

Death Stings

By Kyle Gann

Wendy Mae Chambers

Thomas Buckner

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine measures 124 feet from floor to ceiling, and encloses millions of cubic feet. In 1989 it took Wendy Mae Chambers 100 timpani to move that mass of air in her *Symphony of the Universe*. The number of trombones required? Seventy-seven, apparently, for that's the number she brought together June 19 for her *A Mass for Mass Trombones*, and it was sufficient. Premiered Father's Day eve, Chambers's Mass was a wordless requiem for her father, who died two years ago. The trombones were divided into 11 groups of seven, scattered around the cathedral, the front group including soloist Thomas Hutchinson. David Gilbert conducted the 11 groups via video monitor, a solution that allowed for remarkably good unison attacks between widely separated choirs.

If the conception was avant-garde, the plan was surprisingly traditional. Except for the lack of vocalists, Chambers followed a more Catholic design than any requiem since the Renaissance, for she based her nine movements strictly on the nine sections of the *Mass of the Dead* plainchant, and each movement quoted its corresponding chant. The Introit opened with mournful chords, the rests between them filled in by the cathedral's acoustics. Other move-

ments began with chant fragments echoed back and forth between choirs. The acoustics so softened spatial separation that the sound source seemed a continuous circle, as though the audience were inside a giant organism.

The mood alternated between Mahlerian despair and a bitter-sweet Roy Harris modality. The darker, odd-numbered movements recalled Mahler with downward strings of melodic thirds, dissonances that ignored their opportunities to resolve, and the soloist playing major sevenths over embittered minor chords. The milder, sololess, Harrisian movements shifted between major seventh chords with warm hints of bitonality. Now anguished, now sadly accepting, the piece evoked neither fire and brimstone nor triumphant redemption. The Dies Irae, quoting the 13th-century hymn beloved by composers from Berlioz to Duckworth, started out as the mellowest Dies Irae in the literature, taking on its characteristic threatening gloom only in a climax of feverish counterpoint.

You couldn't trust 77 trombones and St. John's to your average composer, trained in chamber music methods of pitch detail and contrapuntal intricacy. The cathedral's seven-second delay requires a Berliozian attention span and sense of pacing. (A woman near me tried unobtrusively to loosen her sandals between movements, only to hear the rip of the Velcro echo like a cannon shot.) Her name notwithstanding, Chambers

has a symphonic sensibility, a natural tendency to let music breathe. Although she subsumed effects to their mournful context, satisfying spatial moments were frequent. The Kyrie echoed descending fifths at various transpositions from group to group, the Dies Irae offered a single pitch crashing in successively from various directions, and the Offertory's half-step key shifts were nicely blurred by the acoustics.

As a requiem, what did the piece lack? Uplift. No fugue sang out "Hosanna in excelsis," no eternal light flared up in the "Lux aeterna," no "Libera me" offered hope of afterlife. Dark moments surrendered to no emotion brighter than sweet melancholy. This was not one of those academic requiems, as Shaw sneered, "offered as a sort of treat, whether anybody is dead or not." The grave had its victory, death retained its sting, and we took home no reconciling theodicy. The piece contained no glissandos (with 77 oiled slides awaiting!), no spatial *trompe d'oreille*, no exultant blasting back and forth, no climactic triads, none of the extravagant effects you'd be so tempted to experiment with if you succeeded in getting 77 trombones in one place. Unless the occasion were a requiem for your father.

New-music pessimists should have heard Thomas Buckner's May 13 recital at Merkin hall (also broadcast on WNYC as part of John Schaefer's "New Sounds" series). In an exhaustive virtuoso undertaking, Buckner commissioned six new works, sang six world premieres, and, thanks to the quality of either his choices or his inspiration, there wasn't a dog



SANDRA-LEE PHIPPS

There were no glissandos from the 77 trombones.

in the lot. David First drew bravos for the "Separation Chant" from his *Manhattan Book of the Dead*, a deeply spiritual work that had Buckner playing finger cymbals and singing slow glissandos with synthesizer in a rich fabric of nonsynchronous figures. William Duckworth's *Their Song*, with chance-selected texts from Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein, and others, flirted with Erik Satie's salon-chanson simplicity, though with typically Duckworthian jazz touches. Also vernacular was Henry Threadgill's *They Danced* with Tony Cedras on accordion, which sounded like an ethnic band playing all in different keys and beats.

Some had written with Buckner's voice in mind, particularly "Blue" Gene Tyranny, whose *The Isle of the Blue Rose-Apple Trees* moved through gorgeously slow Feldman-esque har-

monies. Buckner crooned the Tyranny and First vocalises in a powerful baritone, though his diction wasn't clean enough to bring out Duckworth's cute humor. Mouth sounds and glottal stops usually make my skin crawl, but in *A Distant Harmony (Phnom Penh Memories)* by journalist/composer Jaques Bekaert, the music's swelling phrases and Buckner's elegant delivery gave them unwonted charm. The best effect was from Peter Gena's folk-song-based *Joe Hill Fantasy*. "I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night/ Alive as you and me," trumpeted Buckner over a din of Gena's electronics, Tyranny's piano, and Douglas Ewart's reed improv. Then, as the performers exited one by one, the computer took over the piano and finished its own spooky jazz by itself, like Joe Hill's unrepentant ghost. ■

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