
Sound bite: *Juliet Morton* on a choral work that challenges torture

*'Singing is transformative.
It lifts our spirits; it heals;
it is creative.'*



Photo by David Beale on Unsplash

I imagine being in bed and finally asleep after a tense day. Then, before dawn, before the cocks crow, a terrible loud hammering on the door. Your children wail, startled from their sleep. Men burst in and then there is chaos. Now you are elsewhere, still in your night clothes, not knowing what is going to happen, but fearing the worst.

Quaker Concern for the Abolition of Torture (Q-CAT) is part of the work of our Yearly Meeting. The charity takes forward the concern about the devastating effect of torture in the world on behalf of Meeting for Sufferings. Terrible cruelty, such as torture, used by state officials in many countries around the world, is not a subject that people want to dwell on. But it happens, and so must be held in check and needs to be eradicated. Being a Quaker charity, Q-CAT views the spiritual welfare of those affected by torture as important as their 'bodily welfare'. We see our remit as also including the spiritual welfare of those inflicting and ordering the torture. Q-CAT aims to raise awareness on the use of torture, and its corrosive effects on the fabric of societies, among Friends, other faiths and the general public.

Recently we asked the composer Sally Beamish to write a piece of music that amateurs could sing, about the shadow that torture casts over people's lives across the world. She did this so that Friends and other people can sing, and for their singing to act as light to reveal and weaken the darkness of torture, bearing witness to this evil.

A librettist, Peter Thomson, has worked closely with her and Q-CAT trustees to create a libretto that lets people sing from the perspective of the detained, and from the perspective of the abusive interrogator. Torturers too are damaged by what they do – souls adrift and at risk.

Singing is transformative. It lifts our spirits; it heals; it is creative. Rehearsing music brings people together in a joint endeavour and generates its own rewards during practice and in the performance. People enjoy coming to listen.

A Knock on the Door is for amateur choirs, for groups of people just coming together to give it a go, for Meetings to create something together, and, most importantly, for the singing to bear witness to the tragedy of oppression and to the endurance of the human spirit.

Following its première, which is likely to be sung by the choir Ex Cathedra during the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, Q-CAT trustees would love Meetings or Friends with friends who like singing, to get together and sing this piece. You might even think of giving a performance of it. We plan to create a small lending library of scores for voices and keyboard to allow access to the music for choirs and groups whose resources are limited.

When we have more information about the concert in which it will be premiered we will let Friends know. A leaflet about this project will be sent to Meetings to ask for help in funding it. ●

Juliet is clerk to Q-CAT trustees.