

Credo in Unum Tonum

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, APRIL 17, 2001 AT 4 A.M.

It's odd, isn't it, that we so easily identify a certain type of music as "spiritual." Spiritual music is slow, or at least slowly changing, yet vibrant in energy, with a lot of high register, mostly consonant though riddled with sustained, poignantly resolved dissonances. And yet surely nothing could be more culture-relative. Haydn's Catholicism was apparently devout, but his masses have always seemed to me rigorously secular, as rationalist and logical as any proof by Leibniz.

In the decades since Cage's book *Silence*, American composers, at least the ones well-known outside the choral-music world, have favored Asian paradigms for spiritual music. Gone are the iconic images, the heavy-handed and instantly recognized motifs drawn from liturgical chant, that formed the European sonic parallel to painterly conventions used to depict the crucifixion, the annunciation, and so on. Instead we have a spiritual aesthetic of no-mind music, sound for meditation, walls of acoustic phenomena in which individual figures are not to be distinguished. It's a neo-Renaissance notion, a river of tone, but in which no detail springs out to occupy the conscious attention and provoke thought or recognition. The music insulates the listener from the outside world, leaving his soul in Zenlike meditation.

Of course, not all composers have converged on this view, and that's what gave the March 30 "Beyond Words" concert, organized by Theodore Wiprud at the Church of the Ascension, its intellectual zing. Bringing together works that expressed faith without words, this was as non-New York a concert as I'd heard in years—quiet, meditative, sans applause, the pieces linked via narration by NPR's Ellen Kushner—and it traveled a cross-continental range of spiritualities. Some composers, it revealed, are still quite involved in Western spirituality, including Wiprud himself, apparently; in a preconcert interview, he mentioned in explanation of his piece that "Christ is the model that spirit and flesh are one, that holiness is with us now."

And so at the Western extreme we had, played by the Flux String Quartet, James MacMillan's *Why Is This Night Different?*—ironically enough, a work on a Jewish theme by a Scottish Catholic. This was the most melodramatic piece in its narrative, the first violin's shudders sending waves of anxiety through the ensemble, and that anxiety contrasted with the calm of luminous chords in harmonics. You could ponder the picture drawn, but there was no meditating to such tortured textures. Next to it was Wiprud's own *Intimations and Incarnations*, whose gestures evolved

almost minimalistically, but in a tensely dissonant idiom, illuminated literally and figuratively by a spotlight on the church's painting of Christ ascending.

Poised at the fulcrum was *The Last Sleep of the Virgin* by John Tavener, British but famous for his conversion to the Eastern Orthodox Church. This piece for string quartet and handbells (Michael Lipsey playing the latter) was written, so the program assured us, during a life-threatening illness, and indeed the piece sounded remarkably frail. The Flux people—whose tireless and fearless activities, I should remark, have brought a new renaissance to quartet music in New York—played from the balcony in hushed quiet and in chords sometimes delicately trilled, sometimes sustained. The melodies seemed based in chant, albeit remarkably chromatic at times, wandering in insouciant dissonance.

It took the American West-Coasters, Janice Giteck and John Luther Adams, to give us the Eastern view. Violist Kenji Bunch and marimba player Frank Cassara played Giteck's *Tapasya*, a mixture of modal drones and ostinatos in which the viola and mallet percussion kept smoothly changing roles. This was reverently nondramatic, but Adams's *In a Treeless Place, Only Snow* withdrew even further into interiority. Its ensemble of string quartet, vibraphones (Lipsey and Dominic Donato), celesta (Jeanne Golan), and harp (Paul Stickney) built up repeating melodies into a featureless continuum whose only structural differentiation was that it would occasionally slim down to a solo instrument before swelling back up again.

Adams's piece beautifully achieved the post-Cage aim of encouraging a spiritual attitude in the listener, while MacMillan's somewhat Schoenbergian melodic rhetoric *depicted* a religious subject for our meditation; other works offered gradations in between. Can music elicit spiritual response? Can it depict the experiences on which faith is based? Assuming it can do either, which is more valuable? Or do we need both, at different times and for different religions? Such questions would be well worth pursuing in future, similar concerts.

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