Cambridge Opera Journal, **15**, 2, 109–126
DOI: 10.1017/S0954586703001654

Sacred entertainments

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Ever since the cultural watershed of the 1960s, predictions of the imminent demise of classical music, especially in America, have been rife. Its audience, undermined by the precipitate decline in public music education and decimated by defections to pop (respectable for aspiring intellectuals from the moment rock became British), was assumed to be aging, indeed dying off. Whether as a symptom of this process or as one of its causes, media coverage for classical music steadily and drastically diminished over the 1970s and 1980s (coinciding with the rise of serious pop coverage), as did the number of radio stations that offered it.

In the 1970s, classical music accounted for 20 per cent of record sales in Japan, its most avid market, 10 per cent in Western Europe, and 5 per cent in North America. As the medium of commercial recording switched in the mid-1980s from LP to CD, and the American market share for classical record sales stabilized at approximately 3 per cent (about the same as jazz, increasingly regarded and described as "America's classical music"), its status was relegated to that of a niche product, serving a tiny, closed-off clientele whose needs could be met with reissues rather than costly new recordings of standard repertory. Major symphony orchestras, especially in the United States, found themselves without recording contracts, with serious consequences for the incomes of their personnel. Major labels began concentrating on "crossover" projects, in which the most popular classical performers collaborated with artists from other walks of musical life in an effort to achieve sales that might transcend the limits of the classical niche. The huge fees such artists commanded virtually squeezed others out of the recording budget altogether. Classical music seemed irrevocably destined to become the culture industry's basket case.

The implications for composers seemed particularly grave, since this period of attrition had no effect on the numbers trained within the protected walls of the academy, which as always offered insulation, albeit temporary, from the vagaries of the market. The result was a vast overpopulation of composers, whose numbers swelled even as their outlets contracted. Their activity came ironically to resemble the sort of self-publication and self-promotion that was known in the declining Soviet Union (where it was a response to political rather than economic pressure) as samizdat. Their work met no measurable consumer demand and found little source of subsidy. Its main purpose became the securing of academic employment and promotion – another sort of niche – that enabled its creators to train the next generation of socially unsupported and unwanted composers, and so on in meaningless perpetuity.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, that pattern began unexpectedly to change, permitting the emergence of a composing élite – tiny, perhaps, but larger than ever

before – whose work was suddenly in demand, sought out by traditional performance organizations for performance at major venues, and who could in some cases live comfortably off their commissions and performance royalties without seeking academic employment. New York's Metropolitan Opera, for example, which had not presented a single première since the 1960s, commissioned four operas during this period, of which three achieved production. First, in 1991, came *The Ghosts of Versailles*, an opera by John Corigliano based on *La Mère coupable* (The Guilty Mother), the one remaining member of Beaumarchais' Figaro trilogy that had not already been turned into an operatic classic. The next year, on Columbus Day, the Met presented *The Voyage* by Philip Glass, which commemorated the 500th anniversary of the great explorer's arrival in the New World. Finally, there was John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*, first performed on New Year's Day, 2000, a period costume drama based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's jazz-age novel.

The Harbison work had been jointly commissioned by the Met and the Chicago Lyric Opera, thus insuring that it would have a life beyond its première production, and also giving the composer a chance to revise the opera on the basis of its reception, as was traditional in opera's heyday, but discouraged in the later twentieth century both by economic conditions and by the ideology of modernism. The Met and the Chicago Lyric also issued a tandem commission to William Bolcom for an opera based on Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge*, premièred in Chicago in 1999 and considerably revised for its New York production in 2002. Nor were these houses alone: the San Francisco Opera commissioned several works in the 1990s, including André Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, after Tennessee Williams's play, and Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, based on the memoir of Death Row prisoners by Sister Helen Prejean that had been already turned into a major Hollywood movie. Just how bankable a commodity the Met thought new opera might now become is indicated by the generous terms of its commissions – especially the one to Glass, who received $325,000. (Expenditures on the production approached $2 million.)

In part this seeming rebirth was a result of the changes wrought by "post-modernism" in the relative prestige of composing styles. Harbison had been trained as a serialist, and of course Glass was one of the founders, in the 1960s, of hardcore minimalism. Both had abandoned their earlier avant-garde positions and were now meeting in the vast moderate middleground called "neo-romanticism." And yet there had always been relatively "accessible" composers available for commissioning, including some specialists in vocal or theatrical genres like Ned Rorem or Hugo Weisgall, who had gone untapped by the major houses all during the 1970s and 1980s. It seemed that the new interest in opera had to do with new sources of money to support it. It was tied, that is, to the interests of new patrons.

The new interest in supporting classical composition in traditional "audience" genres affected the concert hall as well as the opera house. The most spectacular case, perhaps, was that of Corigliano's First Symphony (1989), first performed in 1990 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and later, internationally, by almost 100 others. Along with its lavish orchestration (including parts for virtuoso piano and cello soloists), its rhetorical intensity and its at times poignant use of collage, the symphony's topicality contributed to its success. A memorial to victims of the AIDS

epidemic, each of its four movements was dedicated to the memory of a deceased friend, and gave public expression to the composer's "feelings of loss, anger, and frustration," in alternation with "the bittersweet nostalgia of remembering."

So if the composer John Adams's "impression," voiced to an interviewer in November 2000, was a true one – namely, "that in terms of commissions there's never been a more bullish period in American history" than the 1990s – it is testimony to a new consensus among composers and their patrons that contemporary classical music can and should have the sort of topical relevance more usually found in popular culture, and that works relevant to the topical concerns of the contemporary cultural élite are the ones that will be (and should be) rewarded.[1]

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Adams was in a good position to know, having been among the most conspicuous beneficiaries of this dispensation. One of the moments that defined its emergence, in fact, took place in 1990, when the San Francisco opera rescinded a commission it had given to Hugo Weisgall for an opera on the "timeless" biblical story of Esther in favor of Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer*, a topical opera based on the killing by Palestinian terrorists of an American Jew on board the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* in 1985. *Klinghoffer* was the second opera Adams had composed in collaboration with the poet Alice Goodman and the director Peter Sellars. The first, *Nixon in China* (1987), was the work that originally stimulated the new wave of operatic commissions. Largely on the strength of Sellars' reputation as an operatic enfant terrible (known for topical updatings of familiar operas such as a *Don Giovanni* set in the New York slums, and a *Marriage of Figaro* set in a gaudy luxury apartment house often assumed to be Trump Tower), and on the assumption that it would satirize one of America's most controversial political figures, the opera had been jointly commissioned by four houses: the Houston Grand Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and the Netherlands Opera (or rather, by their corporate sponsors). Its four premières took place between November 1987 and June 1988.

