

BABYLON, THE "GATE OF THE GODS", IN THE SYMBOLIC REALM OF TRE PREGHIERE DI NABUCCODURISSOR FOR GUITAR

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Abstract: *Babylon is situated on the River Euphrates, approximately thirty kilometers south of Baghdad, the capital of modern Iraq [1]. The ancient city was located at the centre of a magnificent plantation of palms and was endowed with a permanent water supply [2]. Furthermore, it was very favourably situated on the trade route and the main highway from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean [3]. In view of these almost ideal economic conditions, it is not surprising that Babylon's destiny should have been taken for granted [4]. An ancient map of the world incised on a clay tablet now held in the British Museum, shows Babylon its centre [5].*

Key words: *world map, ancient city, economic conditions, clay tablet.*

The earliest reference to Babylon occurs in a text of the Akkadian King Shargalisharri (circa 2350 BC), in the Sumerian form *Ka-dingir* (the gate of god) [6], the Akkadian translation of which is *Bâb-ilu*, with the same meaning [7]. Whether this denoted the place of entry into the deity's presence, or even the gate as the place of divine judgement, or both, is uncertain [8]. Subsequently, the plural form, *Bâb-ilâni* (the gate of the gods) appeared. This became the origin of the modern name of Babylon [9]. The first archaeological traces of Babylon date only from the first dynasty (1900-1600 BC), however, it is possible that the city was built much earlier, by the Sumerians [10]. Up until the foundation of the First

Dynasty (1894-1595 BC), Babylon had made no mark on the history of Mesopotamia, although there is evidence that it was regarded as an important religious centre [11]. However, under the Amorite King Hammurapi (1792-1750 BC), the author of the famous Law Code stele, Babylon became the established seat of kingship, and gave its name—Babylonia—to the whole of Sumer and Akkad [12].

The sacking of Babylon by the Hittites in 1595 BC brought an end to the First Dynasty of Babylon, after which it was subjected to the rule of various foreign powers, including the Kassites, Arameans and Assyrians [13]. However, despite its subjugation to foreign powers, and its destruction by the Assyrian King

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Sennacherib in 689 BC, Babylon's dominant position was never lost [14]. All who controlled it accorded it respect as the ancient foundation—'the eternal city'—which had earlier become the traditional capital [15]. It was this concept of Babylon as the 'eternal city' which served as the initial source of poetic impetus for my composition *Wonders of Babylon*, for trombone and wind orchestra [16].

The second golden age of Babylonian history began after the Assyrian empire was destroyed by the Medians, in collaboration with the Babylonians, in 614 BLOCUL DE CALIBRARE [17]. During this period Babylon was ruled by King Nabopolassar (625-605 BC), father of King Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 BC) and founder of the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Dynasty (625-539 BC) [18]. It was during the reigns of these two kings, especially of Nebuchadnezzar II, that Babylon reached the pinnacle of her glory [19]. Not only did they restore the city to its ancient splendour, they raised the entire region of Babylonia from the desolation into which it had fallen [20]. The Babylon visible to the tourist today is largely the work of these two kings [21]. Furthermore, most of the monuments preserved are those of Nebuchadnezzar II [22], during whose reign Babylon achieved the architectural pre-eminence for which it is renowned [23]. It was my vision of Nebuchadnezzar's [24] Babylon, which became the most important source of inspiration for *Wonders of Babylon*.

Is not this the great Babylon
which I have built as the royal
residence by my mighty power
and for the glory of my majesty?
[25]

Nebuchadnezzar's main claim, as echoed in the Biblical records, was to have made the cult-centre of Babylon a 'wonder.' [26]

In his own inscriptions, he relates, in loving detail, the progress of his new capital, which, according to both archaeological and textual evidence, justified his pride [27]. *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor* (Three Prayers of Nebuchadnezzar) [28], for solo guitar, was inspired by translations of prayers from three such inscriptions [29]. Nebuchadnezzar composed these prayers to commemorate the construction of a processional street, and the reconstruction of a palace and temple, respectively [30]. As such, they fall into the literary category of *monumental texts*, according to the linguistic groups of cuneiform literature established by William J. Hallo and William K. Simpson [31]. In his introduction to the translations of these prayers, Benjamin Read Foster says that they reflect the great piety and reverence of the successful, energetic king [32]. It was these qualities that I wished to portray in *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor*.

