



Western
Music

Don Wright Faculty of Music

VISIONS DE L'AMEN

Monday, February 24, 2020

12:30 p.m., von Kuster Hall

Tina Yanchus and James Hibbard, *pianos*

Visions de L'Amen (1943, Paris)

Pour deux Pianos

Olivier Messiaen

(1908-1992)

Notes on 'Visions de L'Amen' by the composer:

Here, bringing to life the creatures who say Amen by the fact alone that they exist, I have tried to express the varied richness of Amen in 7 musical visions.

"Amen" assumes four different meanings:

- Amen, let it be! the act of creation
- Amen, I submit, I accept. Thy will be done!
- Amen, the wish, the desire, let it be, that you give yourself to me and I to you
- Amen, *it is*, all is fixed forever, consummated in Paradise

I Amen of the Creation

Amen, let it be! "God says: 'Let there be light', and there was light" (Genesis). The 1st piano plays a double-rhythm in imitation of a carillon, on non-retrogradable rhythms, augmented or diminished with each repetition. The 2nd piano states the 'Creation theme', which is the principal theme of the whole work: broad and solemn chords. The whole piece is a crescendo. It begins with an absolute pianissimo, in the mystery of that primeval nebula which already contains the light, all the bells that shimmer in this light - light and therefore life.

II Amen of the stars, of the ringed planet

Brutal and savage dance. The stars, the suns, and Saturn, the planet of multi-coloured rings spiral violently. "God calls them and they say: 'Amen, we are here'" (Book of Baruch). – The 2nd piano states the theme of the dance of the planets. First development: under a polymodal spiraling by the 1st piano, the 2nd piano varies the rhythm and changes the register by sudden leaps of the first 5 notes of the theme. Second development: the beginning of the theme, by elimination, contrary and similar motion. The third development layers together: in the 1st piano: the beginning of the theme in rhythmic pedal; in the 2nd piano: the beginning of the theme with register changes. Then a varied repetition of the dance of the planets. All these blended movements evoke the life of the planets and the astonishing rainbow which colours the spinning rings of Saturn.

III Amen of the agony of Jesus

Jesus suffers and cries: "Father, if this cup may not pass unless I drink of it, then Thy will be done, and not Mine" (Gospel according to Saint Matthew). He accepts, that Thy will be done, Amen. – Jesus is alone in the Garden of Olives, face to face with his agony. Three musical motifs: 1) the Father's curse on the sin of the world which Jesus symbolizes at this moment; 2) a cry, a group of notes both rhythmic and expressive: "anacrusis-emphasis-resolution"; 3) an agonizing lamentation on 4 notes, in contrasted rhythms. – Then, an evocation of the theme of the Creation. A long silence, interrupted by some pulsations evokes the suffering of the hour; unspeakable suffering, which expresses somewhat the perspiration of blood.

IV Amen of Desire

Two themes of desire. The first, slow, ecstatic, yearning for a profound tenderness: already the calm fragrance of Paradise. The second, extremely passionate; the soul here is drawn in by a terrible love that expresses itself in a carnal fashion (see the "Song of Songs"); but there is nothing carnal here, only an outburst of the thirst for Love. – A great calming of the 1st theme to end. The two principal voices seem to merge one into the other, and there is nothing left but the harmonious silence of Heaven.

V Amen of the Angels, the Saints, the song of the birds

Song of the purity of the Saints: Amen. Ardent vocalization of the birds: Amen. "Angels prostrate themselves before the Throne: Amen". (Apocalypse of Saint John).

First the song of the angels and the saints, plain, and pure. Then "center" on the song of birds, giving rise to a more brilliant piano writing. These are the actual songs of nightingales, blackbirds, finches, warblers, and their wild and happy mixture. Repetition of the song of the Saints, with a canon in non-retrogradable rhythms, in three tiers. Brief coda on the birds.

VI Amen of the Judgement

Three icy notes like a summoning to judgement. In truth, I say to you, Amen. "Get thee behind me, Satan!" (Gospel according to Saint Matthew). The damned are fixed in their state. The piece is intentionally harsh and brief.

VII Amen of the Consummation

Consummation, Paradise. Life of the glorious bodies in carillons of light. "From light to light", (Book of Proverbs). Amen – The 2nd piano restates in chords the Creation theme and expands it into a long hymn of glory. The 1st piano surrounds the 2nd (in extremely weighty and extremely shrill registers together) with a constant carillon of chords and brilliant rhythms, sparkling, in rhythmic canons more and more compact: precious stones of the Apocalypse that ring, shock, dance, colour and perfume the light of Life.

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