



Seven Last Words of the Unarmed **Composer Note**

Dear Listener,

In November of 2014, a Staten Island grand jury chose not to indict the officer who murdered Eric Garner. To me, the message was clear: if I were to be killed in some interaction with authority figures, my loved ones should not expect justice. There could be a video recording of my futile attempts to describe my distress – “I can’t breathe” – with the arm of the law around my neck and the life fading from my eyes, and still, my death wouldn’t matter. My death wouldn’t matter enough to warrant a formal charge of even manslaughter or negligent homicide. This was not an isolated incident – this was a trend. The color of my skin is a capital offense. *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* wasn’t written to be heard. It was essentially a sonic diary entry expressing my fear, anger, and grief in the wake of this tragedy. I was serving as a choral conductor at a small college in south Georgia, but I occasionally composed pieces and hid them away. Finishing this work in early January 2015 was a much-needed catharsis; I felt exorcised of the emotions that had drained my spirit. However, Freddie Gray’s death the following April impelled me to try to bring *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* to life. A Facebook post asking musician friends to sightread the work, a phone call by a friend to Dr. Eugene Rogers of the University of Michigan, a commission from Andre Dowell to fully orchestrate the work for the 20th anniversary of the Sphinx Organization, and the piece is alive several years later and I am very grateful.

Liturgical settings of the *Seven Last Words of Christ* are not trying to

demonize the Roman soldiers that orchestrated the crucifixion, but they are designed to stir within the listener an empathy towards the suffering of Jesus. Inspired by that template, this piece is a meditation on the lives of seven Black men and an effort to focus on their humanity, which is often eradicated in the media in an attempt to justify their deaths.

Listening to Seven Last Words of the Unarmed can be uncomfortable. As you listen, I ask that you try to remain open. It can be easy to let a spirit of defensiveness pollute the experience of the piece. I ask that you revisit the last moments of these men with fresh hearts:

- Kenneth Chamberlain, Sr: the retired Marine who accidentally pressed his Life Alert necklace which recorded the police calling him a n***er before he was killed.
("Officer, why do you have your guns out?")
- Trayvon Martin: the teenage boy with his bag of Skittles being chased in his own neighborhood. ("What are you following me for?")
- Amadou Diallo: the young immigrant who called his mother in Guinea after he had saved up enough money to pursue a degree in computer science. ("Mom, I'm going to college.")
- Michael Brown: the recent high school graduate and amateur musician whose body lay baking in the street for four hours before being taken to the coroner. ("I don't have a gun. Stop shooting!")
- Oscar Grant III: the young father (of a 4-year-old girl) who was shot in the back while handcuffed in a prone position at Fruitvale Station. ("You shot me! You shot me.")
- John Crawford: another young father who was purchasing a BB gun in a Wal-Mart in the open carry state of Ohio. ("It's not real.")
- Eric Garner: the 43-year-old grandfather who was choked to death on camera on the streets of New York City. ("I can't breathe.")

When the music is over, let us continue to listen. Let us listen to each other with love and hope for a more just future. Thank you.

With love,

Joel Thompson (2015)

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Conspirare asked Joel to write and addendum in the context of our current time:

In the last 10 years, the social and political landscape of this country has been overwhelmed by metastases of cruelty, hatred, and fear. It feels even more dangerous to sing this piece now than it did in 2015 when it premiered.

We have since heard the echoes of Eric Garner's last words in the dying breath of George Floyd. We have seen pledges to change and the ensuing backlash against those same pledges.

We now see a willful self-induced amnesia of our country's past sins and a purposeful blindness to our precarious fascist present, so it seems selfish and cruel at this point to consider bringing another Black child into this world. But that despair evaporates when I realize that my very existence is evidence of the impossible hope of my ancestors who were stolen from everything they had ever known, crammed into the hull of a ship and smuggled to another world.

It is that hope that sustains me now and it is the hope that we all need to persist and resist in this unjust world. *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* is still a difficult listen, but I invite you today to hold on to the hope that this piece will no longer be relevant 10 years from now.

Let us sing it until that day comes.