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Paul Crowley

MUSIC OF THE INVISIBLE

Messiaen's 'Saint Francis'

Saint François d'Assise, Olivier Messiaen's only operatic work, received its world premiere in Paris in 1983. It has rarely been performed since, partly because of the sheer scope and audacity of the project, but also because of its subject matter—faith itself. This fall, the San Francisco Opera, newly directed by Pamela Rosenberg, gave the opera its U.S. premiere in its namesake city. It was a brilliant gamble, possibly opening a new operatic door in America. This is an opera unlike any other—an unabashed paean to music, to nature, and to the mystical path to joy seen in the figure of Francis (sung movingly by baritone Willard White).

Messiaen, who was born in 1908 and died in 1992, was a devout Catholic. For many years he served as principal organist and director of music at L'Église de la Trinité in Paris. Much of his oeuvre is infused with his own mystical faith, nourished in the soils of a French Catholicism at once pious and completely modern. In the person of Saint Francis, Messiaen found the meeting place of many of the drives of his own soul: the poverty, humility, and suffering of Jesus; the revelation of God in nature, especially in the beauty and song of birds; and the pathway to God through the prayer of music itself.

Those looking for a comforting spiritual romanticism in Messiaen had better look elsewhere. As subtly conducted by Donald Runnicles, this music stands closer to Wagner in its lush magnitude and to the early Stravinsky in its shocking effect. The recognizable influences here are Debussy and Bartok. There isn't a trace of the more didactic religious evocations of recent "transcendental"

composers such as Tavener, Pärt, or Górecki, much less the abstraction of Adams. This is to religious music what Rilke is to religious poetry: It converts through both its sheer boldness and its inner allure. Dissonance emerges through highly structured chord strata and haunting tonalities and atonalities working with and then against one another. Hindu raga rhythms flow underneath. Rarely heard instruments, notably the ondes



Blue & only one wing

SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

martenot, produce colorful, sonorous, and wild tones. Singing voices are introduced by a signature leitmotif, somewhat in the manner of Wagner.

The opera divides into eight scenes or tableaux. They translate not into plot, but into luminous occasions along Francis's road to God. An anxious tone is set right away with the words of Brother Leo (Johannes Kränzle): "I am afraid on the road." Francis himself moves fearfully along that road (here a spiraling platform), only to meet his worst fear, a leper. His angst is offset in the stunning third scene where he embraces and kisses the leper. The music pauses just

long enough to mark Francis's conversion, signaled suddenly by an exuberant dance theme that later recurs in fragments, always in connection with the joy promised at the end of the road of fear and suffering.

Francis then meets a one-winged blue Angel (soprano Laura Aiken), a visitor from "far beyond" who makes tremendous noise and rattles the cages of more than one of the friars. She also has an affinity for Francis. As the Angel seeks him out, "François, François" becomes a plaintive refrain, a divine wooing. The rendering of a pure intimacy between Francis and the Angel—as Francis is transfixed by the music of heaven—is uncannily expressive of mystical union. (The day I attended happened to coincide with the Blue Angels' air show over San Francisco. At precisely this point in the opera, I could hear the muffled roar of the fighter jets overhead, a disturbing intrusion into the drama on stage, but the very irony of it giving the message of Messiaen's blue Angel all the more poignancy.) The Angel-Musician invites Francis: "Listen to this music that suspends life from the ladders of heaven; listen to the music of the Invisible."

And so we do. Messiaen's unique musical signature comes into full play in "The Sermon to the Birds," the sixth tableau. It is the synthesis of his personal vision: the spiritual apex of Francis's earthly life, the heavenly "music" to which he was attuned, and Messiaen's own love for bird song (he was a well-traveled ornithologist who recorded bird sounds). The longest scene in the opera, it may be the most transcendent. Human voices give way to a glittering cacophony of bird voices that become interlocking and shifting polytonal structures, punctuated by seemingly chance atonal effects, something like an aural rendering of a Jackson Pollock painting, in seventy-five staves! The effect is ethereal, the action on stage stops, and for a moment we are lifted out of the opera itself. At this point I simply closed my eyes.

The final two tableaux, representing

the stigmata and the death of Francis, describe the arduous path of the Christian through suffering to the light of resurrection. The Cross is inscribed in the scenery itself, as a visible, three-dimensional scar on the floor of the stage. The stigmata arrives with eerie force: the Saint stands atop a platform that rises slowly above the stage. The entire musical burden is shifted to the massive chorus, while fierce sharp chords pronounce the onset of the bloody wounds. In the death scene, Francis is thrust toward the audience and over the orchestra, like a supine crucified Christ. Yet supernatural joy prevails. A pure white light shines on the Saint's body as the chorus sends him upward.

