

Annelies: The diary of a young girl—a concert by the Ottawa Choral Society

How do you set a diary to music? But not just any diary—Anne Frank’s diary. Most of us probably have read a translation of this Jewish teenager’s work in high school. But did we fully appreciate her insights? It’s easy to forget that she was a real person with hopes and dreams.

Anne’s full name is Annelies. During World War Two, Anne’s family was unable to escape, so they were forced to hide from the brutal Nazis who occupied the Netherlands. They shared a secret attic in an Amsterdam warehouse with several others. In 1942, less than a month before they went into hiding, Anne received a diary. In it, she expressed her maturing, innermost thoughts. This diary would become a significant historical document and personalize the tragedies of war.

Anne hoped to become a writer, but she would not live to see her dreams fulfilled. Nazis broke into their hiding place and transported the family to various concentration camps. Anne died at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

British composer James Whitbourn was authorized by the Anne Frank Foundation to set parts of the diary to music along with additional text. This choral work has been described as “devastatingly beautiful” and of “such tender respect it’s almost impossible to hear without tears.”

Whitbourn’s score paints heartbreaking images, the likes of which most of us will never witness. Jewish harmonic-minor melodies weave throughout the piece, reminding us of Klezmer music.

The second movement is a foreshadowing of their doom. You hear the higher choral voices as Anne looks out the window up at the peace and beauty of the sky, contrasting with the lower voices representing the gathering storm of history below. The family goes into hiding.

Confined to the attic, the soloist as Anne remains cheerful: “As long as this exists, the sunshine and this cloudless sky, how can I be sad?” The chorus adds hopefully that “One day we will be people again.” The movement, “Courage,” attempts to comfort us saying that the winter is over, blossoms are everywhere, and my heart is glad.

But the terror is not far away. In movement 7, the Nazis almost discover them. You hear the frantic heartbeats of the attic dwellers holding their breath. Then the action freezes—the angelic sounds of *Kyrie eleison* builds into a desperate plea, “God have mercy.”

Anne tries to boost her courage: “We must be brave and trust in God.” Reminiscent of a German hymn, the haunting “Thank you, God, for all that is good and dear and beautiful” contrasts with the horror of their impending arrest. The despair builds as Anne dreams that her friend is lost without her. But then—a glimmer of hope with news about D-day and the advancing liberation forces.

August 1, 1944 was Anne’s last diary entry. A few days later they were arrested, the scene presented in a chilling chant.

Anne's words are still relevant for us today. Her legacy challenges us to end prejudice and embrace diversity.

Sunday, March 29, 2020 at 3 PM – 5 PM. Church of St. Francis of Assisi, 20 Fairmont Ave., Ottawa.
Tickets are \$25, \$35, \$50 from www.ottawachoralsociety.com/box-office.