The work confounded expectations by being cast not as a farce but as a heroic opera that turned the title character, as well as the Chinese leaders Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai, into mythical representatives of their countries – naively idealistic young America and ancient, visionary China. Adams's music, like that of Glass's *Voyage*, was set in what could be called a "postminimalist" style, in which the freely grouped and regrouped rapid pulses and arpeggios of minimalism, and interesting textures obtained by pitting different pulse patterns in counterpoint, were reconciled with a fairly conventional harmonic idiom, naturalistic vocal declamation, a neat number-opera format replete with entertaining choral and dance sequences, and frequent references to various styles of popular music. Adams gave his fairly standard orchestra a late twentieth-century, somewhat Steve-Reichian sonic edge by

[1] "In the Center of American Music" (interview with Frank J. Oteri conducted on 21 November 2000), *New Music Box*, no. 21 (vol. 2, no. 9): www.newmusicbox.org/first-person/jan01/5.html

replacing the bassoons with a quartet of saxophones, and by adding a pair of pianos and a keyboard sampler to the percussion section.

Nixon in China thus differed from most twentieth-century operas by reinvoking music's power of enchantment, surrounding figures from recent history with a "transcendent" aura that turned them into detemporalized, godlike figures. In particular, this characteristic set Adams's opera off from the topical operas or *Zeitopern* of the 1920s and 1930s, like Paul Hindemith's cynical *Neues vom Tage* or Ernst Krenek's jazzy *Jonny spielt auf*. Where in the disillusioned aftermath of World War I audiences enjoyed an operatic genre that debunked the myth of timeless art, in the super-affluent, triumphant post-Cold War decade audiences sought through art the monumentalization of their own historical experience.

The operatic mythologizing of Richard M. Nixon's signal diplomatic coup displeased a minority who objected to the way it helped turn memory away from the domestic scandal that ended his presidency. It disturbed others for the callow way it cast the bloody Chinese Communist dictatorship, fresh from the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, in an uncritical, heroic light. But the critical consensus that formed over the remaining years of the twentieth century seemed to favor the aesthetic eclipse of "mere" history or politics. The critic Alex Ross, writing in the *New Yorker*, went so far as to predict that "a century from now audiences will still be fascinated by this opera, and that some listeners will have to double-check the plot summary in order to remember who Richard Nixon was." Its value, like that of all great art, Ross implied, was independent of its relationship to external reality, and that value was its capacity to create spiritual archetypes.

And yet that very evaluation, that very assignment of values, was the product of an external reality. At a time of gross materialism and commercialism widely compared in America to the "Gilded Age" at the end of the previous century, classical music (Wagner then; Adams now) was being marketed for its powers of "uplift" to a guiltily affluent audience ("robber barons" then; "yuppies" now) eager to depict itself as humane. Peter Sellars, the mastermind behind both Adams–Goodman operas, made the claim quite forthrightly. "I think in this age of television and Hollywood film, if classical music is going to stick around, there'd better be a very good reason," he told an interviewer. Then, shifting bizarrely but characteristically into the language of commerce, he added, "we have to offer something that is not available otherwise. I think it is spiritual content, which is what's missing from the commercial culture that surrounds us."

This time, the subject under discussion was not an opera but a new collaboration by Sellars and Adams, and a more overtly religious one: a topically slanted nativity oratorio called *El Niño*, commissioned by another international consortium – Théâtre Chatelet (Paris), the San Francisco Symphony, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (New York), the Barbican Centre (London) and the British Broadcasting Corporation – and performed according to the terms of the commission in Paris, San Francisco, Berlin, New York and London between December 2000 and December 2001. *El Niño* was one of a number of works of flamboyant "spiritual content" commissioned and performed under prestigious auspices to solemnize the new millennium. Another, Philip Glass's Fifth Symphony, was (like

several of Mahler's symphonies, or the finale of Beethoven's Ninth) an oratorio in all but name, scored for five vocal soloists, mixed chorus, children's choir and orchestra. Its subtitle, "Requiem, Bardo, Nirmanakaya," pits the Latin title of the service for the dead (representing the world's past) against the Tibetan word for "in between" (as in the Tibetan Book of the Dead – Bardo Thodol – which describes the soul's journey after death) and the Sanskrit Mahayana Buddhist term for rebirth or bodily transformation (representing mankind's hoped-for future). The text draws on "a broad spectrum of many of the world's great 'wisdom' traditions," as the composer put it in a program note, translated from Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Hawaiian, Zuñi, Mayan, Bantu, and Bulu scriptures. The symphony was commissioned by the ASCII Corporation, a computer software company, for performance at the Salzburger Festspiele, Europe's most exclusive summer music festival.

Another example was the cycle of four Passions – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – that the German choral conductor Helmut Rilling, with the support of the city of Stuttgart and the publisher Hänssler Musikverlag, commissioned from a quartet of composers, one German (Wolfgang Rihm, who did Matthew) and three with conspicuously "multicultural" backgrounds, for première performances in Rilling's home city, to be followed by world tours. Mark went to Osvaldo Golijov, an Argentinian-born Jew residing in the United States, who assembled a lavish collage of Latin American, Afro-Cuban, and Jewish cantorial idioms and stole the show. Luke was assigned to Tan Dun, a Chinese composer trained at the Beijing Conservatory and Columbia University, who had demonstrated his suitability for the Passions project with a work entitled *Symphony 1997 (Heaven Earth Mankind)* for orchestra, children's chorus, an ensemble of Chinese temple bells, and a solo cello part written for Yo-Yo Ma, the Paris-born American cellist of Chinese descent who had been making a specialty of "crossover" undertakings involving repertoires as diverse as jazz, Appalachian folklore, and the classical music of Central Asia. John was assigned to Sofia Gubaidulina, a post-Soviet composer of actual Central Asian ("Tatar" or Mongolian) descent but living in Germany, whose predilection for religious subject matter had been considered a mark of political dissidence in the waning years of Soviet authority. The very fact that two of the composers chosen for the Passion project were not Christian – Golijov, for one, cheerfully admitting that it was only after receiving the commission that he looked into the New Testament for the first time – suggests that the impulse behind it was something other than religious in the customary or doctrinal sense of the word.