The first of these three prayers is addressed to Marduk, the tutelary deity of Babylon, and is taken from an inscription commemorating the construction of a processional street in Babylon [33].

O Nabu and Marduk, as you go
joyfully in procession through
these streets, may words
favourable of me be upon your
lips. As I proceed before you
within the (se streets), may I live
a life enduring till distant days, in
good health and [satisfac]tion
forever [34].

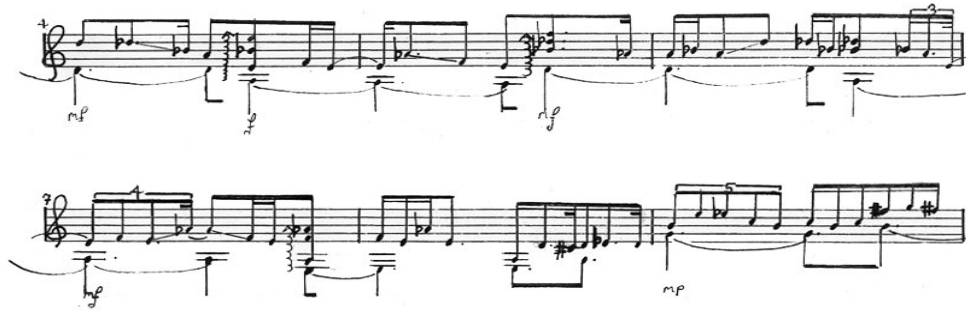
As a symbolic reference to the joyful procession mentioned in this prayer, I based the first and last sections (mm1-35 & mm98-105) of *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor* (mm4-9 cited below) on the opening melody of "La Via Processionale" ("The Processional Way")

– the first movement of *Wonders of Babylon*. This movement was named after the famous “Processional Way” of Babylon, along which the images of the gods were carried during the New Year’s Festival [35].

Opening melody of of "La Via Processionale"



(i) *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor* mm4-9



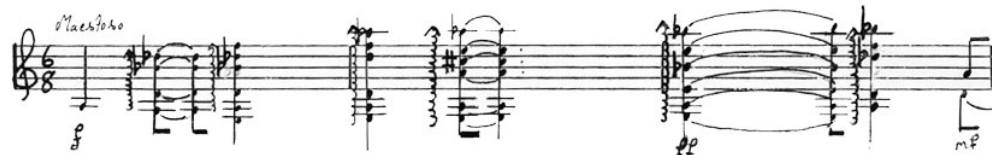
The second prayer, also addressed to Marduk, is taken from an inscription commemorating Nebuchadrezzar’s reconstruction of the old palace and construction of a new one at Babylon [36].

What is there besides you, my lord? You have promoted the reputation and vouchsafed an honourable career to the king you love, whose name you pronounce, who is pleasing to you. I am the prince whom you preferred, your handiwork. It was you who created me and vouchsafed me kingship over all peoples. According to your favour, O lord, which

you are always ready to bestow upon all of them, make your sublime lordship merciful upon me, instil in my heart reverence for your divinity, grant me what you please that you sustain my life [37].

The following series of chords, which recurs in varied forms throughout *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor*, is intended to recall my vision of the palaces commemorated in the second prayer. This series is also intended to symbolise Nebuchadrezzar’s personal majesty, reverence and piety, as reflected in this prayer.

Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor series of chords



My vision of the majesty, success and piety of Nebuchadrezzar also finds symbolic expression in the last section of *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor* (mm98-105), which, I have been told, bears resemblance to renaissance court music [38].

The third prayer referred to in *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor* is taken from an inscription commemorating Nebuchadrezzar's reconstruction of the temple of Ninmah, the birth goddess, in Babylon [39].

