

Motivating a Choir to Sing “Curse Upon Iron” with Intent.

Brigitte Doss-Johnson

Scary sound has affect as a portion of the goal in performing Tormis’s “Curse Upon Iron,” but how can a singer find personal connection with this piece?

Understanding the history, motivation and tools that Tormis used, both musical and literary, can bring appreciation for many parts of this piece, but how can singers invest their individual emotions while they perform?

Imagine my cute hands on both sides of your head.

Imagine that I push your head under water.

Imagine any setting, but I picture a huge horse trough in a pasture.

You think: what a creep. You move to bring your head up and I push you down again.

You think: I’m getting her back. You move more strongly to lift your head. I push you down.

Your lungs begin to burn, the vacuum threatens to overpower your epiglottis and you press your lips tight. Your arms grab to push me away while you lift your head, panic beginning to envelope you. I push down. All thinking has ceased, your visual cortex is misfiring bursts of yellow dandelions and your prime imperative is survival. Only survival. With a surge of supernatural adrenaline, you strain to bring your head up.

I let go.

Oxygen replenishes your starving brain cells enough for you to comprehend that I’m laughing at you. Fury rises in your throat. You hate me.

I walk away as if I had stopped momentarily to enjoy watching a butterfly land on a blue cornflower.

Your face burns, livid. You watch me walk away in long strides, one easy step for three of your racing heartbeats.

I turn back to face you. I lift a hand, not to wave, but to remind you what I can do with it.

You squint, roiling with hate and injustice and tears.

I am iron.

You curse me.

I am iron and I have the power to change the heart of men, men who seek to oppress and keep legions of people subjugated. You feel you should fight this power, but you are taxed and exploited so all you can think and do is manage survival. You have no liberty for creative industry, for individuality, for thriving.

What is your oppression?

Everyone has one. Does a parent expect things you can’t give them? Do finances or debt bind you? Addiction? Does the media bombard you with irrational ideals? Maybe your oppression is internal? Do you have an obsession with someone who doesn’t return your affection? Are you conflicted between responsibility and desire? Do you lie to yourself?

Identify the oppression that affects you. Hate it and curse it and you’ve tapped into the intent for performing “Curse Upon Iron.” Anti-war wishes and world peace are grand things but are too broad to focus high-performance delivery.

With intent, you can sing intensely. Intensity is louder than volume.

Invest this fight against oppression from your core and the sound, look and affect will be there.