

same scourge that we are talking about, but also for those who may not be aware of the nuances of what it's like to be black.

[00:16:26] There's a lot happening in the world that needs fixing. There always has been, and there probably always will be. So what's a socially conscious artist to do?

[00:16:37] My mother often says she has a lot of little sayings that like stay with me all the time. But one of them is, you know, every little bit helps. So that's the first thing I would say is every little bit helps. Try doing something. It's not your last try. It's a continual try.

[00:16:51] You can't do this work in a silo. You have to work in partnership with one another. You have to bring in the communities that you are accountable to so that they can be at the decision making table with you. So when you're thinking about the policies that impact people in their lives, experiences, people in their bodies, black people, brown people in vision is both their their lives. Bodies have a walk about this world where you write those policies. Think about what does it mean for us to account for their lived experiences and to bring those voices into the conversations while making both count.

[00:17:29] Our organization crafted a statement. Right. As many organizations in our community have. And one of our board members responded by saying it's not much, but it's a step. And a journey begins with a step.

[00:17:43] Justice is like politics. We say politics is local. All politics is local. Justice is local. It starts with where you are. It begins in the context in which you have been placed. So I think the first step to addressing the issues and the ills that may be around us and not becoming overwhelmed is to figure out what it needs around what's happening, where I am, what arena an area does not where they should impact, what are the needs. So I start there and that takes listening, sitting as all throughout our country, across the world, that people are now being awakened to the presence of injustice as if it just showed up. The danger of that is when you are used to always being the decision maker and always be having the power and the leverage and moments that you show up trying to give answers and provide leadership to spaces where leadership is already active. But if you show up and you are present and support and just as skilled as a follower as you are a leader, you'll be surprised.

[00:18:44] What kind of impact that can be made? My two words are this mustard seeds. You can't do anything unless you have something to start with. And it can be as small as a mustard seed. And everyone has a job in caring for the mustard seed. You have to start and know that what you're doing is Patrick said little bitty. And if we don't start planting those and nurturing those in our children, in our families, in our communities, now the social justice stuff works. Whatever you do in that organization, several of you got to say it. It may seem small, but a mustard seeds even smaller, can grow.

[00:19:23] If nurtured these societal ills that are plaguing us: police brutality, economic inequality and so on and so forth, they're all symptoms of the same elements that are rooted in this system of exploitation and built on this incorrect heirarchy that perpetuates the inequality and inequity that we're experiencing to this day. And so we should start local start now with what's around us. But even before that, one might want to start with oneself really taking a deep, hard, long look inward, assessing the unearned advantages that feel. These are things, I think, that heads of organizations and also just members of organizations can do in order to start this. Every little bit helps.

[00:20:24] Answers were edited for time for this episode. You can find the full panel on video on 91Classical.org. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio's 91Classical. The editor is Anita Bugg and Carl Pedersen is the engineer. I especially want to thank the panel for this episode. Powerful art takes emotional labor and this group was willing to dive right in without a pending performance. So thanks to Joel Thompson, Lauren Fitzgerald, Pastor John Faison, Margaret Campbell, Holeman, Kelly Corcoran and Patrick Dailey. Thanks also to Damon Mitchell and Ambriehl Crutchfield for reading both sets of seven last words. If you haven't subscribed yet, hit that button and tell your friends to do the same that we'll all automatically have your backstage pass to classical music, Classically Speaking.