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The experience of Sacred Music: *St. John Passion* and *St. Luke Passion*. The Challenge of Composing Performable Modern Music

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I am delighted and honored to be the kick off of this second day of the *Ars Poetica Conference*, with this talk, as you can see in the title – which is quite big, quite complex, *The experience of Sacred Music* and then it mentions the *St. John Passion* and *St. Luke Passion*, these are two works of my own and I will talk to you about it later. But then there is this extra sentence in the title, *The Challenge of composing*

performable modern music.

Are the two issues related? We will see. I am sure that by combing the two we can lead to discussions over a great range of things, later, with ourselves here and also within the panel. I noticed yesterday that the conversation was very wide ranging.

I would like to begin with this second point, that is the challenge of composing performable modern music. When one thinks of performable modern music what he thinks of is

aspects of practical and technical issues, the virtuosity of the music, the complexity of the music, whether the players are capable of playing music of great complexity. What are their skills and does the composer write according to these skills? And what about amateur musicians? Can amateur musicians perform modern music? For example, in my own country, the United Kingdom, there is an organization called C.O.M.A., The Contemporary Music for Amateurs and these people are not specialists at all; they are not professionals but they love music, and they love modern music and they want to perform modern music. As you know some modern music is very complex and sometimes beyond capabilities of amateurs. But that does not hold them back; they have invited many composers to write especially for them and that has happened. And in fact, there is a value-ing tradition in Britain, of British composer the role of the amateur in our musical culture. From the beginning of the 20th century, British composers have always valued the amateur choir in the music making in Britain. The amateur choral tradition in the United Kingdom is very strong. You may know that the choruses that sing with the great orchestras are all amateurs: the London Symphony Orchestra's Chorus is an amateur chorus. They have to perform at a very high level, of course, to work with one of the great orchestras, conductors and soloists of the world, but they are essentially volunteers who get together during the week and prepare music of a very, very high professional standard. And that is the way of it, with all the orchestral choruses in the United Kingdom. The amateur chorus has to step up to a very high level to perform and there has also been, in the recent British history, a desire amongst the composers to write music for the amateurs, to value the role of the amateurs in musical society. Right back to the 19th century there were works being written including *Elijah* by Mendelssohn, works to be sung by volunteer choruses in the United Kingdom and that lead to a healthy and long stream of oratorios being written throughout the late 19th century towards the 20th century; *The Dream of Gerontius*, for example, by Elgar, which would have been performed by a professional orchestra but with amateur singers, an amateur chorus. And a whole range of composers who came after Elgar, Vaughan Williams who loved the music of the church and he was not necessarily

religious but he liked writing music for the church, and writing for the amateur volunteer singers in churches. And indeed, when one thinks about the British composers many of them wrote music for church Liturgy, they didn't change track or style or aesthetic to write for church choirs, they wrote with their own musical character and we can see great choral works by Benjamin Britten, *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis* by Michael Tippett, all used in the great cathedrals by the cathedral choirs of the United Kingdom. And there has been that love of the amateur, non-specialist choir, leading on from Tippett, Gustav Holst, through to Maxwell Davies who set up his own festival in the North of Scotland precisely to engage the musical activities and enthusiasm of ordinary people. It was from the imperative of bringing modern music into the attention of as many people as possible and to spread the word about modern music.

We need to talk about technical and practical issues a lot when we talk about performable modern music. But there are other dimensions to the idea of performable modern music. What about music which becomes performable by its power to reflect the shared experiences of humanity? What about music which becomes performable by the action of the composer leaving his or her island of non-communication, to express feelings and experiences that he shares with the performers as fellow human beings and those performers communicate in a channel of communication to the people in the audience? I loved that analogy that was used yesterday by one of the speakers about the triad, the tonic was the composer, the performer was the third and the listener was the fifth and they are all interconnected and there is a relationship between these elements in the same way there should be between composer, performer and the audience.

And why do I need to state to the obvious? It could be said that for many different reasons, understandable, justifiable reasons, that during the last one hundred years or so, at various points in the music history there has been a breakdown of that relationship, a breakdown of that communication between the composer, performers and the audience. And sometimes it was simply the fact that the audience could not keep up. Schönberg formed the society for the private performance of new music because he realized that it is a

smaller group that he needed to speak to first and perhaps further down the line, the larger audience, the bigger community could be engaged. I am not making any value judgements about this, I'm just stating the fact that for one reason or another the communication relationship has broken. One can understand the mindset not just in the mind of the composers in 1945 but with many artists, philosophers, politicians, who have viewed what happened here and have seen the convulsions of a disaster. And the conclusion was indeed that the society, the identity and the culture was broken and destroyed and that they had to begin again. Music and many other things, politics and society as well, went into a kind of laboratory mentality exploring the fundamentals of the language regardless of what this wider communication and relationship might mean.

