

The sonic starting point of *By the Streams of Babylon* was the flowing, perpetual-motion, but ever-transforming figure introduced at the start of the piece, one that parallels the imagery of the psalm but also simply “works” in the musical context. Agócs’s assignment of the text to two sopranos rather than one or a chorus allows us to hear this lament as both individual and collective, intimate and universal, while her choice of Latin for the setting is not only for the sound of the words themselves but also for the resonance of its liturgical and musical history. In the imitation and interplay of the vocal lines, Agócs implicitly evokes the intricacies of the Renaissance motet and madrigal, although there is nothing archaic about the sound-world of the piece. *By the Streams of Babylon* also exists in a version for larger orchestra (double winds and brass). The composer has provided the following note for her piece:

“*By The Streams of Babylon* was commissioned by David Alan Miller and the Albany Symphony for their Dogs of Desire ensemble, and written in January and early February 2008. The work is a setting of the Latin version of Psalm 136, perhaps one of the most ecumenical of the psalms. Running about five minutes, my setting opens gently with a lyrical, wistful, asymmetrical eighth-note figure that runs through almost the entire piece—the image of the flowing rivers of Babylon, tributaries of the Euphrates. The figure gives way to a chain of suspensions that evokes their weeping as the singers recall the glories of their lost homeland. The music pauses symbolically when they hang their lyres from the branches of the willows beside the streams. As their captors torment them by demanding the words of their songs and trying to force them to sing their old hymns, they are prompted to demand rhetorically: “How can we sing the lord’s song in a strange land?” This, the work’s dramatic and musical climax, is the only place where the through-running figure is broken; the earlier chains of suspensions are picked up and extended by the orchestra. Never do we hear the actual hymns, but their memory persists, echoed and transformed by the geographical and temporal distances of exile.”

- Program note by Robert Kirzinger for Boston Modern Orchestra Project, January 2009