

## David Lang: The Writings album review — emotion, poetry, tenderness

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Six movements are inspired by texts from the Hebrew Bible and sung with precision by Cappella Amsterdam



Richard Fairman

It has taken David Lang 14 years to complete his unaccompanied choral work *The Writings*. He says the spur came from setting a few lines from the Book of Ecclesiastes in 2005, wondering how such a dark and philosophical text had come to be associated with the joyous Jewish harvest festival of Sukkot.

That set him thinking about other books from the Hebrew Bible that had become associated with particular holidays, in particular the part of the Bible called “The Writings”. The texts that interested him were those that focused on what is human in us and universal. They offer, he says, “a catalogue of human emotions, repeating endlessly, year after year”.

*The Writings* had its premiere at Zankel Hall, New York, in 2019. This is its first recording and it gets an exemplary performance, sung with high-quality balance and precision by Cappella Amsterdam, conducted by Daniel Reuss.

At 65, Lang, co-founder of new music ensemble Bang on a Can, belongs to the generation that has followed the American minimalists. His music for *The Writings* is very disciplined, with repetition much in evidence, but the result reaches beyond the hypnotic zone of the minimalists.

Each of the six movements starts out proposing a simple root idea, as if setting an algebraic test, but out of these musical formulas emerge emotion, poetry, tenderness, and a profound concentration. Some of the driest biblical texts resist, but the rest flower when set to Lang’s music. Choral groups with sufficient expertise should think of investigating them.

★★★★☆

*David Lang: The Writings* is released by Pentatone

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