When I talk about an island of non-communication I am not saying it in an accusatory way, there are understandable reasons why composers and artists want to live in an island of non-communication.

But one way to find these deep reservoirs of connection, these deep reservoirs of relationship between artist and audience is in our shared civilization, in our shared history, and our shared traditions and perhaps the reflowering of the relationship needs to be resurrected by looking at the very concept of tradition in a new way. To be interested in tradition is not always nostalgic, not always reactionary. It can be, of course, but sometimes is not. To be interested in tradition is not always old fashioned. Traditions can be alive with a past, a present and a future. And the analogy I like to make for myself as a composer or just as a normal person living in this world is the analogy of a river. The river runs through the land, it has come from somewhere and is going somewhere else and it finds me here on its bank. It has a past, a present and a future. There is nothing reactionary about that. It's entirely natural, it's part of the ecology of the land. If one puts a dam in the river one causes the fruitfulness to stop. And that is the problem. It can be the problem, if one deliberately decides that this river is not a good thing and puts up this dam, the irrigation of human experience ends and the land dries up, it becomes desiccated. My preference is to see the river flowing from the past, I see where it comes from and I see where it might go and I feel part

of this onward flow from the past to the future. That is not reactionary, I think that is just progressive as anything else.

And this brings me from the second point in the title to the first and arises the question, why is it an interest again amongst the composers for the sacred music? You will have noticed it. It is not just Arvo Pärt and Henryk Górecki, although these are the most prominent names and the most popular names and they have reached beyond the world of new music to people, non-specialists that don't know much about modern music or even classical music. They have that reach and it could be argued, especially with Pärt for example, that he has this new way of looking at tradition, not in a reactionary form, but a new way of imagining harmonies, counterpoints and consonances that speak for themselves.

But the issue is much deeper than this handful of composers and goes back into the history of Modernism itself and can be accounted for in the mainstream of the modernism as well. When I look at the history of the 20th century music I see a wide range of composers, some of them less prominent or significant who were profoundly religious men and women. Stravinsky set little prayers like *Ave Maria* and *Pater Noster*, he was a believer, he was as revolutionary in his music making as he was reactionary in his politics. But he was one of the great figures of Early Modernism, one of the great polar, inspirational and vital figures who had such an impact on what happened in the 20th century, who saw the search for the sacred as being vital to his imagination, to his creative life. And then another great polar figure of early musical modernism, Arnold Schönberg, who reconverted to a practicing Judaism in the 1930's when he left Germany. And his later work is filled with that Jewish character, theology, tradition and culture, he was a mystic and you can hear that mysticism in his later works especially. It is no accident that John Cage chose to study with him. Cage saw in Schönberg a fellow mystic. And John Cage found his own path in search for the sacred through discovering the ideas and the deep spirituality of the far east. It's interesting that his most famous or let's say his most notorious work, 4'33, that is four minutes and 33 seconds of silence, which is a kind of provocation to our culture and listening sensibilities or lack of them, a profound provocation to the banalities of the modern

age, the original title was *Silent Prayer*. So, John Cage shared with Schönberg and many other composers this fascination with silence, that there is a relationship between silence and sound and that in the silence of the composer's mind, the musical imagination begins, that silence is pregnant with possibility, pregnant with the possible music that comes from a contemplation of a reality beyond us. And then, of course, there was Olivier Messiaen, who was famously catholic, he shares with J.S. Bach the description of being a musical theologian. And yes, Messiaen was this central revolutionary figure in Modernism, with an impact on the generation who came after him, Boulez and Stockhausen looked up to Messiaen; far from being an old-fashioned religious reactionary, Messiaen was at the heart of the whole experimental movement. It is wrong to see religion in the case of Messiaen as some kind of reactionary esthetic. And of course, his great opera *St. Francis of Assisi*, one of the great modern operas of our time, is not the most successful or popular. The most successful and most popular French modern opera of the last 50-60 years is of course the *Dialogues of the Carmelites* by Poulenc. A work that is a direct challenge to the assumptions of secularism, the assumptions of a modern age, a direct challenge in the very capital of the secularism itself, Paris, to what happened there, the implications of revolutionary violence, and a deep Christian heroism, love, forgiveness, the love of the Christian faith.

