



Music

Hell, Set to Music

by David St.-Lascaux

ARGENTO CHAMBER ENSEMBLE AND THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY CHORALE AT ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, OCTOBER 27

Dies iræ! Dies illa. So begins the brimstone *Sequentia* proper of the Requiem Mass. If you find this, or America's current sociopolitical state, unfathomable, you may be in denial that, according to a 2011 Gallup Poll, 92 percent of Americans "believe in God." Whatever Mozart believed in 1791, he was nominally, ambiguously Theophilus/Gottlieb/Amadeus—"God loving/God beloved." He was also mortal, and, having taken the commission to write a requiem for the deceased wife of a nefarious nobleman, died at 35, before its completion.

...solvat sæclum in favilla. Over 200 years later (in 2005), Georg Friedrich Haas, a fellow Austrian genius composer, wrote *Sieben Klangräume* (Seven Soundspaces), in which he alternated the unfinished fragments of Mozart's *Requiem Mass in D minor* (K. 626) with his own innovations. (Haas is dope: His midnight lightning storm *in vain* [2000] was performed by the Argento Chamber Ensemble at the Tune-In festival at the Park Avenue Armory last year; early credits include a collaborative chamber opera, *Wölflí Szenen* [Wölflí Scenes; 1981], based on the musical notation of Adolf Wölflí, the Swiss schizophrenic outsider artist.) *Soundspaces*, his doppelt-antiphonal synthesis, performed at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church by Argento and the College of New Jersey Chorale (which combined to premiere it in 2011), was at turns uncanny and supernatural.



Argento Chamber Ensemble. Photo: Argento.

Confutatis maledictis. Argento disarmed the audience with an otherwise irrelevant warm-up—Mozart's *Andante for Flute and Orchestra* (K. 315), in which the criminally talented Paula Robison played, on a literally golden flute, classic, mellifluous Mozart. So melted, we were no match for what followed.

...flammis acribus addictis. Perhaps I should've realized that the subject of a concert in a church might be religious. Although I'd visited the Byzantine/Romanesque St. Bart's before, and gaped at its glitter-tessellated celestial domes, triune chancel-flanking columns, and chaste Caucasian

stained-glass angels, I hadn't fully grasped that the evening's fare would be a reflection on the Last Judgment and certain personal Consequences. Haas's own beliefs being unknown, the odds that 92 percent of Argento's and the Chorale's members are also believers gave the evening's apocalyptic liturgy a Dark Age Halloween's Eve overtone.

Lacrimosa dies illa. After the standard *Requiem* incipits and the *Dies iræ*, Haas invisibly insinuated the first *Soundspace*, in response to which an inattentive Zenchild might be forgiven for thinking, *Wow! I didn't know Mozart wrote that.* When what was happening sunk in, Haas had the listener hooked—enrapt by Mozart's sober harmonies while anticipating Haas's next unpredictable installment.

...qua resurget ex favilla. *Soundspaces* is a consummately "tuned," challenging work, requiring musical mindshifts to audit (and, no doubt, perform). Its spectral passages, inviting comparison, leave Mozart's minor-major lexicon behind for a psychoacoustic one. Because the Haas vocabulary includes illusionary Shepard tones, the performers—vocalists and musicians—at times sounded computer-modulated. Argento, under conductor Michel Galante, and the Chorale, under choir master John P. Leonard, were impressively aligned; the Chorale's soloists modulaminous.

...judicandus homo reus. While entrancing overall, *Soundspaces* traded effect for perfection. At lull, the strings engaged in uninteresting, extended open-string sequences; in force, *Soundspaces* transported listeners to the edges of the universe. György Ligeti's *Requiem, of 2001: A Space Odyssey* fame, and fragments of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* also made cameos, as did imaginary didgeridoos and real timpani.

Domine Iesu Christe, Rex gloriæ, libera animas omnium fidelium defunctorum. The genius of *Soundspaces* lies in its interwoven flow and seamless integration of two distinctly different musical languages, which surely isn't easy. The contrast between Haas's masterwork and a recent program at Columbia, in which the International Contemporary Ensemble inserted works by John Cage between the movements of Pierre Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître* (1955), couldn't have been starker. While both performances were undeniably complex, Argento symphonically cohered while ICE's program, whose lay-up libretto was that of French surrealist poet René Char, was shambolic.

...de pœnis inferni et de profundo lacu. Did the lyrics matter? Perhaps to the performers, the words were quaint mediæval chant—vocal cord Latin. To this listener, seated in a cathedral's nave, unsympathetic emotions (conniptions, actually) arose. According to the BBC, the Vatican, having disavowed the seven centuries-old concept of Sheol-salvaging Limbo in 2006, announced an additional set of Deadly Sins in 2009: "genetic modification, experiments on the person, environmental pollution, taking or selling illegal drugs, social injustice, causing poverty, and financial greed," while setting forth a sex-biased hierarchy of the original seven (men, lust; women, pride). The good news: A lot of so-deserving souls will burn in everlasting flames. Mozart? Decomposing—decomposed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID ST.-LASCAUX is a poet and author of the upcoming memoir *My Adventures with la Belle Jeune Fille ; L'Oubliette, or Plan A; and e*sequiturs*. Website: davidstlascaux.com.

