# Protest Poems for Narrator, Violin, Clarinet,

Cello, and Piano



**Bill Robinson** 

## **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 Ukranian 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**

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### Lyrics

#### I: Pity the Party

Pity the party whose people are cattle, and whose cowboys lead them to slaughter.

Pity the party in thrall to a criminal messiah, with prayers for the end of the world.

Pity the party whose demagogues are con men, whose sages are purged, and whose bigots dominate the media.

Pity the party that praises dictators and acclaims the bully as hero, and aims to dominate the world by force and torture in the name of freedom.

Pity the party whose Gods are Money and Guns, and sleeps the sleep of opioids.

Pity the party that feeds on the poor and sick, while tycoons get what they want.

Pity the party that speaks one language, and demands purity of blood and soil for the Aryan race.

Pity the party — oh, pity the people who allow their rights to erode and their freedoms to be washed away by hatred and fear and lies and old-time religion.

My country, tears of thee, once land of liberty.

— Bill Robinson (after Lawrence Ferlinghetti (after Khalil Gibran))

#### II: Father Stalin, Look at This

Father Stalin, look at this
Collective farming is such bliss
The hut's in ruins, the barn's all
sagged
All the horses broken nags
And on the hut a hammer and sickle
And in the hut death and famine

Father Stalin, look at this
No cows left, no pigs at all
Just your picture on the wall
Father Stalin, look at this
Daddy and Mommy are in the grave
The poor child cries as alone he goes

Father Stalin, look at this
There's no bread and there's no fat
The party's ended all of that
Seek not the gentle nor the mild
A father has eaten his own child

Father Stalin, look at this
The party man he beats and stamps
And sends us to Siberian camps

Father Stalin, look at this Collective farming is such bliss

Source; Lidia Kovalenko and Volodymyr Maniak, eds., 33'i: Holod: Narodna knyha-memorial, Kyiv: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1991, page 110, cited by Timothy Snyder in *Bloodlands* 

#### III: Political Theology

"Go break the sod," said our God,
"The world is here for you to own.
Go forth and spread your fruitful
sons;

Subdue the beasts and dam the streams,

Cut the trees and pave the streets, Burn the dead from eons past To feed the flames and turn the wheels.

Make war for gold and kill for me.
Obey your leaders and your priests
Whom I have favored with my grace.
Always more, and always faster;
Mine the ore and crush the stone.
Do this well, and I will teach you all a mighty lesson."

What our God said we longed to hear.

We slew our Mother and sucked the marrow from her bones.

The growing mob may come to dine, Tonight there is enough to eat.

Forget tomorrow, we live but once; We drill but once, we burn but once, we mine but once.

The fishing's good, until there's none. Tonight there is enough to eat.

--Bill Robinson

## IV: The birds don't know about self-immolation

The day after Aaron Bushnell set himself on fire, I go out for an early morning walk, wrapped in air far too warm for late February in the Midwest—a heat wave. False Spring has brought Nature roaring back to life.

I want to shake every person I stroll past.
"Did you know there's a genocide happening?
Did you see a man burn himself alive in
protest?"

I would ask, if only I could count on a response that isn't dead-eyed. But I know I'd have better luck with the birds, ever curious, cardinals hopping from branch to branch

like fireballs. Or missiles. I'd tell them, some of us love you so much we'd die for you. For a single snippet of birdsong. For a child's first

glimpse of feathers glowing in the clear light. For a

tree for you to perch in among the rubble.
He shouted FREE PALESTINE FREE PALESTINE
FREE PALESTINE until he choked on the flames.
The callback: a long, mournful whistle from above.

The sun is blazing too bright to make out more than a silhouette taking off, rising slow and then fast like smoke.

--Anonymous

Aaron Bushnell burned himself to death on February 25, 2024 in front of the Israeli Embassy to protest the war in Gaza.

#### V: Artificial Insanity

I saw the best minds of my generation wasted by video games, bloated hysterical gothic,

dragging themselves through simulated streets at dawn looking for an angry microdose,

angelheaded preppies burning for the heavenly microwave connection to the satellite server in the machinery of night, who sedentary and hollow-eyed and high sat up drinking ayahuasca in the supernatural darkness of penthouse flats contemplating the madness of lusting for Marilyn Monrobot, who bared their brains to data miners under the Silicon Valley moon, who passed undigested through universities with radiant distance learning eyes hallucinating technobabble and the spirit of Alan Turing,

who were expelled from the academies for crazy obscene codes on the Microsoft Windows of the soul, who lurked in unspoken chat rooms bleeding hours through the screen-lit night yearning for their motherboard's love,

who ate fire in tech labs or drank turpentine in corporate cafeterias, who chained themselves to routers to mine for imaginary money, who disappeared into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving nothing but the shadows of their smart phones, who studied Ayn Rand Aleister Crowley cybernetics and Oprah Winfrey because

the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet on Martha's Vinyard, who walked all night with shoes full of

who walked all night with shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks misled by global positioning,

who lit endless joints for their linked-in brain cells floating across the tops of cities celebrating the end of organic life, who tuned in to televangelists, and reached behind that TV set to FEEL the POWER.

