

Jean Françaix - L'Apocalypse selon St. Jean (1998)



"Oratorio fantastique" in Three Parts for Four Soloists, Mixed Choruses and Two Orchestras"

1. 1. Prologue
2. Part One: 2. Letter To The Seven Churches
3. Part One: 3. A Vision Of God's Throne
4. Part One: 4. Manifestation Of The Lion-The Lamb Receives The Book Of The Seven Seals
5. Part One: 5. Opening Of The Book Of The Seven Seals: a) Breaking Of The First Four Seals... [play](#)
6. Part One: 5. Opening Of The Book Of The Seven Seals: b) Breaking Of The Fifth Seal...
7. Part One: 5. Opening Of The Book Of The Seven Seals: c) Breakig Of The Sixth Seal...
8. Part One: 5. Opening Of The Book Of The Seven Seals: d) Breaking Of The Seventh Seal...
9. Part Two: 6. Vision Of The Seven Trumpets: a) The Angels With The Trumpets...
10. Part Two: 6. Vision Of The Seven Trumpets: b) The First Four Trumpets
11. Part Two: 6. Vision Of The Seven Trumpets: c) The Last Three Trumpets
12. Part Two: 7. a) Opening Of The Bottomless Pit
13. Part Two: 7. b) Invasion Of The Locusts
14. Part Two: 7. c) Invasion Of The 200 Million Horsemen
15. Part Two: 7. d) The Two Witnesses
16. Part Three: 8. Vision Of The Woman And The Dragon
17. Part Three: 9. The Battle Of Michael With The Dragon
18. Part Three: 9. The Battle Of Michael With The Dragon: a) The Beast Of The Sea
19. Part Three: 9. The Battle Of Michael cheal With The Dragon: b) The Best Of The Earth -
20. Part Three: 9. The Battle Of Michael With The Dragon: c) Babylon The Harlot [pla](#)
21. Part Three: 9. The Battle Of Michael With The Dragon: d) The Millennium
22. Part Three: 9. The Battle Of Michael With The Dragon: e) Gog And Magog
23. Part Three: 9. The Battle Of Michael With The Dragon: f) The Celestial Jerusalem
24. Part Three: 10. Epilogue

Eva Lind, soprano

Waltraud Hoffmann-Mucher, contralto

Kurt Azesberger, tenor

Robert Holzer, bass

Herbert Bolterauer, organ
St. Jacobi-Kantorei, Göttingen (Arwed Henking, director)
Jeunesse-Chor Linz (Wolfgang Mayrhofer, director)
Göttingen Symphony Orchestra,
Christian Simonis, conductor

Six months prior to his death in September of 1997, Jean Françaix wrote a letter of thanks to the Göttingen Symphony Orchestra: "I am deeply indebted to you for mounting my beloved 'Apocalypse,' which I consider my most important work, particularly because of its admirable text, which reaches further than the work of my illustrious patron [saint], St. John, is commonly thought to reach." Thus the composer credited his oratorio's importance not to his own compositional skills but to the document that inspired it, the Revelation of St. John. This difficult, final chapter of the New Testament presents humanity with a prophetic image of the end of Time, the Last Judgment and the final flowering of God's creation. It is couched in a series of cryptic visions, often deemed to be allegorical and symbolic, and its interpretation has long been a source of controversy among Christians. Françaix, believing that music has the power to communicate subtleties that might otherwise be lost in written or spoken language, sought in his *Apocalypse selon St. Jean* not so much to interpret these prophesies as to illuminate them from within.

The composer was a devoutly religious man, and the depth of his belief is one of the hallmarks of this work. Listening to one episode after another, we become aware that there is sense of solidity underfoot. It is an unhurried composition, and the assured manner in which it unfolds carries the listener forward. To be sure, there are moments anxious and triumphant! The Four Horsemen are loosed upon the Earth; the dead are judged; the clouds do part and angelic trumpets sound, but, a calm and resolute thread winds its way through the fabric of the whole work. I can find no name for this quality other than "Faith." Yet, I feel the word needs some qualification, for the faith of Jean Françaix is not the hysterical faith of the zealot but the tranquil trust of one who has experienced that, indeed, "God shall wipe away all tears...."

Françaix chose to compose this work for two orchestras, their opposing tonal principles representing the sacred and the profane. A symphony orchestra and organ comprise the celestial orchestra. The infernal band is composed of only very high and very low instruments as well as the "vulgar" sounds of the accordion, harmonium, saxophone and electric guitar. (Lovers of free-reed instruments be warned! Françaix once described the accordion as sounding "like an organ that went through the wash.") While confining himself to a surprisingly narrow range of expressive devices, especially considering his large resources, he nevertheless

creates some delicious sounds and subtle textures.

In the composer's mind, the biblical text was of paramount importance, therefore he framed it in clear, uncluttered vocal lines. In true oratorio fashion, the soloists and choruses are not quite full-blown characterizations, yet they are more than simple agents delivering the text. Their voices are integral to the color, texture and design of the piece. Solos range from Christ's ominous and chant-like "Letter to the Seven Churches," for bass voice accompanied only by distant, rolling timpani, to the swaggering syncopation of the soprano's "Babylon the Courtesan." Her reeling accordion and saxophone accompaniment can only be described as bawdy! All images finally dissolve into "The Heavenly Jerusalem," and the composition reaches a quiet apotheosis with the fading choruses chanting "He is, he was, he shall come..."

The musical structure of Françaix's Apocalypse is wholly dependent upon his text, and due to its recitative-like nature, care is required to prevent a lackluster and dragging performance. On this recording, the St. Jacobi-Kantorei, Jeunesse-Chor of Linz and Göttingen Symphony Orchestra give a relaxed, yet well-paced reading of the score under the baton of music director, Christian Simonis. The German vocalists turn out surprisingly clear renderings of the French text, although I often had to refer to the libretto during the choruses.

This well-recorded CD would make a worthwhile addition to any collection of sacred, concert or twentieth century music. Françaix found his unique and tonally-centered compositional ideal early in his career and remained true to it throughout his life. He resisted the trends followed by many of his contemporaries who courted atonality, tone rows, and more severe and (to my ears) trying methodologies. The booklet that accompanies the disk is very complete, containing biographical details about the composer, commentary on the piece and a complete libretto in German, English and French. This recording is also a fine tribute to the composer, summing up his oeuvre and saying adieu to a man who spoke with a Voice of Harmony during the Age of Clamor. It likewise provides a perfect close to the waning century and millennium—a time when bizarre, apocalyptic visions abound! Unlike the images of many doomsayers, Françaix's musical reflection of Eternity is ultimately a serene and compassionate one. As the sun sets on these final moments of the second millennium, I will keep in my heart his hope that as it rises on the beginning of the third, this same serenity and compassion will be held up as an ideal for all to follow. --Gregory A. Vozar

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Środa, 02 Luty 2011 20:00 - Zmieniony Piątek, 15 Listopad 2013 14:10

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