And there were the other composers after Shostakovich, behind what we used to call 'The iron curtain' who were profoundly searching for the sacred role, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Górecki, Pärt, Kancheli, as a way of challenging. Again, this is not a passive spirituality, it is a form of challenge, in their case, to state atheism, and a search for something more than the banalities the regime was wanting to enforce on them and on the people, that lived under these regimes. And in my own country, I've already mentioned some of them. Benjamin Britten and John Tavener wrote music for church liturgy. They saw no problem in writing one day for the choir of Westminster Abbey and writing for an orchestra the next day, in different ways probing their own path to modernity but realizing that the past is a great gift. These traditions I am talking about are gifts from history, that can be reinvigorated somehow, in the modern

age. And so, I come to the idea of the Passions, my works. I'll get to my music in a minute, but to be honest I look back at me about ten years ago when I started to think about Passion settings and I saw many other composers of our time who were drawn to the Passion. The Passion form, the Passion narratives, and I say to myself, 'what is happening here?' Many, for different reasons, are attracted to this 'defunct' form, there are different ways to tell the passion story. The first one that came to my notice was Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion* from the late 1960's, a work that had a huge impact on me, and kind of signaled to me, as a young composer. A sign that, perhaps, by reflecting on these matters (and I searched for these things) was a sign that Modernity and the sacred were interconnected in some way, that the search for the sacred had not died. Indeed, it was alive and well. In fact, you can say that a study of Modernism in music would be totally incomplete without a reflection and a probing of the deep spiritual, some might even say theological reasons for why all these composers that I mentioned did what they did. After Penderecki came Arvo Pärt with his *St. John*, a decade or so later, but then, one after another, Gubaidulina and another *St. John*, Wolfgang Rihm, another Passion, Golijov from Argentina another Passion, John Adams too is exploring in his own way the retelling of the Passion story using modern scenarios.

So, I didn't feel alone in this but sometimes composers like myself are asked whether they feel eccentric for having interests like this. All you need to say is just look at what has happened in the 20th century and see all these different composers and say that this is the mainstream, this is Modernity, this is the thrusting of the modern mind, to find Ancient truths and something deeper than ourselves; that there is something really spiritual in the art of music itself that still provokes and inspires composers to look for it.

Why the Passion setting? The history of the Passion goes back before Bach, of course: musical settings of Christ's suffering and the crucifixion based either on biblical text or on poetic elaborations can be traced right back to the 4th century. The original template for such a form consisted of three parts, sung by three deacons or three clergymen, in plain-song. I've done this myself many times in Scotland, singing the narrator's

part with a very simple Gregorian, and sometimes Dominican chant, with a priest, usually with the lowest voice singing Christ's lines, and then other parts being taken by a schola who would sing the angry interjections of the crowd. In the 13th century the Passions became more dramatic, two versions are found in the famous German manuscript of the *Carmina Burana* before becoming longer and more complex by the 15th century. Passions settings blossomed throughout Europe. Plain-song alternated with polyphony, and the crowd was now sung by the choir. German Lutherans, of course, picked it up and ran with it unexpectedly. They embraced it; there were many German Passions before Bach came along. And it was the Lutherans who kept the tradition of using solo singers; and from the early 1600's the Lutheran settings used recitative, arias, choruses, until we get to the form that we now recognize in the two famous settings by J.S. Bach in his St. Matthew and his St. John. There are twenty Passion settings by Bach's prolific son C.P.E. Bach. During the Classical and Romantic period, the Passion went out of fashion although there are a few Victorian works. Then it began again, in our own time, strangely enough, to the surprise of many.

