

# Parting Shot: Sublime and infinite

By **Pia de Jong** - December 26, 2017



*The Dutch Chamber Choir*

I had forgotten how cold New York can be. The bitter wind cuts into my face and slices through my thin coat and sweater. A father tugs a woolen hat with a fur pom pom tightly over the ears of a baby snuggled in the sling against his chest. A teenage girl in a leotard hops from one leg to another while waiting for the traffic light to change.

I am on my way to the atrium of the New York Ethical Culture Society to hear Lincoln Center's White Light Festival performance of 150 Psalms. It is a week of choral concerts of only psalms. Tonight the Dutch Chamber Choir will perform 12 lamentations.

Inside, the room is as warm and toasty as a church. Pews are in a semicircle, and above our heads floats a chandelier that throws shadows along the walls. As I sit down, I nod to the older man next to me. He does not seem to notice me.

Strikingly, many people sit alone, apart from one another. This is a completely different atmosphere from the opera, just a few doors away in Lincoln Center, where people come to be seen as well as to watch.

Then the singers, all dressed in black, file onto the stage. Immediately their voices swell and fill every corner of the bare space, every crack in the wall, every crack in the ceiling. The psalms tell about mankind in all its smallness. Threatened by evil, full of soul pain, feeling guilty, overwhelmed by fear of the end. Their plea is to turn to the superhuman, the divine, which, we are told, holds the keys to our salvation.

In one week all 150 psalms will be performed. From 150 different composers, representing 1,000 years of choral music. The music varies from the 16th-century composer Adriaan Willaert to the contemporary Jean Berger. But in my head the psalms mix into one desperate lament. I am not alone in my vulnerable humanity. The gentleman next to me, sinking deeper and deeper in his inner world, is likewise moved.

A beautiful young soprano sings solo a psalm of Constantijn Huygens in her flawless voice. The music takes me back to my student days and to an image that has stayed with me ever since. It is the sound of water lapping against the shore in the poem of W.B. Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.  
Those words and this music together are sublime. They give me a hint of the infinite, just beyond my gaze.

Looking out of a small stained-glass window, I have a view of the cold night outside in New York, through which I will have to return on my way home again. The last psalm, “Lord, let me know mine end,” by Hubert Parry, does not seem to want to end. Every time I think I will hear the final notes, the song revives again, springs to life. A never-ending supplication against the inexorable end.

Tears are running down the cheeks of the man sitting next to me. He makes no effort to brush them away.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her bestselling memoir, “Charlotte,” was published in July, 2017, in the U.S. She can be contacted at [piadejong.com](http://piadejong.com).

**Pia de Jong**

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her bestselling memoir, “Charlotte,” was published in January in Amsterdam. She can be contacted at [piadejong.com](http://piadejong.com).