I was struck in San Francisco by the power of artistry to convey a conviction that cannot be expressed in the ordinary forms of the liturgy, much less by "official" theology. Few academic theologians could get away peddling in public the theology found in this opera (What? The path to God is becoming another Host in and through suffering?!) Yet somehow it stands, as a deeply modern yet stubbornly antimodern expression of what living Catholic faith boils down to. We are indebted to Messiaen for helping us see, and hear, that message. □

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STAGE

Celia Wren

FAST & EASY

Pop music invades Broadway



Deep wisdom dwells in the oeuvre of Billy Joel.

Such, at least, is the implication of *Movin' Out*, the bizarre dance-theater concoction that opened on Broadway in October to a cavalcade of hype—from blurbs on rock radio stations to a Richard Avedon photo spread in the *New Yorker*. Conceived and directed by the highly regarded choreographer Twyla Tharp, whose earlier venture into popular music, the witty *Nine Sinatra Songs*, is a favorite of many of her fans, *Movin' Out* features veteran dancers prancing up a tale of innocence lost and self-knowledge gained to the accompaniment of Billy Joel's greatest hits. These are performed by an on-stage band and a crooning Billy Joel sound-alike and pianist (Michael Cavanaugh). Remember the querulous couple Brenda and Eddie from the song "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant"? They are among the protagonists who come to terms with death, Vietnam, and low self-esteem in the show, which is set in a lower-middle-class Long Island community in the 1960s. If you have

ever desired to see a black-veiled, black-toe-shoed dancer impersonate a war widow to the strains of "The Stranger," your opportunity is here.

Such narrative moments vaguely attempt to tap the energy of Joel's lyrics, but *Movin' Out*'s soul belongs to dance. Within about thirty seconds, the opening number ("It's Still Rock and Roll to Me") has demonstrated not only the exhilarating proficiency of the dancers (Elizabeth Parkinson, Keith Roberts, and John Selya are among the principal performers) but the inherent interest of the choreography, which, even to someone ignorant of the art form can seem to be full of diverting idiosyncrasies, allusions, and intent—dance that means, rather than just dance that moves, the staple of many Broadway extravaganzas.

In upbeat numbers like "Uptown Girl," in which an elegant woman in a hot pink cocktail dress flirts through a pas de deux with a series of slouching jean-and-bandana-clad men, the show's energy is infectious. It's when tragedy steals up on Brenda, Eddie, and their pals that *Movin' Out* moves into problematic aes-

thetic territory. Toward the end of Act I, the action briefly shifts to wartime Vietnam; a wedge of military gear and what appear to be uniform-accoutered corpses slides into sight; to the accompaniment of strobe lights and the rebellious anthem "We Didn't Start the Fire," soldiers die.

Now, the music of Billy Joel isn't exactly Top 40 fluff, especially in an era that has given us Britney Spears, but the hell of war and the anguished solemnity of a military funeral (in a subsequent scene) are weighty thematic burdens for a rock song to support, and in these sections, the *Movin' Out* experiment is not a success. The fusion of pop music and dramatic elegy is simply too jarring: the oddness of the moment fractures the spell that Tharp and her artists, through sheer verve and hit-tune infectiousness, have cast.

The gap between aim and result, here, may be particularly troubling insofar as *Movin' Out* exemplifies a current theatrical trend: the concoction of shows centered on classic popular-music tunes. Just a few blocks from Tharp's production, the year-old *Mamma Mia*—a collection of Abba's greatest hits propped on a wafer-thin excuse for a narrative—is playing to 90 percent percent audience capacity. Elsewhere in the country, *My Way: A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra* is one of the most-performed plays in regional theaters this season, while, in the United Kingdom, the Broadway-bound *We Will Rock You*, based on the music of Queen, proved such a smash that the creators are brewing up a sequel. Dramaturgical machinery has chewed through the songs of Janis Joplin, John Denver, Hank Williams, and the pop groups Culture Club, the Pet Shop Boys, and Madness, just to name a few, and the results have met with considerable popular success.

The phenomenon responds to the same human predisposition for embracing the familiar—as opposed to greeting the new—that has turned movie studios into franchise factories (*Spy Kids 2*, *Austin Powers*) and that keeps TV channels airing formulaic dramas and sitcoms. Pop-soundtrack plays may also reflect the short attention spans of a public accustomed to sound bytes, the fre-