

Janet Oates

2020

## The Mortuary Chest

For solo speaker with a box

*Duration 2 ¼ minutes*

# Mortuary chest

Text by Janet Oates.

Inspired by the Mortuary boxes of Winchester Cathedral, this is an imaginative response to a more personal, metaphorical kind of bone-box that some people have in their lives.

An open-score version for choir was commissioned by Contemporary Music for All and published as part of the Choral Partsongs Project in 2020 by Peters Edition.

## Performance notes

The box could be on a table in front of the speaker, or it could be held in one arm/hand and played with the other, perhaps like a side-drum. It could be of any material and size, as long as you can produce the four different sounds (three levels of taps/knocks, and a scrape/scratch) clearly and audibly. The box might be meaningful to the performer, or it could be a supermarket cardboard box. It could be light or heavy; plain, or the performer may have painted it or written all over it. It may be empty, or full of rubbish, or hold something important to the speaker, or something broken.

Alternatively, the piece may be performed by three or more women together, each with their own box. They must speak in unison, using no effects (such as canon or whispering). They do not have to all speak every word, but the result should be to vary the texture, not to 'share out' the lines or 'take turns'. Similarly, not every performer needs to perform every bar of box-noise, but apart from bars 29-32, the box-noises must be in unison.

For you have disordered my bones.  
My organs too have been pummelled and bruised.  
My skin, still glistening with effort,  
You flayed and stripped,  
Meticulously, thin line by thin line by thin line,  
And hung it up to dry.

My thoughts, my little scraps, you flung about,  
Causality and consequence dismissed,  
An Escher-land circling ever inward.

I cannot identify myself  
The pieces do not fit

And  
Anyway

There is no key

# The Mortuary Chest

words and music  
Janet Oates

*Speak always with a slow, spacious, un-heightened speech, not rhythmical or trying to 'fit' with the box rhythms. Do not speed up speech when tapping tempos change. Bars and barlines are there just to give a sense of order. Dashed vertical lines indicate moments of co-ordination. Silences - even short ones - do not have to be counted accurately.*

♩ = 84

Voice

(unaccented - do not ever emphasise 'bars'.)

box

tap on box with fingernail or fingertip

5

For you have disordered my bones.

continue in time.

10

My organs too have been pummelled and bruised. My skin,

13

glistening with effort, you flayed and stripped,

15 meticulously, thin line by thin line by thin line,

*a swift scratch or scrape on the box*

18 and hung it up to dry. My thoughts, my little scraps,

♩ = 108

*swirly-scrape with fingernails.* *knocking, a tempo in new speed; do not change speech tempo*

23 you flung about, Causality and consequence dismissed, an Escher-land

28 circling ever inward.

*free tempo- little groups of irregular number and tempo. The written dots are guide ideas only.*

31 I cannot identify myself. The pieces do not fit

33

And, anyway,

36 ♩ = 60

There is no key.

*f* Knocking a tempo, now loud and heavy, perhaps with a fist.  
Again, speech does not change tempo to fit new knocking tempo.

41

*ff*

44

*fff*