The Adams–Sellars oratorio was also of distinctly "multicultural" content. Its texts were drawn from the New Testament, the Apocrypha, the Wakefield Mystery Plays, and a Latin Hymn by Hildegard von Bingen, supplemented by modern poems by several Latin Americans, including the seventeenth-century Sister Juana Inès de la Cruz, the nineteenth-century Rubén Dario, the twentieth-century Gabriela Mistral, and, most prominently, Rosario Castellanos, who combined an artistic career with a diplomatic one, serving at the time of her death in 1974 as the Mexican ambassador to Israel. One of the oratorio's most striking moments was the juxtaposition, near the end, of the terse biblical account of the Slaughter of the

Innocents (Herod's massacre of all the children in Bethlehem to insure that the infant Jesus would not survive) with "Memorial de Tlatelolco" (Memorandum on Tlatelolco), a long poem by Castellanos sung by the soprano soloist with choral support, that furiously protests the violent police repression of a student demonstration that took place on 2 October 1968 at Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City, which more than four hundred years earlier had been the site of the last bloody confrontation between the Aztecs and the Spanish conquistadors led by Hernando Cortez.

The poem bears witness to a crime that went unreported at the time by the government-controlled Mexican press. Its inclusion in the oratorio text draws explicit parallels between religious observance, acts of political conscience or resistance, and the role of artists as keepers of public memory and conscience. (Golijov, too, made much of the fact that his *St. Mark Passion* celebrated the grass-roots efforts of Latin American "people's priests" rather than the "out of touch" doctrines of the hierarchical Catholic Church.) Adams's setting of Castellanos's poem reaches, within the limits of the composer's openly declared commitment to an ingratiating idiom, a pitch of intensity reminiscent of expressionism in its use of wide intervals to distort the lyric line.

His oratorio's final number balances the vehemence of the "Memorial de Tlatelolco" by juxtaposing an Apocryphal account of the Infant Jesus's first miracle, in which he commanded a palm tree to bend down so that his mother could gather its dates, with a consoling poem by Castellanos that pays respects to an Israeli palm tree for inspiring a moment of peaceful reflection amid the turbulence of the contemporary Middle East. Here Adams underscores the message of solace and chastened optimism by, as it were, resurrecting the Innocents in a children's chorus that gets to sing the oratorio's last word – "Poesia" (poetry) – accompanied by a pair of Spanish guitars. *El Niño* provides the best evidence yet that at the beginning of the third millennium spiritual or sacred entertainments have become the most marketable and profitable genre the literate (or "art") tradition of music can boast at a time when its end, for reasons both economic and technological, has become foreseeable.

3

The sacred as marketable, as profitable: it seems a paradoxical notion, even a blasphemous one, but there are plenty of precedents. Nearly three hundred years ago, Handel's oratorios made similarly opportunistic – and similarly successful – use of sacred subject matter to exploit the market. And just as we now resolve the paradox in Handel's case by reading through the sacred metaphor to what most scholars take to be the Handelian oratorio's "real" (i.e., nationalistic) appeal, it may not be too early to attempt a similar diagnosis of the multicultural religiosity that found such widespread musical expression at the end of the twentieth century.

Historians agree that Handel's oratorios achieved their amazing success not only by dint of their musical caliber, but also by flattering their élite English audience – a

mixture of nobility and high bourgeoisie (comprising "the first Quality of the Nation," according to a review of *Israel in Egypt* on its 1739 première) – with comparisons to the biblical Hebrews, God's chosen people.[2] The audience that patronizes the work of the successful sliver at the top of today's seething heap of struggling classical composers is a new social élite, the one recently identified by the social critic David Brooks in an amusing but penetrating analysis published in 2000 under the title *Bobos in Paradise*.

Brooks's Bobos, short for "bourgeois bohemians," are the highly educated nouveaux riches of the Information Age, who live comfortably and fashionably but retain a sentimental attachment to the "sixties" concerns of their youth, and who are most effectively flattered by art that reflects their ethical self-image. "The people who thrive in this period are the ones who can turn ideas and emotions into products," Brooks writes. And that, among other things, is what composers do. The cherished Bobo self-image is one of personal authenticity, constructed not in terms of a wholly original world view but in terms of eclecticism – an individual selection from among the unlimited choices on the global cultural and spiritual menu. The greatest challenge the new establishment faces, according to Brooks, is "how to navigate the shoals between their affluence and their self-respect; how to reconcile their success with their spirituality, their élite status with their egalitarian ideals."[3] Their task, in constructing their identity, is to reconcile values that had been traditionally at odds: bourgeois values of ambition, social stability and material comfort on the one hand, and on the other, bohemian values that identified with the victims of the bourgeois order: the poor, the criminal, the ethnic and racial outcast. The essential dilemma is that of reconciling the need for spirituality with the even more pressing need for personal autonomy and unlimited choice, since "real" religion imposes obligations and demands sacrifices.

It is not too difficult to see how the spiritualized classical music of the turn-of-millennium (prefigured in the 1960s and 1970s by the "Kaddish" Symphony and *Mass* by Leonard Bernstein, the original Bobo) has catered to these needs and predicaments. Audiences looking for purifying experiences are easily beguiled by symbols of innocence, hence the ubiquitous children's choirs in the works described above. Not that that was anything new: children's voices have long been exploited as an insurance policy by traders in romantic nostalgia. Mahler's Second, Third and Fourth Symphonies all feature real or metaphorical child-performers, as did the work of Soviet composers at times of particularly intense political pressure. The success of "Holy Minimalists" like Arvo Pärt, Henryk Górecki and John Tavener in the 1980s was more specifically related to the coming Bobo phenomenon. It already bespoke the desire for a way to return "aesthetically"

[2] For the review, in the *London Daily Post* (18 April 1739), see Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (New York, 1955), 481; the most extensive interpretation of Handel's oratorios in the light of contemporary politics is Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995).

