

The Fifth Century, movement IV (2014)
Gavin Bryars

The Fifth Century was commissioned and premiered by The Crossing, with PRISM Saxophone Quartet.

Recorded July 2014; released 2016

PRISM Saxophone Quartet

Timothy McAllister, soprano

Matthew Levy, tenor

Bobby Young, alto

Taimur Sullivan, baritone

This large-scale work for choir and saxophone quartet sets a text from the English poet and theologian Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations*, taking lines from the last section "The Fifth Century." As with all vocal works, for me, the most critical thing to establish is the text and it was Donald Nally, director of The Crossing, who suggested that I look at the writings of Thomas Traherne.

Although Traherne lived in the 17th century, his work was unknown for over 200 years, and was first published in the first decade of the 20th century. It has an intense spirituality, celebrating the glory of creation, his almost intimate relationship with God and leading, in the final section to an apotheosis in which he declaims the "essence of God." In many ways his work is astonishingly modern with its unwitting "Eastern" sound and feeling. The constant recurrence of certain images and abstract nouns is a feature of the language and is reflected in the musical setting:

There are seven sections drawn from the different sections of Traherne's "Fifth Century"; while the musical setting is not complex, the choir is often divided into multiple parts. The saxophone quartet—soprano, alto, tenor and baritone—has a prologue and short interludes but the instrumental writing is relatively restrained. In some movements the saxophone accompaniment is quite busy, whereas at times the choir is virtually a cappella.

The work was commissioned by The Crossing, to my mind North America's finest choir, for performance with the saxophone quartet PRISM.

—Gavin Bryars

Text:

IV

Eternity is a mysterious absence of times and ages: an endless length of ages always present, and for ever perfect... All ages being but successions correspondent to those parts of the Eternity wherein they abide, and filling no more of it, than ages can do. Whether they are commensurate with it or not, is difficult to determine. But the infinite immovable duration is Eternity, the place and duration of all things, even of infinite space itself: the cause and end, the author and beautifier, the life and perfection of all.

—from *Century V.7*