

Caroline Shaw: *To the Hands*  
premiered June 24, 2016, Philadelphia

The Crossing commissioned *To the Hands* as a response to *Ad manus* from Dieterich Buxtehude's 17th century masterpiece, *Membra Jesu Nostri*. It is a part of the Seven Responses project and was performed by members of The Crossing, the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), and the early music ensemble Quicksilver, alongside the complete Buxtehude and new works by six other composers.

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*To the Hands* begins inside the 17th century sound of Buxtehude. It expands and colors and breaks this language, as the piece's core considerations, of the suffering of those around the world seeking refuge, and of our role and responsibility in these global and local crises, gradually come into focus.

The prelude turns the tune of *Ad manus* into a wordless plainchant melody, punctured later by the strings' introduction of an unsettling pattern. The second movement fragments Buxtehude's choral setting of the central question, "*quid sunt plagae istae in medio manuum tuarum,*" or "what are these wounds in the midst of your hands." It settles finally on an inversion of the question, so that we reflect, "What are these wounds in the midst of our hands?" We notice what may have been done to us, but we also question what we have done and what our role has been in these wounds we see before us.

The text that follows in the third movement is a riff on Emma Lazarus' sonnet *The New Colossus*, famous for its engraving at the base of the Statue of Liberty. The poem's lines "Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" and its reference to the statue's "beacon-hand" present a very different image of a hand — one that is open, beckoning, and strong. No wounds are to be found there — only comfort for those caught in a dangerous and complex environment. While third movement operates in broad strokes from a distance, the fourth zooms in on the map so far that we see the intimate scene of an old woman in her home, maybe setting the table for dinner alone. Who is she, where has she been, whose lives has she left? This simple image melts into a meditation on the words *in caverna* from the Song of Solomon, found in Buxtehude's fourth section, *Ad latus*.

In the fifth movement the harmony is passed around from one string instrument to another, overlapping only briefly, while numerical figures are spoken by the choir. These are global figures of internally displaced persons, by country, sourced from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) data reported in May 2015 (accessed on 20/03/2016 at [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org)). Sometimes data is the cruelest and most honest poetry.

The sixth and final movement unfolds the words *in caverna* into the tumbling and comforting promise of "ever ever" — "ever ever will I hold you, ever ever will I enfold you". They could be the words of Christ, or of a parent or friend or lover, or even of a nation.