[3] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York, 2000), 40.

or "appreciatively" to a world of "spiritual wholeness" without assuming the burdens of an actual religious commitment.

The added attraction of multiculturalism – eclecticism writ large – in the works of the 1990s completes the parallel with the Bobo mentality, which places the highest premium on "personal" pastiche. A Princeton University study of contemporary religious practices, cited by Brooks, turned up an extreme but characteristic example: a twenty-six-year-old disabilities counselor, the daughter of a Methodist minister, who described herself to her interviewer as a "Methodist Taoist Native American Quaker Russian Orthodox Buddhist Jew."[4] Philip Glass's Fifth Symphony was made for her, indeed of her.

The Adams–Sellars *El Niño* tapped into another time-honored trope of innocent authenticity, especially as it was performed during its initial run, with dancers interpreting the content of the words alongside the singers, and with a simultaneous film by Sellars adding yet another level of commentary. The film paralleled the unfolding story of the Nativity with footage showing the unaffected lives of anonymous members of Los Angeles's Hispanic community: an attractive Chicano couple stood in for Joseph and Mary, their baby for Jesus, some rookie cops for the shepherds, some local fortune tellers for the Magi, and so on. Audience members and critics alike exclaimed on the beauty of the film, of the nameless actors, and of their uncomplicated but fulfilling emotional lives.[5]

One of the most scathing passages in Brooks's study is devoted to precisely this sort of updating of hoary neoprimitivist ideas. The immediate subject is travel:

> The Bobo, as always, is looking for stillness, for a place where people set down roots and repeat the simple rituals. In other words, Bobo travelers are generally looking to get away from their affluent, ascending selves into a spiritually superior world, a world that hasn't been influenced much by the global meritocracy. . . . Therefore, Bobos are suckers for darkly garbed peasants, aged farmers, hardy fishermen, remote craftsmen, weather-beaten pensioners, heavyset regional cooks – anybody who is likely to have never possessed or heard of frequent flier miles. So the Bobos flock to or read about the various folk locales where such "simple" people live in abundance – the hills of Provence, Tuscany, Greece, or the hamlets of the Andes or Nepal. These are places where the natives don't have credit card debts and relatively few people wear Michael Jordan T-shirts. Lives therefore seem connected to ancient patterns and age-old wisdom. Next to us, these natives seem serene. They are poorer people whose lives seem richer than our own.[6]

But as Adams and Sellars showed, you don't have to travel so far to ogle "indigenous peoples" or "noble savages." Any urban ghetto can supply them in quantity. Nor is it clear that displaying an aestheticized, romanticized fantasy image of the poor for the edification or titillation of the sinful affluent really furthers egalitarian ideals. Will imagining the poor as leading lives richer than one's own inspire social action on their behalf? Will it inspire a true reconciliation between

[4] Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, 242.
[5] See, for example, Bernard Holland, "With Ears and Eyes in Fierce Competition, the Eyes Have It," *New York Times*, 15 January 2001, B1.
[6] Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, 206–7.

material comfort and social conscience? Or will it allow the comfortable to congratulate themselves on their benevolence and silence the nagging voice within?

Is the new spirituality, then, just another screen behind which high art engages in its traditional business of reinforcing social division by creating élite occasions? The old questions that bedeviled modernism have not gone away with the advent of postmodernity – which is yet another reason, perhaps, to doubt whether post-modernism is anything more than the latest modernist phase. Or are such moralizing concerns of dubious benefit to art or to artists, whose task of creating beauty is a constant imperative, transcending the politics (or the "political correctness") of the moment? The debate goes on.

4

A new wrinkle, or a new counterpoint, was added to the implicit debate in September 2002 with the American première – nineteen years after its first European performances, and a round decade since the composer's death – of Olivier Messiaen's only opera, *Saint François d'Assise*. It took place – inevitably? – in San Francisco, not only the Saint's namesake city (a fact much touted in the attendant publicity, along with the fact that the score weighed 25 pounds) but also the city that has figured most prominently, with four mentions, in the discussion so far. The San Francisco bay area – encompassing Silicon Valley, Marin County, Berkeley, and so on – is surely the Bobo capital of the world. *Saint François* was a hot ticket despite sky-high prices, and it was greeted by those who remained to the end with an ovation.

But unlike *El Niño*, or The Passion According to Golijov, this was no panderfest. At both performances I attended, including the first one, far from everyone made it to the end. At a Berkeley symposium co-sponsored by the San Francisco Opera, the conductor, Donald Runnicles, grumbled like a good modernist at the audience's disrespect for the great composer, but disrespect had nothing to do with it. Messiaen's opera, like the Bach Passions, is the real spiritual article. Its religion is rigorously doctrinal: paralleling Bach's orthodox Lutheranism (which can be disquieting, especially to Jews, if properly reflected on), it offers pure Catholicism without the slightest multicultural palliative, a model of spirituality based not on consoling self-congratulation but on suffering. And at four hours' running time (over five with its two intermissions) it is demanding to the point of exhaustion, as an opera celebrating asceticism perhaps ought to be.

In eight static scenes, it portrays the stages of the saint's spiritual ascent. In the first, he counsels a wavering brother friar that perfect joy can be attained only by accepting the suffering of Christ as one's own. In the second, he praises God's creation and asks to be allowed to overcome his aversion to lepers, the one barrier to his attainment of universal brotherly love. In the third, egged on by a guardian angel, he cures the wished-for leper with his kiss. In the fourth, the angel, respectfully waiting for Francis to finish his prayers before revealing himself, exposes the hypocrisy of the abbot in charge of the monastery where Francis is secluded. In the fifth, the angel grants Francis a foretaste, through music, of

heavenly bliss. In the sixth, Francis preaches his famous sermon to the birds. In the seventh, he solicits and receives Christ's stigmata. In the last, he dies and, ministered to by the angel and the leper, is reborn to new life.

