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ABSTRACT
The internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II caused the suffering and fragmentation of many families. One internee, Mary T. Matsuzawa, authored a prayerful poem entitled “My Plea” that I see as expressing her thoughts on freedom, equality, and servitude as a “cross-bearer” for the Japanese-American people. Musical imagery, text painting, and historical context are used to craft a choral setting of Matsuzawa’s poem, scored for SATB mixed choir and cello. The purpose of this work is both to draw attention to the Japanese-American internment and to portray Matsuzawa’s suffering and longing while displaying the hope and comfort she had as a result of her faith in God.

METHODOLOGY

Research of Historical Background
Prior to composing, I studied historical context. Matsuzawa lived in Pasadena, California, but was interned in Gila River War Relocation Center in Rivers, Arizona. She attended the center’s Butte High School. Her poem was published, with poems by others from this school, in the collection Cactus Blossoms 1945. Although Gila was one of the less-oppressive internment camps, having for examples only a single watchtower and no barbed wire, overcrowding and harsh desert climates caused water shortages and heatstroke/hypothermia. Other concerns included exposure to poisonous wildlife such as rattlesnakes and scorpions. Knowledge of these conditions was important in guiding my interpretation of Matsuzawa’s poem and ultimately served as a foundation upon which I shaped the musical atmosphere.

Analysis of Poem Text/Mapping Keywords for Musical Imagery
Following background study, I examined the poem for meaning and keywords (as boldfaced below). These elements served as bases for developing musical ideas that effectively could illustrate the text.

Oh God, I pray that I may bear a cross
To set my people free,
That I may help to take good-will across
An understanding sea.
Oh, God, I pray that someday every race
May stand on equal plane
And prejudice will find no dwelling place
In a peace that all may gain.