

# Protest Poems

## for Narrator, Violin, Clarinet, Cello, and Piano

March 16—June 8, 2024      Duration: 24 minutes

*for John and Nancy Lambert*

In January 2024, Eric Pritchard offered the idea of a concert at Duke University in January 2025 to mark my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. For that concert, I prepared a piano quintet version of *Symphony No. 1: Popular Music of Planet X*, and a version of *Strange Songs* for singers and piano quintet. Given that the concert would be within a week of the next presidential inauguration, and the extreme global political situation, I thought it timely to set some protest poems for narrator and a chamber group. Eric suggested the instrumentation. This would give me an opportunity to perform, which has not been possible since 1982 due to arthritis and poor hearing. *At last, an opportunity to do what I do best—complain.*

The first poem, “Pity the Party”, is inspired by “Pity the Nation” by Laurence Ferlinghetti, who in turn was inspired by a poem of the same name by Khalil Gibran. While this is pointed directly at today’s Republican Party in the US, it applies just as well to neo-fascist and authoritarian parties around the world, such as the BJP in India.

The second poem, “Father Stalin, Look at This” is a Ukrainian children’s song from about 1933. This was at the height of the Holodomor, when Stalin deliberately starved six million people to death in the process of collectivizing farms.

The third poem, “Political Theology”, I wrote a few years ago in disgust with the power of religion in governments through history. It is also critique of a civilization that is based on the destruction of Nature, and which is hell-bent on catastrophic overpopulation and extirpation of resources.

The fourth poem, “The birds don’t know about self-immolation”, was posted anonymously on social media two days after Aaron Bushnell burned himself to death in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington DC on February 25, 2024, to protest the war in Gaza.

The fifth poem, “Artificial Insanity”, I wrote (with a little ironic assistance from artificial intelligence, which I couldn’t resist) based on Alan Ginsberg’s poem “Howl”. It is about the threat to our mental health and culture from modern technology, especially AI.

### Performance notes

Should this music be performed in places and times where the references are unknown, obscure, or irrelevant to the audience and musicians, the texts may be changed to be more applicable to the local situation. I intend to make a version of this piece for narrator and orchestra.

Cover art; anti-fascist poster by John Heartfield, Germany early 1930’s

## Bill Robinson

Publisher Parish Press, Garner NC      First Edition June 8, 2024 (*corrected to 7/1/2024*)

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