Most people who approach this operatic leviathan via recordings find it an oppressive bore. In the house it was numinous, thanks in part to Hans Dieter Schaal's marvelously adaptable and multiply symbolic unit set, and the striking costume Andrea Schmidt-Futterer came up with for the Angel, the opera's one supernatural character: an electric-blue body suit (sprouting a single, quasi-symbolic wing) that contrasted tellingly with the drab apparel of the human characters. Laura Aikin, making her local debut as the Angel (referred to throughout as "he," but cast for a lyric soprano), sang with unforgettable radiance. The rest of the cast – particularly Willard White, who finished the horrendously demanding title role in undimmed vocal shape, and Chris Merritt in the shrieky part of the Leper – acquitted themselves with missionary zeal and a sense of appropriately steadfast devotion. Runnicles and the orchestra made the 25-pound score sound buoyant. But mainly, coming together with the rest of the audience in a special place to experience it enhanced the sense of religious communion on which the opera depends, and which cannot be achieved in everyday surroundings. Now dazzled, now sedated, we received a new reminder of what serious music can accomplish when it takes its task (and its audience) seriously.

Like most works by Messiaen, *Saint François* perpetually skirts the fringe of kitsch, and one watches the composer, working to his own libretto, negotiate these spiritually mandated shoals with the fascination that a netless tightrope walker commands. In the fifth scene, which many listeners found the most affecting, he challenges himself to compose the "music of the invisible," the divine music of the spheres that, according to one of the legends on which the libretto draws, the Angel bowed for St Francis on a viol. In Nicolas Brieger's production, the Angel plucks the giant strings of a Wagnerian world-harp. Messiaen's music consists of a wayward atonal melody produced by a trio of ondes martenot – an ancient electronic instrument that was invented seventy-five years ago, and that Messiaen's works have singlehandedly maintained in a sort of Nosferatu half-life – directing their unearthly sounds to speakers placed all around the hall, while a C major triad rustles faintly in the orchestra. After hearing it and being set atingle by its uncanny otherness, one could almost agree with St Francis that if it had gone on a moment longer, "because of its unbearable sweetness my soul might have left my body."

But imagine the risk! The merest hint at this point of friendly banality, the "new spirituality's" stock in trade, would have pulled the whole opera down into a vortex of bathos. Messiaen, supremely sophisticated in technique yet naively direct in expression as only a believer could be, works throughout the opera – indeed worked throughout his career – at the ticklish borderline of cliché. But *Saint François* offers kitsch no lusty Bobo's embrace. For Messiaen, platitudes were a hazard to be borne, not a mine to be exploited. The shallow obviousness of his libretto; the doggedly simple, maniacally static and didactic way he harps on a small fund of musically unprepossessing themes (about half of them included as examples within a short program-book essay); his seeming ignorance – or perhaps his calculated

neglect – of any semblance of ordinary stagecraft; the virtual banishment from the texture of counterpoint and thematic development (the usual guarantors of "purely musical" interest), all bring to mind Pascal's dictum that the virtue of adherence to religious discipline is that it *vous fera croire et vous abêtira* ("it will make you believe, and make you stupid"). But the fact that, despite its many near approaches to it, Messiaen's opera manages after all to avoid kitsch while retaining its naïveté is perhaps its most impressive feat – and at the present cultural moment, dominated by a profusion of extremely artful spiritual kitsch, an enormously provocative one.

The Austrian novelist Hermann Broch memorably defined kitsch as the artistically endorsed demand that the stars, "and everything else that is eternal," come down to earth for the sake of human temporal gratification.[7] Broch had sexual gratification first in mind, but placing the politics of the moment *sub specie aeternitatis*, especially the voyeuristic multicultural politics of Bobo art, seems no less flagrant an example of Brochian kitsch. Messiaen did not always escape the trap Broch identified. His grandiose, ten-movement *Turangalîla-symphonie*, commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky and first performed in Boston under Leonard Bernstein in 1949, is one of the great monuments of sacroporn in its attempt to marry Christian mysticism to the Kama Sutra with side-by-side movements bearing titles like "Joie du sang des étoiles" and "Jardin du sommeil d'amour."

The Indian element was musically represented by palindromic (or, as Messiaen put it, "non-retrogradable") rhythms, often in beat patterns that are organized around prime numbers, hence quite foreign to the uncomplicated duple or triple meters of traditional European art music. It was not multiculturalism or "ordinary" orientalism that sent Messiaen in search of the exotic music of the East – he first encountered an Indian prime-number pattern (seventeen beats) in the course of a desultory browse through a standard French reference source, Lavignac's *Encyclopédie de la musique et Dictionnaire du Conservatoire* – but rather the need for a musical representation of otherness that could stand in for the utter otherness of the divine. The same quest led to his lifelong fascination with the superhuman sonority of the ondes martenot: Messiaen began writing for it in 1937, when he was twenty-nine, and stayed with it to the end of his life in 1992, when he was eighty-three. In *Turangalîla*, it provided the climactic voice of ecstasy, alternately moaning low and belting out diatonic love songs from the *au-delà*, accompanied by the "added-sixth" harmonies of a celestial piano bar.

But if *Turangalîla* was Messiaen's eternally kiddable *chef d'oeuvre* of ingenuous excess, his quest for the uncanny otherness of the eternal (precisely the quality that distinguishes Catholic or Orthodox theology from Protestant) was earnest, life-long, and crowned with some amazing successes, of which *Saint François* may have been the ultimate, and not just in terms of size. There is something genuinely scary about Messiaen at full strength. The leitmotif that heralds the Angel in *Saint François*, for example, is a bloodcurdling electronic screech, and when the Angel knocks lightly on the monastery door, all hell breaks loose in the orchestra. The same hellish – er,

[7] Hermann Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York, 1969), 58.

heavenly – pounding, redolent of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* but reaching a far more lacerating pitch of dissonance, returns in the penultimate scene to symbolize the imprinting of the stigmata on St Francis's flesh. You feel his pain, which is the pain of the crucified Lamb of God. The light that receives the saint's soul at the end of the opera burns mortal eyes with its wattage; you've got to look away. No cute children's choirs here. No sexy Latin rhythm. Messiaen's spirituality was anything but warm and fuzzy, his style often the opposite of ingratiating, and that is what finally saves his work from kitsch. Of all the music of the twentieth century, his was the most genuinely (and essentially) theological, with all that the word implies in opposition to the debased secular humanism that drives John Adams's or Osvaldo Golijov's socially regressive visions of the commercial sublime.