But to many of us who have tackled a Passion or thought about writing a Passion, the ghost of J.S. Bach stands very heavily on our shoulders, a frightening ghost from history, asking why on earth would you, a modern composer, want to do such a thing? But, just like a moth circling around a flame, some of us can't help it. So, I had to make a decision about which text to write; I have actually made a decision that I will eventually write all four. I've done two so far but I started with St. John. And in the St. John's Passion I wanted to make it vocal, of course, I wanted it to have a soloist; there is a Christ figure who is a baritone voice and there are two choirs. Using that tradition, that amateur choral tradition was important to me, so you will hear in this excerpt the large chorus singing. There is also a little chamber choir who is the narrator in the work; and it's a chamber choir using harmonized chant mainly who tells the story. But because I have sung the Passion, the St. John Passion is used on Good Friday in the catholic churches, I valued it and I know most about it. I always experienced the St. John Passion in a liturgical context, so when Bach who also

wrote his passions for a liturgical context, provided these moments of repose and reflection in his chorales which would've been sung by the assembly of course, everyone joined in. I thought to myself 'what is it about my experience that might provide an alternative to these chorales', and, of course, as someone who knows and loves liturgy, those moments of reflection are given through the experience of the motet, the Latin motet. In my St. John's Passion there are Latin texts, when the drama stops, the storytelling stops, then we perhaps hear a little bit of the *Tu Es*, for example, which is a reflection on Peter and his betrayal, or the *Crucifixus etiam pro nobis* at the moment of crucifixion itself in the drama. But there are lots of other texts that Catholics hear; one hears the text of the *Improperia*, which is a very strange text indeed. These are not the words of Christ; they are the words of Antiquity coming through as if they were the words of Christ, but they are taken from the Hebrew Gospel. And I'd like to play a little example of this. This is not the words of St. John but it's a movement which appears in my St. John's Passion. It is called *The Reproaches* when you can hear the Christ figure saying 'my people, what have I done to you, how have I offended you...' texts from Isaiah and other Old Testament sources. And then, interpolated into this there's a sacred text from liturgy orthodox and catholic, *Holy is God*, sung by the choir. The only other thing that probably needs to be said about this is that I've cited a lot of different sources as an inspiration point, Gregorian chant, the Passion settings of the past, but there is also opera here as well. There is great drama in the Bible and the courtroom drama could be straight out of an American movie from Hollywood; it is fully operatic. I value opera, I had just finished an opera, and when I wrote this a lot of that opera came into the Passion setting. You may hear all of this in this little extract; so, this is the beginning of *The Reproaches (Improperia)*.

My first Passion, of St. John's is quite a big piece, with quite a large orchestra (not huge) two choruses and a baritone soloist. I've decided that from there, each setting will get smaller and smaller, so the next one, *St. Luke's Passion* is written for a Händelian orchestra, one choir, children's choir and no soloist. The next one would be *St. Mark's Passion* which it will be for choir and organ and maybe a soloist or two and the last one,

would be a St. Matthew and it will be only for four singers. So, I am doing a 'shrinking', if you like, of the musical language as I work through the four texts. The other big difference between My St. John and my St. Luke's Passion is that where there is in St. John this intertextuality that is an almost chaotic mixture of scriptural texts, but also these other liturgical texts and so on. One might say this is an undisciplined approach to the Scriptures. I've decided I would take a much more refined approach not just in the language and in the scoring but actually in the text itself, so in St. Luke it is just St. Luke, no *Reproaches* or Latin text, sung purely and simply by the two choirs. And the words of Christ in the St. Luke's are taken by children's chorus, not a man, but a kind of disembodied sound which kind of makes you think of Christ's innocence. It is also sometimes in one part, just one single line, or in three parts, again a theological implication looking on the triadic nature of the Trinity. So, there are many musical and indeed extra musical considerations going on in the writing of these works. I enjoy trying to educate myself in areas of history and scripture and reading and it all feed into the imagination, I think. The next short excerpt from chapter 23 in St. Luke's, you will hear the orchestra, the four-part choir telling the story, and if we've got time, you may hear the children singing the words of Christ.

I have tried to tell the Crucifixion story in other ways too: in *The Seven Last Words*, the 14 stations of the Cross, there's a little piano trio of mine, no words at all, the piano, violin and cello, *14 Little Pictures* it's called; again, it's another journey towards God. I've also written a *Stabat Mater* quite recently for one of the great British choirs, *The Sixteen*. Again, the same story, but seen through a different pair of eyes, Mary's eyes, and a very different perspective altogether with its own history, its own tradition, deep into the past through many great composers, of course, Pergolesi, Victoria and way back. It's an interesting theme and an inexhaustible theme for me. It is not the only thing I want to do, I like writing purely instrumental works without titles or with generic titles, String quartet no. 3, for example, Horn Quintet, but I think I will continue to come back, almost like an obsession, to see the possibilities of new ways of exploring this very important day in the history of humanity; the day when Christ died.