

## TWO APOCALYPTIC SONGS

These songs were among the first in my recent period focusing on the voice. I set them right away, one after another, yet it was only when I reached “somewhere in the sands of the desert” in the Yeats that the relationship between them came to me. Here are two visions of the inevitable end of all great and powerful civilizations, one drawn from the tangible wreckage of a long-dead tyrant’s monument, the other the poet’s fevered prophecy of the disintegration and end of our world. My desert mood music links the two settings.

### OZYMANDIAS

Shelley evidently wrote this sonnet, his most famous, in friendly competition with Horace Smith in 1817 (Smith’s is, of course, inferior). By most accounts it was inspired by a description of the ruin of one of myriad monuments to Rameses II of Egypt (yet another was discovered in 1996), and of an inscription on its base. Shelley, inspired, probably took liberties with both description and inscription, to enhance its drama. The result is timeless.

Mine is a straightforward setting of the poet’s images. A long slow modal introduction puts us in the desert, the voice lays out the description gradually, building to the climax, announced by a triple fanfare in the piano, with the stentorian motto in the voice: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings. Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” And the rest of the song is denouement, etching the irony of the double meaning we must put on “look on my works” and “despair,” then meandering off across the lone and level sands towards the blank horizon, never resolving.

### THE CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE (composer’s title)

Scholars and critics still puzzle over just what Yeats was saying in his apocalyptic poem of 1921, “The Second Coming.” I resonate with the view that he was expressing his despair at the apparent disintegration of society and of the social compact, and expecting, even predicting the eventual triumph of evil on the world scene. A message for our times still, perhaps . . .

Yeats wrote this famous poem as Europe and the rest of the world was trying to recover from the unprecedented carnage and destruction of World War I. He saw great social turmoil all around him, and remarks on a world falling apart. His “falcon” may be humanity no longer responding to the lead of religion or morality; or it may be human-born technology spiraling beyond human control.

Despite the mention of Bethlehem in the last line, however, his “second coming” is not that prophesied for Christ but, it seems, that of a rough Beast in His place. Yeats envisions the awakening of a figure like the Sphinx at Giza (which slept in nightmares for 2000 years). Around 1904 he had written, ‘I began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of sight, a brazen winged beast which I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction. . . afterwards described in my poem “The Second Coming.”’ He depicts the Sphinx rising up to bring about the end of the world (in what he considered a repeating cycle of 2000 years, which he termed a “gyre.”). In the end, he offers no hope for mankind.

In setting the poem, I took my overall tone from his vision and, using varying accompaniment textures and moods, and the vocal inflections of solo oratorio, built successive episodes by reflecting the specific key images in successive stanzas: the soaring falcon (simply as a bird), the unheeded falconer, the blood-dimmed tide, the drowning of innocence, the passionate intensity of the worst, the revelation, the night sands of the desert, the plodding shape with lion body, the angry desert birds, the rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem, and finally a mockery of Christmas bells after “to be born.”