5

"Let us have a *true* music," Messiaen wrote, italicizing the word himself; "that is to say, spiritual, a music which may be an act of faith; a music which may touch upon all subjects without ceasing to touch upon God; an original music, in short, whose language may open a few doors, take down some as yet distant stars."[8] For all their religious euphoria, these words come from the preface to Messiaen's *Technique de mon langage musical* (Technique of My Musical Language, 1944), one of the most systematic expositions any composer has ever given to the mechanisms of his art. And past the preface, the treatise is true to its title. It resolutely ignores all meaning and treats "language" alone – or as Messiaen put it, "technique and not sentiment," abstracted and broken down in extraordinarily schoolmasterly fashion into its rhythmic, melodic and harmonic dimensions.[9] Any seeming paradox or contradiction is dispelled as soon as one considers the nature of the truth that Messiaen designed his art to convey. It is neither a personal credo nor an occult conceit, but rather (as he put it) "the theological truths of the Catholic faith," as dogmatically set forth in scripture.[10]

Messiaen was an extreme rarity among leading twentieth-century composers (indeed, among composers since the advent of romanticism) in being a working church musician. For more than forty years, beginning in 1930, he served as regular Sunday organist at the Eglise de la Saint-Trinité, one of the largest churches in Paris. Messiaen wrote many of his most important works for La Trinité's huge Cavaillé-Coll organ, and was without question the most important organist-composer of the twentieth century, as César Franck, who also served as organist for many years at a Parisian church, and who also wrote a highly spiritualized brand of modern music, had been (with Bruckner) in the nineteenth. As a further parallel, both Messiaen and Franck were famous and much sought-after teachers of composition, whose pupils and disciples formed an élite group of advanced composers who universalized their master's teaching and made it an important "mainstream" influence.

[8] Quoted from Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris, 1956), 8.
[9] Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, 7–8.
[10] Messiaen, 13.

But Franck, whose career ended shortly before the great wave of modernism broke, was never drawn to such radically novel means as Messiaen proposed, nor did he ever systematize his practices so thoroughly into a teachable method. It was the latter that made Messiaen such a potent force in the technique of contemporary music even among those who held his aesthetic principles at arm's length. He managed to transform theological dogma into musical dogma, and that is why Messiaen always objected to being called a mystic. Rather than a mystic he was a scholastic, in the medieval sense of the term. Like St Thomas Aquinas, he sought to embody the mysteries of faith in a rational and transmissible discourse. No wonder his self-analysis was so "schoolmasterly," and so influential. What were means for him easily became ends for many.

Messiaen's treatise very rigorously analyzes his innovative techniques into their rhythmic and melodic/harmonic domains; and the remarkable thing about it is how much the pitch and durational aspects of his novel "language" had in common. The chief innovation with respect to pitch was the use of what Messiaen called "modes of limited transposition," and the chief durational innovation was the preference we have already observed for what he called "non-retrogradable rhythms." Both of these impressively named devices depend on a single quality: invariance achieved by means of symmetry. Scales that reproduce themselves on transposition, and rhythms that reproduce themselves in reverse, are both devices that arrest the sort of progression on which musical "development" (i.e., the sonorous illusion of directed motion) depends. Non-progressive structures are necessary to any music that wants to represent or symbolize the atemporal (i.e., the eternal) within an inexorably temporal medium.

Only the name that Messiaen gave his modes of limited transposition was new. The concept had been familiar as such for almost a century, ever since Franz Liszt had made his first systematic experiments with symmetrical cycles of major and minor thirds, and scales – ascending or descending by whole steps, or by alternating whole steps and half steps – derived from them. Messiaen had in good scholastic fashion carried the process of systematization, begun by Liszt and already developed to a single-minded peak by Scriabin (another composer interested, like Messiaen, in eschatological revelation), to the point of theoretical exhaustion. Where Liszt and Scriabin had employed two modes of limited transposition, Messiaen increased their number to eight – the mathematical limit.

Messiaen used his principle of non-retrogradable rhythm to organize long spans in which not only the number of beats per measure, but also the length of the beats themselves, were unpredictably variable, hence uncanny. The variable lengths come about by the interpolation, in every other bar, of an "added value" that arbitrarily lengthens one of the musical pulses that undergirds the rhythmic surface. The rhythms so arbitrarily dislocated are then patterned by working outward from a midpoint. Messiaen called the midpoint the "free value" or the "central common value." Functionally speaking, of course, it was an axis of symmetry.

Putting the two axes of symmetry together, the harmonic axis represented by the modes of limited transposition and the temporal axis represented by the non-retrogradable rhythms, allowed the coordination of the vertical (spatial)

and horizontal (temporal) dimensions in dual representation of invariance = constancy = immutability = eternity. That is the time-transcending truth that religion reveals through music, its handmaiden, in Messiaen's aesthetic universe. And that, Messiaen explicitly informs the reader, was the source of his mysterious hold on the listener. "Let us think now of the hearer of our modal and rhythmic music," he writes:

> He will not have time at the concert to inspect the nontranspositions and the nonretrogradations, and, at that moment, these questions will not interest him further; to be charmed will be his only desire. And that is precisely what will happen; in spite of himself he will submit to the strange charm of impossibilities: a certain effect of tonal ubiquity in the nontransposition, a certain unity of movement (where beginning and end are confused because identical) in the nonretrogradation, all things which will lead him progressively to that sort of theological rainbow which the musical language, of which we seek edification and theory, attempts to be.[11]

In language that almost seems borrowed from the Russian mystical symbolists who inspired Scriabin, but that Messiaen would no doubt have ascribed to St Francis himself, he wrote that one of his primary aims in composing as he did is "l'atrophie du moi" – the atrophy, or wasting away, of the "I," the petty self. It will not be difficult to discover in his musical methods (to quote the English composer Wilfrid Mellers, one of Messiaen's most sympathetic critics) the means towards the "complete reversal of the will-domination of post-Renaissance Europe." One aspect of this reversal was simply and literally the revival of pre-Renaissance practices, contemporaneous with the medieval saints, long since considered obsolete by musicians caught up in the flux of history.

