

The Devil, He Is Us

By Kyle Gann

Carman Moore

In his *Mass for the 21st Century*, Carman Moore fell into the same trap as Dante, Milton, Berlioz, Liszt, and every other artist who has dared paint heaven and hell on the same canvas: the Devil always has the best lines. Thanks to some quirk in human psychology, musical materials come out strange and multifaceted and spiky and wonderful when you try to suggest depravity, hubris, power-lust, and sin. But when you take a stab at harmony, well-being, peaceful resignation, and submission to a higher power, the music sort of rolls into nondescript A major and 6/8 meter, *daah-de-daah-de-dah-de-dè-daah*, as the audience desperately begins reading the lists of major contributors in the back of the program. That's the 19th century in a nutshell, and it should have indicated something profound about either Europe or Christianity that every opera and oratorio produced during that period made pacts with the Devil swing like a circus, while the angelic alternative paled by comparison. Without the Devil, there would be no 20th-century music.

Moore's devil was Man, not just a lone, tormented Faust, but all of us. The first half of *Mass for the 21st Century*, at Lincoln Center's Out-of-Doors festival August 11, detailed the harmful effects of Western man's rationalist materi-



Carman Moore conducting his *Mass for the 21st Century*

STEPHANIE BERGER/LINCOLN CENTER

alism. "I want that balloon," sang Manchild, and Mother Earth replied, "But Manchild, you already have that balloon." "But I want more of my balloon," Manchild insisted, bringing the rejoinder "But child, you have *all* of that balloon." The fact that this attitude augured no good didn't prevent the music of these opening sections from being propulsive, varied, and teeming with thorny personality. The extent of Manchild's screwup was dramatized by having the children's choir flee the stage in the first half, during a rap song called "The Future's on Fire." The second half, which put the adult soloists through enough musical therapy to realize the error of their ways, climaxed in a waltzlike gospel setting of the

23rd Psalm sung by Cissy Houston: emotionally sincere, stylistically authentic, but without the dissonances and rhythmic surprises that had riveted me in the first half. Musically, I started wishing Manchild had grabbed that balloon and raised Cain.

Thus my reading; the audience, however, had a different take. The opening choral "Gloria," a rousing fugue (you gotta love a composer with enough chutzpah to begin with a fugue in 1994), received a patter of polite hand claps. In the second half, though, "Hymn to the One and All," a sappy, sentimental pop song that I would gladly have missed, drew cheers and the first outburst of audience enthusiasm, subsequently topped only by Houston's 23rd

Psalm. Only afterward did I realize the genius with which Moore inverted the classical pattern. In older, European culture, hell was always identified with the vernacular, with jazz, drinking songs, and a snappy beat, while heaven was portrayed in fugues and majestic chorales. But Moore used his more classically modernist forms for man's hell-bent path. And he depicted man's return to sanity with gospel tunes, conventional and less distinctive, but (or therefore) easier for the audience to identify with. That inventive means of making spirituality musically attractive didn't work for intellectual, avant-garde, classically trained me, but it was pitched just right for most of the crowd. What a coup.

I don't want to review *Mass for the 21st Century* as a work yet: there were major performance goofs, acoustics are always screwy at outdoor gigs, three movements were cut, and it rained. I expect the piece to have tremendous impact at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine once its kinks are out. But I'm fascinated by Moore's bold attempt to reach out from the avant-garde/conservatory world in which he was nurtured and grab the masses. In a "Credo," Moore's Skymusic ensemble vamped softly while leaders from different religions alternated prayers in diverse spiritual veins. Musically, the mass was no less ecumenical. Over the course of a 21-movement oratorio, it took us from an abstract, Stravinskian, introductory fanfare to pure, clap-along gospel and back to a more classical finale, with a wailing Senegalese griot, fugal techniques, European waltzes, jazz, and modern dancers along the way. Yet the effect

wasn't that of a pastiche of quotations, for Moore's flexible musicianship managed to color the whole with a single sensibility.

In such a varied, emotionally ambitious work, you realize that the demands of art and the demands of a lay audience hardly overlap. In "Why Do We Rage So?" the tenor soloist held his climactic note for maybe 20 seconds. It was a patently unmusical effect that stuck out of the whole evening like a sore thumb—a triumph not even of vocal artistry, but of sheer air power—and that awful, gratuitous note garnered its own round of applause. In a society where Arnold Schwarzenegger has success as an actor, where the repetitive doodlings of New Age music sweep across America like wildfire, what position can the artist take with respect to a large audience? Do you write that lousy note in and whip up the crowd, or do you write a great fugue and leave them cold? It's hardly a new question, but in a democracy in which funding is tied to audience size, so that nonpandering works risk oblivion, it takes on new urgency.

Moore's answer was like Beethoven's: you do both, at different times. In fact, *Mass for the 21st Century* reminded me more than anything else of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, right down to its grandiose dramatic moments, its mixture of genres, its technical tours de force, its moments that seemed out of place in a mass, its unevenness of inspiration, and its occasional tendency to hit the listener on the head. The measure of the brilliance of Moore's technique is that he delighted both me and the audience—though never, of course, at the same time. ■