

Program Note *by the composer*

El negro Motherwell | Negro negro elegía | Llanto negro sin fin negro callado | Bandas de luto | negros estandartes | Negro de este país de negro siempre | Yo puedo entrar en ti negro deschecho en lágrimas | Por el negro salir purificado | ¡O negro muro de España!

Motherwell black | black black elegy | black lament endless silent black | armbands of mourning | black banners | black of this land of eternal black | I can enter you black shattered by tears | through black emerge purified | O black wall of Spain!

—Rafael Alberti, from *El Negro Motherwell* (1980)

The Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936, the consequence of a failed right-wing military coup d'état against Spain's democratically elected republican government, and ended in 1939 with the Spanish Republic's defeat. The war caused more than a half-million deaths, forced as many more into exile, and resulted in the 36-year repressive dictatorship of Francisco Franco. In the eight decades that have passed since it ended, the Spanish Civil War has become a universal metaphor for human suffering and injustice.

The conflict and its aftermath had a deep and lasting effect on the American abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell. His response was a monumental series of more than 200 paintings collectively titled *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, a work he began in 1949 and continued for the rest of his life. Common to the imagery of all the paintings are thick, intensely black vertical slashes and ovoids that dominate their backgrounds. Descendants of Goya's *Disasters of War* and Picasso's *Guernica*, and characterized by poet and Museum of Modern Art curator Frank O'Hara as "some of the most powerful and brutally ominous works of our time," Motherwell's *Elegies* are sentinels, dramatic emblems of the Civil War's tragedies and warnings never to forget them.

The present *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, a short musical addition to Motherwell's paintings, is also meant to be a warning and sentinel, "barbaric and austere," to borrow Motherwell's description of his work. My *Elegy* makes brief references to music written during the Spanish Civil War by composers who experienced it first hand: the Catalan Roberto Gerhard's *Soirées de Barcelone*, written in Barcelona in 1936-38; and the Mexican Silvestre Revueltas's *Homenaje a Federico García Lorca*, composed in memory of the poet who was murdered in 1936 by Franco's troops, and performed in wartime Madrid and Valencia in 1937 with Revueltas conducting. By imitating the jazz-inflected rhythms that permeate his music from the late 1930s, *Elegy* also pays homage to Arkansas-born composer Conlon Nancarrow, who fought in Spain for the Republic as a volunteer in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.

Initially I planned to divide the work into contrasting sections, each with a title in English assembled from poems written during the Civil War by Spanish artists and poets. As the composition unfolded, however, the sections turned into discontinuous shards and fragments that disrupt each other repeatedly; the titles themselves were also broken. But the music of *Elegy* remains in the shadow of their words:

Outraged musics scar the face of every hope
(Miguel Hernández, 1939)

City of troops and clanging cars: dusk, dusk, and the beating of the rain
(José Moreno Villa, 1937)

cries of children cries of women cries of birds
(Pablo Picasso, 1937)

To learn a lament that will cleanse me of earth
(Federico García Lorca, 1936)

A grant from the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard made possible the commissioning of *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* for the 21st Century Consort, the resident new music ensemble of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. for over forty years.

Robert Motherwell on painting, and on the *Elegies*

"Without ethical consciousness, a painter is only a decorator. Without ethical consciousness, the audience is only sensual, one of aesthetes.

"Pictures are vehicles of passion, of all kinds and orders, not pretty luxuries like sports cars. In our society, the capacity to give and to receive passion is limited. For this reason, the act of painting is a deep human necessity, not the production of a handmade commodity.

"I will never forget André Malraux at a mass meeting in San Francisco (after he had been shot down in Spain) to raise money for the Spanish Republic, his crumpled tailored suit, his Gauloise hanging from his lips, his weary intensity, his eloquent appeal for help, for an end to neutrality. This must have been 1937.

"I was not thinking about the Spanish Civil War or anything else when I stumbled on the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* image. Before, my work had been personal and intimate; and even though the first version was a very small picture and a wholly unexpected one, I realized that what was different about it was that it was basically a monumental, *public* image. In reflecting on what to call it, what I felt about it publicly, it occurred to me that I cared deepest about the defeat of the Spanish Republic. By that time, in 1949, with World War II having ended, I felt that the earlier drama of the Spanish Republic was largely forgotten. The image fitted my sense that there ought to be an elegy (a funeral lament) for the original Republic.

"My *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* were meant, on one level, as an elegy for the tragically missed opportunity of Spain to enter the liberal modern world in the 1930s. And for its tragic suffering then and for decades afterward. They represent an effort to symbolize a subjective image of modern Spain. They are black and white: they are laments, dirges, elegies—barbaric and austere."

From *Robert Motherwell: A Personal Recollection* (1986); notes for the "Reconciliation Elegy" (1978); an address given at Smith College (1963); the catalogue for *The New American Painting*, Museum of Modern Art (1959); the catalogue for *The New Decade: 35 American Painters and Sculptors*, Whitney Museum (1955); and from the catalogue for an exhibition at the Samuel Kootz Gallery, New York (1950)