Many of the rhythmic techniques Messiaen described in his self-analyzing treatise of 1944 – canons by augmentation, by diminution, by "the addition of the dot" – were common features of the so-called ars nova of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as was the idea of organizing musical structures around what Messiaen called "rhythmic pedals," durational plans that could be mentally conceptualized, but that could not be followed perceptually (that is, sensorily) during performance. Messiaen, who claimed to have been ignorant of it at the time, had in effect revived the concept of the "isorhythmic motet," and for the same purpose the original medieval practice had served: to represent (and in some small measure make available to human cognition) the divine eternal harmony of the cosmos, a harmony that expressed itself precisely in the coordinated movement of heavenly bodies in seemingly independent orbits.

Rhythmic pedals (talea in Latin, tala in Sanskrit) were the chief medieval means for representing cosmic harmony. And at the same time they provided a genuine meeting point between time-honored European (in fact, French) and Indian musical practices. But Messiaen also revived the other aspect of medieval isorhythm, namely the abstractly conceived melodic ostinato or color – hidden sequences of pitches that are repeated at the bedrock of the texture. But they are not really hidden; they are merely too lengthy – that is, too great – for immediate detection.

[11] Messiaen, 21.

Like the truths of astronomy and many other scientific truths (as well, needless to say, as religious truths), the presence of a color is the sort of fact that reflective intellect reveals sooner than the senses. Putting such a thing into an artwork is an implicit warning against assuming that true knowledge can be gained empirically. The highest truths, Messiaen's music implies, are revealed truths. Theology was truth. Anything beyond that, Messiaen implied along with countless theologians, was mere human history.

6

And yet while the truths may be transcendent, the means of representation (the work, after all, of mortals) are inevitably historical, the product of the fleeting moment. Messiaen's music does not sound like a medieval motet. His ear, and the ears he addressed, had been otherwise conditioned. His "musical language" confronted and accommodated the musical styles of its time in an openly omnivorous and opportunistic spirit, even as it sought to extend them in the spirit of modernism. And that is why his work has been so useful as a model to many composers who not only failed to share his religious commitments, but were hopelessly caught up in "patent-office modernism," something Messiaen outwardly decried as the rat-race of historicism, and yet something in which he was willy-nilly a participant, and a very successful one at that.

The high point of his modernist prestige came at the century's midpoint, when he was invited to lecture at the Darmstadt *Ferienkurse*, established in 1946 (by a German critic named Wolfgang Steinecke, but with the financial backing of the American army of occupation) to reacquaint the musicians of formerly Fascist Europe with the work of the formerly suppressed avant-garde. A short piano piece called *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (translatable as "abstractly ordered durations and dynamics"), which Messiaen had composed in 1949 to see how far he could take the arcanely "scholastic" organizing principles of his technical treatise, was seized upon by Pierre Boulez (his pupil since 1942) and Karlheinz Stockhausen (who became his pupil as a result of it) as the harbinger of the impersonally scientific, "totally organized" music, based on a vast extension of Schoenbergian serial principles, that they regarded as the only viable musical language for a devastated Europe's "zero hour." They exalted Messiaen as the patriarch of the avant garde.

But Messiaen, never a serialist, had no use for this secular distinction. However abstracted, he regarded his technique as being, *au fond*, a representational one, even if it represented things that could only be speculatively known. Indeed, shortly after composing *Mode de valeurs*, Messiaen made a sudden turn away from abstraction and toward naturalism of a sort, when he became obsessed with birdsong, drawn literally from life as far as the transcriber's acuity of ear (and the tuning of existing instruments) allowed, as the new foundation of his art.

This was no about-face. Not only theological tradition, but many of the world's ancient folk traditions as well, regarded birds as messengers from the *au-delà*. Divine inspiration had long been rendered in Christian iconography by showing the applicable prophet or saint (including St Gregory the Great, legendarily the

composer of the Catholic Church chant that bears his name) receiving it directly from the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove – and this belief survives incognito in our expression "a little bird told me." Schumann's prophet-bird, Wagner's forest-bird, Stravinsky's Firebird (and his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov's avian messengers in *The Tale of the Invisible City of Kitezh*) sustained in romantic musical tradition the pagan (or Hindu) counterparts, possibly the paleo-Indo-European prototypes, of the Christian dove. Again, Messiaen took an existing mode of representation and scholastically systematized it, making bird-listening expeditions, beginning in 1952, throughout France, and later wherever his travels took him – including an express trip to New Caledonia in the South Pacific to transcribe *in situ* the especially exotic song of the rare gerygone that became one of the Angel's uncanny calling cards in *Saint François*.

The first work of Messiaen's to incorporate actual birdsong was *Le Merle noir* (1951) for flute and piano. The next was *Réveil des oiseaux*, a huge composition for piano and orchestra, first performed in Donaueschingen on 11 October 1953. This première was perhaps the greatest fiasco of Messiaen's career. Instead of pursuing the increasingly strict and arcane methods of *Mode de valeurs*, he was offering an audience of committed avant-gardists an obviously representational, and (what was worse) obviously joyous and "affirmative" tone poem that maintained demonstrative ties to all kinds of pre-zero-hour traditions. Shaken by the bad reviews, his publisher threatened unilaterally to rescind its mutual exclusivity agreement with the composer (proving, among other things, that the avant-garde is just as much a market category, and "disinterested" modernism just as marketable a commodity, as any other).

Messiaen, as if to demonstrate that his kingdom was not of this world, continued undaunted to write birdsong pieces, and Boulez, to his credit, used his own prestige to rescue that of his teacher, commissioning a chamber counterpart to *Réveil des oiseaux* called *Oiseaux exotiques* for performance at his own concert series, La Domaine musicale, in 1956. The birdsong line reached its pinnacle in the monumental cycle of piano pieces known, straightforwardly enough, as *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1959). But not even this two-hour total immersion could work the songs of birds out of Messiaen's system. Once something had found a place in his musical theology, nothing could dislodge it. Everything that Messiaen described in his treatise of 1944 remained current in his style to the end; the birds merely joined the existing style and took up permanent residence within it.

