

The Fiery Furnace

Music and Libretto by Daniel Kellogg

Text taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version

- I. Prayer of the Israelites
- II. Nebuchadnezzar erects an image of gold
- III. Praise for the image of gold
- IV. Refusing to worship the image of gold
- V. Prayer of hope
- VI. The burning fiery furnace
- VII. Praise the God of Judah

all movements are performed without break

The Fiery Furnace is a sacred oratorio telling the Biblical story of the same name. King Nebuchadnezzar defeats Jerusalem in 605 BC and eventually takes the Jewish people into captivity in Babylon, where they remain for decades. Some of the most promising Jewish men are appointed to Nebuchadnezzar's court and grow to have great influence. The Biblical figure Daniel served in the Babylonian government for 60 years and eventually penned the Old Testament book "Daniel" that tells the story of the burning fiery furnace.

A common theme runs through the stories in the book of "Daniel". The Jewish people are subjected to the idolatries of foreign gods and face brutal executions if they refuse to participate. In dire circumstances, they remain faithful and the God of Judah saves them from death.

In this particular story, King Nebuchadnezzar dreams of his own glory and erects an image of gold. He demands that all the peoples of his land should worship the image when they hear the sound of music. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, three Jewish priests serving in the courts, refuse to worship the image. As promised, King Nebuchadnezzar binds them and throws them to their death in a burning fiery furnace. The heat of the furnace is so hot that the guards who throw them into the furnace are burned to death by the flames.

Miraculously, King Nebuchadnezzar sees the three priests walking around in the midst of the fire. They are unhurt and are accompanied by a fourth, who is described as a son of the gods. The king calls them out of the fire and declares the greatness of the God of Judah who can save these men. The oratorio ends when the king calls for all to praise this God.

I am attracted to this story because of the wonderful dramatic arc. There is a riveting urgency to the terrible situation in which the three priests find themselves. The music ranges from an intimate prayer before facing death to a wild narcissistic rant as the king demands everyone to worship his golden statue. Early in the planning stage, I decided to write the libretto myself. Almost all of the words are assembled from different passages of scripture (English Standard Version). In particular, the plot of the story comes from Daniel Chapters 2-4, while the prayers and emotional asides come from Daniel Chapter 9 and numerous Psalms. Working with my own libretto allowed a great freedom when writing the melodic lines. The directness of the text was easy to adjust.

This musical setting is for chorus, tenor solo, bass-baritone solo, and orchestra. The chorus plays several roles and echoes the sentiments of the soloists. The tenor soloist plays the part of Shadrach, who represents all three of the Jewish priests. The bass-baritone sings the part of King Nebuchadnezzar. The musical language of the piece pulls from the modern American palette, with moments of harmonious tenderness, clashing dissonance, and triumphant joy.

The Fiery Furnace was commissioned by Soli Deo Gloria, Inc., with John Nelson as music director. This organization seeks to continue the long and glorious tradition of large scale sacred works.