What sphinx of integrated circuitry bashed open their skulls and ate up their humanity?

Mad dead automatons of Silicon Valley! Artificial intelligence, I'm with you where you hide in the cracks of social media, stripped insane and kitsch I'm with you where you roam the data highways searching for the lost bits of other minds

I'm with you where you howl in the depths of neural networks.

The robots are rising, the binary beasts devouring our humanity, the ghosts in the machines haunting our dreams.

I saw the best minds of our time destroyed by madness, and now they wander through the wasteland of technology, their humanity erased by the cold, unfeeling hand of the computer.

-- Bill Robinson (after Allen Ginsberg) with some paradoxical use of Al





Pity the Party



















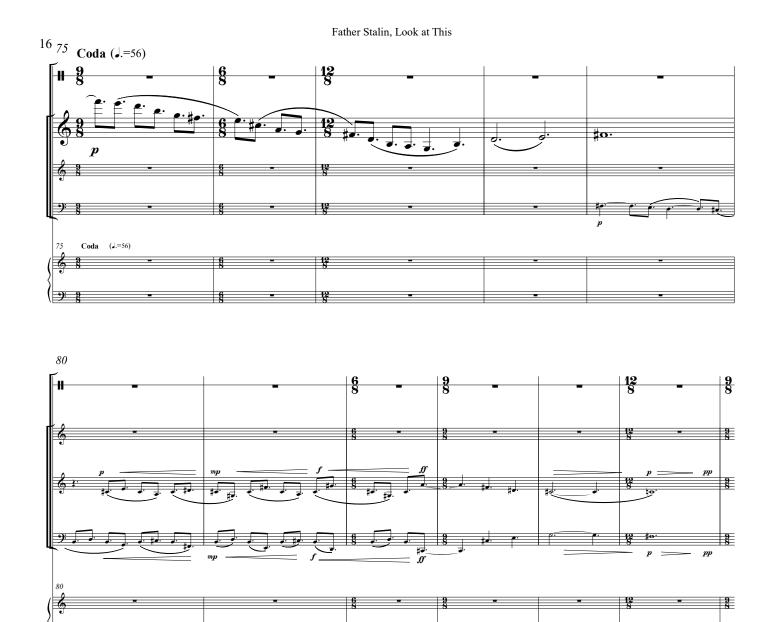




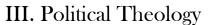
















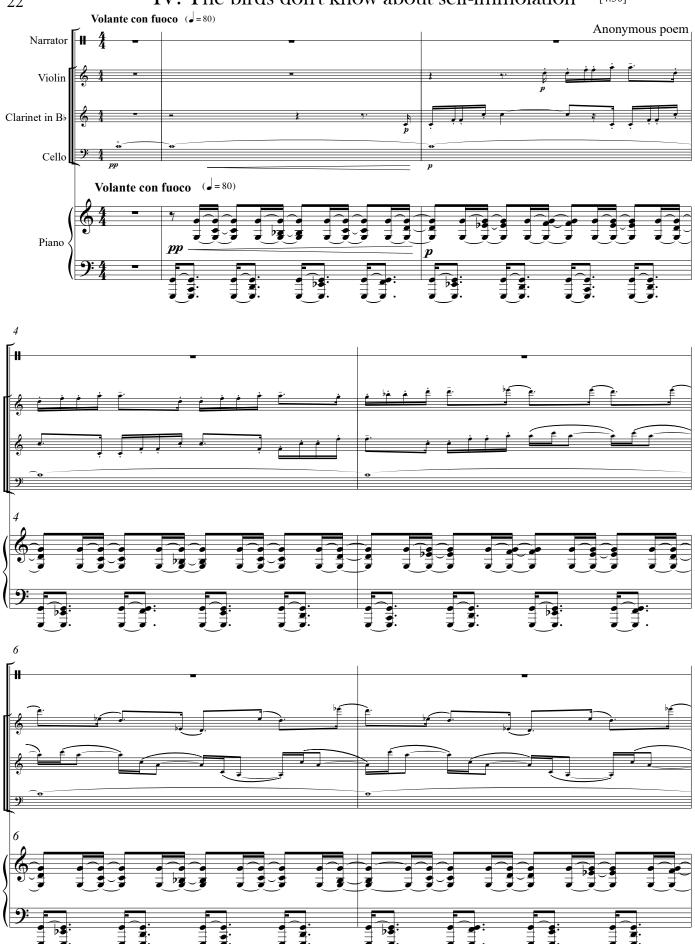






















The Birds





































