

PSALM CXXXVII

a metrical paraphrase

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MEDITATION L.M. pentatonic scale on *re* throughout *The Southern Harmony*, 1835



1 By dis - tant wa - ters, sad, a - lone, I sat and wept, and thought of home.
2 Then pass - ing stran-gers stared, and said: "Who are you, and where are you from?"
3 If I for - get from whence I came, then let my hands lose all their skill,



4 Con - si - der, Lord, the scorn of them who storm your house with sword or pen.
doxology 5 Some-how you suf - fered, yet for - gave; I live be - cause you con- quered death,



1 My thoughts re-spired, as though a breeze would scat - ter them a - mong the trees.
2 Where do I look to seek my God, when I do not know where I am?
3 My tongue be numb, my mouth grow dumb, if what I love be - come self-will.



4 Some-times it is hard not to hate them all for all that they have done.
doxology 5 kind God whom none can un - der-stand, whom I will praise with my last breath.



Metrical psalters, i.e. psalms arranged in poetic form for congregational singing, have been commonly used in the Christian West since the 16th century. This version of Psalm 137 is offered as a contemporary example of metrical psalmody, and with a more immediate, personal voice. In Christian practice, a doxology ("Glory be...") is customary at the conclusion of a psalm.

The melody (*Meditation*) belongs to an outpouring of popular hymnody during the American Frontier Revival in the early 19th century. The setting is also characteristic of that genre, being polyphonic and quartal, qualities shared with certain Medieval polyphony. Indeed, this piece is altogether pentatonic, as the second and sixth intervals (microtones) are absent in all three parts, thus making the tonic *re*.

The original settings are preserved in a genre of hymnals called "shape-note", which use a distinctive notation that can appear exotic to singers trained in common-practice. With some modifications, certain of these books have continued to be sung in parts of the American South, a tradition now extended globally. Although the old modal melodies are currently *en vogue*, their original settings are equally deserving of interest. Both are remarkably archaic in character, and both often possess spiritual depth as well as a distinctive charm.

NOTE: the old settings often have three parts rather than four (the alto is lacking), and place the melody in the tenor (middle part). Frequent voice-crossing can make transposition into conventional SATB format awkward. Voice mixing is customary in the tenor (melody), and lends to the ethereal, Medieval sound. — D.G.J.