O Ninmah, merciful mother, look joyfully! May words in my favour be upon your lips. Multiply my descent, make numerous my posterity, administer in safety childbirth among my descendant [40]. This prayer inspired me to allude to

the ideas of fertility, and abundant posterity in mm49-60 of *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor*. These measures are dominated by sixteenth notes and harmonics, which are intended to symbolise "abundant posterity". Conscious allusions to fertility and abundance are also encountered in mm89-94, which recall the melodic material of my cello solo *al-Kauthar* (the Abundance)—a composition replete with symbolic references to profusion and abundant prosperity.

The melodic material in mm37-55 and mm73-80 of *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor* is based on an original Babylonian Jewish lamentation [41].

Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor Babylonian Lamentation

Babylonian Lamentation 1

The musical score for "Babylonian Lamentation 1" is presented in three systems. The first system consists of two staves of music in 3/4 time, featuring a melodic line in the upper staff and a harmonic accompaniment in the lower staff. The second system is a more detailed score for a cello, with a tempo marking of ♩ = 84 and a dynamic of *mf*. It includes a handwritten note: "Lowest string tuned to 2(Cre) instead of 4(mi)". The third system continues the cello part with dynamics ranging from *mf* to *mp*.

The lamentation which forms the basis of the above example is intended as a symbolic reference to Nebuchadrezzar's destruction of Jerusalem, and his carrying off of the Jewish people into exile in 597 BC [42]. This Jewish lamentation was also intended to refer to the Jewish prophet Daniel, who, during his exile in Babylon, became Nebuchadrezzar's most favoured adviser [43]. This Babylonian lamentation is also included in my orchestral composition, *An Orientalist in Palestine*, which, like *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriusso*, does not incorporate processes involving numerical axes of inversion, nor any other procedures related to number symbolism.

A piece from which I derived considerable inspiration while composing *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriusso* was the piano composition *Voices in Stone*, by Canadian composer, Elma Miller [44]. Unlike *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriusso*, *Voices in Stone* drew poetic impetus from the actual appearance of cuneiform script:

Voices in Stone was inspired by the actual appearance of the cuneiform script. It seemed to me to appear like musical notation. That it took over a thousand years to learn and understand what it says could be compared to the parting of the veil of music to those who wish to 'understand music'; there is a parallel [45].

The symbolic dimension of *Voices in Stone* draws on the cuneiform inscription which King Darius I caused to be carved into the mountain face at Bagastana, during his reign from 521-489 BC [46]. The music mirrors the three periods of the inscription (cited below): first the carving into stone, then civil war, chaos and twenty centuries of oblivion until, finally, the moment in time when the script could again be read [47].

I am Daaryavush the King,
the great King,
King of Kings...

King Daaryavush proclaims:

Ye who in future pass and see
this inscription
writ with hammer on the cliff...
Efface and destroy nothing!
As long as posterity endures
preserve them intact [48].

Like the inscriptions from which the three prayers referred to in *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriusso* were taken, this monumental text was intended to glorify the memory of a king for posterity [49]. However, unlike the prayers of Nebuchadrezzar, there is no trace of humility, or piety in Darius' inscription. It was the combination of self-glorification and humble devotion in the face of the divine, which I found so inspiring, as well as attractive, in Nebuchadrezzar's prayers. This is what ultimately inspired me to compose *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriusso*.

Notes

- [1] Parrot, André. *Babylon and the Old Testament*. Translated by B.E. Hook. Studies In Biblical Archaeology, no.8.London: SCM Press, 1956. p15
- [2] *Ibid*.
- [3] *Ibid*.
- [4] *Ibid*
- [5] *Ibid*
- [6] *Ibid*. pp15-16
- [7] However, it is now believed that this Akkadian name was derived from an earlier name, *Babil*, the meaning of which is unclear. See: Oates, John. *Babylon*. Ancient People and Places, vol. 94, edited by Glyn Daniel. London: Thames and Hudson, 1986. p. 60
- [8] Wiseman D. J. *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. p44
- [9] Oates, John. *Babylon*. Ancient People and Places vol. 94, edited by Glyn Daniel. London: Thames and Hudson, 1986. p60
- [10] Parrot, André. *Op. Cit.* pp68-69
- [11] Oates, Joan. *Op. Cit.* p60
- [12] *Ibid*.
- [13] Parrot, André. *Op. Cit.* pp72-77
- [14] Wiseman D. J. *Op. Cit.*

- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] *Wonders of Babylon* was requested by Dr. James Michael Bicigo, for performance by Dr. Bicigo and the Michigan New Music Ensemble, at Michigan State University (USA). Dr Bicigo performed excerpts of the trombone soloist's part of *Wonders of Babylon* at the Hawaii International Conference of the Arts and Humanities, January 12-15, 2003.
- [17] Oates, Joan. *Op. Cit.* pp126-128
- [18] Parrot, André. *Op. Cit.* p80
- [19] *Ibid.*
- [20] *Ibid.*
- [21] Oates, Joan. *Op. Cit.* p144
- [22] The Hebrew form of the name is used here; the Babylonian form is *Nabukudurri-usur* (Nabu guards my landmark) the Latin transcription of which is Nabuchodonosor, to which the biblical name Nebuchadnezzar is related. See: Parrot, André. *Op. Cit.* p87. ff
- [23] Oates, Joan. *Op. Cit.* p144
- [24] "Nebuchadrezzar" should henceforth be understood as referring to King Nebuchadrezzar II.
- [25] *The Holy Bible* (Revised Standard Version, Catholic Study Edition)
- [26] Wiseman D. J. *Op. Cit.* p64
- [27] *Ibid.*
- [28] *Tre Preghiere di Nabuccoduriussor* was requested by Italian guitarist Giovanni Pattavina. It received its world premier performance on 28th September 2001, at the Great Hall, University House (Australian National University), performed by Luke Tierney. It received its Italian premiere, performed by Giovanni Pattavina, on 9 June 2002, at the Santuario dell'Oliveto, Chiusavecchia, Liguria, as part of the festival *Chitarra Imperia: Seminari e Festival di Primavera*, Imperia, Liguria. Pattavina also performed it in concerts in Columbus, USA, in February 2003. *Tre Preghiere...* was also performed in several concerts in Brazil, by Brazilian guitarist, Arnaldo Freire, in January, March, April and May 2004. *Tre Preghiere...* received its Russian premiere on June 24 2006, at the Palace of the Saint-Petersburg Composers' Association, Bolshaya Morskaya, 45, performed by composer/guitarist Sergei Ilyin, of St. Petersburg. The score of *Tre Preghiere...* is available for purchase at the Australian Music Centre and is also held in several Australian and international libraries. A recording of the work is included the compact disc entitled *Katia Tiutiunnik: Concert of Solo and Chamber Works*, released by CENART.NET in 2006. An MP3 recording of it can be listened to at www.reverbnation.com/katiatiutiunnikcomposer
- [29] Hallo, William W. and William Kelly Simpson. *The Ancient Near East: A History*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971. p155
- [30] Foster, Benjamin Read. *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia*. Bethesda, Md: CDL Press, c1995. p283
- [31] Hallo, William W and William Kelly Simpson. *Op. Cit.*
- [32] Foster, Benjamin Read. *Op. Cit.*
- [33] *Ibid.* p284
- [34] *Ibid.*
- [35] Oates, Joan. *Op. Cit.* p152
- [36] Foster, Benjamin Read. *Op. Cit.* p283
- [37] *Ibid.*
- [38] Personal communication with Luke Tierney, 28th September 2001.
- [39] Foster, Benjamin Read. *Op. Cit.* p284
- [40] *Ibid.*
- [41] All original Arab, Jewish and Greek melodies used in this thesis are variations of those found in Idelsohn, A. Z. *Jewish Music: In Its Historical Development*. New York: Schocken Books
- [42] Postgate, Nicholas. *The First Empires*. Lausanne: Elsevier Publishing, 1997. p134
- [43] *The Holy Bible* [Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition]. Daniel 4:1-4
- [44] Miller, Elma. *Voices In Stone*. Facsimile score held at the Canadian Music Centre, 1995 (revised 1998).
- [45] Email communication with Elma Miller, 14th November 2000.
- [46] Miller, Elma. Programme Note to *Voices In Stone*. Facsimile score held at the Canadian Music Centre, 1995 (rev 1998).
- [47] *Ibid.*
- [48] *Ibid.*
- [49] Hallo, William W. and William Kelly Simpson. *Op. Cit.*