This in its way was another expression of timeless truth. Messiaen's stylistic consistency, despite its heterogeneous sources, was the very opposite of eclectic. Rather, his steadfast adherence to his path despite all adversity (to put it in terms of one of the large themes in *Saint François*) is another expression of dogmatic faith. In a young-people's book on comparative religion I recall riffling as a teenager, representatives of various denominations responded to a questionnaire that asked, among other things, whether they considered theirs to be the only true faith. Everyone waffled but the Catholic, who answered (as best I can reconstruct it), "Of course; if we thought someone else possessed the true faith, we'd follow him." That was Messiaen.

7

Messiaen's rigorously religious outlook in a relentlessly secular world made him an eccentric figure and a paradoxical one. Although he was certainly a towering figure in the history of twentieth-century music, he was not of it. In a peculiar way the twentieth century did not exist for him. When we look back on it we can hardly see it except in terms of gulags, holocausts, actual and threatened mass destruction, and spiritual emptiness, now capitally exemplified by what passes for spirituality in art. Messiaen, whose life spanned practically the entire century, got from one end of it to the other without expressing anything but joy: a joy that could appear monumentally excessive – and monumentally unobservant – to anyone not attuned to the composer's beatific disposition. "I have had the good fortune to be a Catholic," Messiaen wrote, adding that "I was born a believer." But that seeming unobservance, that eternally cloudless sky, could look, to one less fortunately born, like indifference, even an insult, to human suffering.

Those who hold Messiaen's Catholic affirmations against him can point to his early exploitation by Marshal Pétain's collaborationist regime, which issued Messiaen's early "symphonic meditation" *Les Offrandes oubliées* as part of a set of records sent around the world (or at least to the few countries whose governments recognized Vichy's legitimacy) to demonstrate the "nonpolitical" cultural achievements of the French as participants in the New Europe. "Unchaste" was the critic Andrew Porter's deliciously prim and Protestant reaction to the Himalayan ecstasies of *Saint François*.[12] Even those less inclined toward moral censure often find it hard to understand an aesthetic that celebrates renunciation of the material and mortification of the flesh with such opulent – even voluptuous (not to mention expensive) – forces as Messiaen mustered up for *Saint François*: a chorus of 150 voices in as many as a dozen parts, and an orchestra that overflows the pit (and that the San Francisco Opera was constrained by its budget somewhat to curtail in the string department), notated on as many as seventy staves for the overwhelming concert of birdsong in scene 6, and supplemented not only by the trio of ondes martenot, but also by a jangling gamelan of mallet percussion (xylophone, xylorimba, marimba, vibraphone, glockenspiel) that acts as a sort of amen corner, applauding every step of the title character's spiritual quest and going quite berserk with affirmational glissandos at the end.

But how else give a secular audience a convincing taste of the perfect joy of divinity: the joy that St Francis describes in the opera's first scene as the goal of terrestrial existence, toward which every subsequent scene depicts another arduous step? That joy exists quite apart from anyone's experience of it. Among mortals only a saint can ever know it, but anyone can – must – try to imagine it, for to the believer it is the true – and only – existential reality: what we know on earth – gulags, stalags, Vichys, holocausts and all – is mere Maya, "appearance." Messiaen's art was dedicated from the beginning to affirming the right of artists – and the duty of

[12] Andrew Porter, "Surfeit," *The New Yorker*, 5 May 1986; rpt. in Porter, *Musical Events: A Chronicle, 1983–86* (New York, 1989), 480.

believers – not to pay attention to appearance, but to keep their eyes fixed with constancy on the eternal prize.

Among the sufferings his art ignored were his own. The work that first made him famous was the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1940). It was composed at a prisoner of war camp in Görlitz, Germany, where Messiaen was detained as one of thousands of military hostages to Pétain's craven armistice. Its scoring for violin, clarinet, cello and piano was determined by the presence of virtuosos of those instruments (including Messiaen himself as pianist) among the composer's fellow inmates. Its title is often misconstrued to refer to their longing for the end of the "time" they were serving. Many commentators (and, of course, the record companies) have touted the work's connection with the war. In a recent study, the musicologist Leslie Sprout has shown how the work "has come to represent the plight not only of the captive French soldiers, but also of all victims of Nazi persecution, including those of the Holocaust."[13]

But of course Messiaen had the Apocalypse in mind, not his own predicament, and represented it with one of the early masterpieces of the time-arresting musical "language" he would describe a few years later in his treatise. Indeed, he told many interviewers that the opportunity to devote his mind to composing a work dedicated to a timeless theme amid the degrading conditions of temporal detention made him the one free man in the stalag. And when one compares his quartet, with its extremes of slowness and speed, its mesmerizingly sustained harmonies and its rhythmically elusive ecstatic dances (the kind angels do on the head of a pin), with the kind of art that does seek to memorialize twentieth-century human suffering on a scale to match its enormity, one can only be grateful that Messiaen's religious convictions precluded any such attempt.

For with only the rarest exceptions (like Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, an improbable masterpiece of modesty and indirection), Holocaust memorializing furnished the twentieth century with its greatest infusion of ephemeral, egoistic kitsch. Messiaen's *Quatuor* has survived that heap of artistic corpses, just as the oppressively lengthy and theologically alienating *Saint François* will surely survive the wave of *Niños* and multicultural *Passions* that glut our concert halls today. Robber barons and Bobos, and those who cater to them, come and go. The Kingdom of Heaven, the object of mankind's most consoling and necessary imagining, and the original subject and stimulus of artistic representation, endureth – even unto the twenty-first century, thanks to Messiaen, and to Pamela Rosenberg, the San Francisco Opera's visionary new General Director who plunged the company dangerously into the red for the sake of his opera. Classical music may still be doomed by inexorable social and economic change. (In the long run, J. M. Keynes reminded us, we are all dead.) But if so, let it die as it lived, affording glimpses of other worlds and other minds, rather than in a desperate grab for the life raft of shabby topical hypocrisy.

[13] Leslie Sprout, "Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*: Modernism, Representation, and a Soldier's Wartime Tale," *Program and Abstracts of Papers Read at the Joint Meetings of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory, October 31–November 3, 2002*, 149.