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Music for Airports (review)

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Choral Ikons. DVD. James Whitbourn / The Choir. Heathfield, East Sussex, UK: Opus Arte, 2002. OA 0855 D. \$25.00.

This film presents several *a capella* sacred choral works by Sir John Tavener in a virtual reality presentation featuring the Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul interspersed with Orthodox icons. Conductor James Whitbourn and his vocal ensemble, The Choir, are placed in the church and in front of icons. Individual singers and pairings of singers are also a part of many of the pieces. There are some pieces in which the church or the icons are presented with the choral music only heard. Whitbourn and The Choir give a very impressive and spiritual performance with attention to the importance of the religious text.

The choral works performed in this film are: *As One Who Has Slept*; *A Hymn to the Mother of God*; *Song for Athene*; *A Parting Gift for Tam Farrow*; *Annunciation*; *Magnificat*; *Nunc Dimittis*; *The Lamb*; *The Tyger*; *The Hymn of the Unwaning Light*; and *The Lord's Prayer*.

The DVD has three parts: "Choral Ikons," which is the performance of the pieces; "Manifestations of God," featuring Tavener's own words on the creation and meaning of his compositions, and "The Ikon Chooses You," an historical explanation on the artistic and religious origins of icons.

The viewer may choose to watch "Manifestations of God" to hear about all the pieces performed, or view the segment on each piece after viewing the performance of the individual pieces. Regardless of the order the viewer selects, Tavener's explanations of the texts, the occasions or events associated with composing some of the pieces, and his views on the "cosmic events" of the lives of Jesus and Mary, the Mother of God are a valuable and enlightening feature of this film. Tavener points out sections of Byzantine text, most of which deal with the risen Christ.

The pieces performed in this film deal with several spiritual concepts and entities, including Mary, the Mother of God and the

resurrected Christ. It also includes Tavener's choral settings for two poems by William Blake: *The Lamb* and *The Tyger*. Perhaps the best known piece in the film is *Song for Athene*, written on the death of a friend's daughter. An interview with the parents of Athene is included with the composer's description of the piece and the event. The most dramatic work and perhaps the climax of the film is "The Hymn of the Unwaning Light." This hymn of Resurrection proclaims that "Christ is risen from the dead; trampling down death by death . . ." Tavener explains that is a processional in one of the Easter services. The performance of the choir brings out this aspect of the hymn by beginning the piece at some distance from the conductor and walking forward for some sections so that they are right in front of the conductor as the piece ends.

The third segment of the DVD, "The Ikon Chooses You," features Robert J. Roozemond, director of the Ikon Museum, Stichting ODIGIA-Instituut, The Hague, The Netherlands. Roozemond lectures on the origin and history of the icon in Christianity, including the definition, religious meaning, and the painting technique. His definition of an icon is that it is "essentially an image of the word." The title of this feature refers to Roozemond's comment that when he assists an Orthodox family looking for an icon for their home he believes "the icon chooses them."

This DVD will interest viewers of several types. Those performing, researching, or conducting sacred choral works will find the performance of the pieces and the segment by Tavener enjoyable and educational. For those interested in Orthodox icons and their spiritual meaning, the segment with Roozemond should not be missed.

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Music for Airports. DVD. Directed by Frank Scheffer. Music by Brian Eno. Performed by Bang on a Can All-Stars. [London]: Medici Arts, 2008. 3077558. \$24.99.

This DVD contains two films—Brian Eno's *Music for Airports*, performed in an arrangement by Bang on a Can All-Stars, and *In the Ocean*, a documentary on the founders of Bang on a Can musical festival, featuring Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe.

Brian Eno originally composed *Music for Airports* in 1978, for voices, acoustic piano, and synthesizer, as a means to alleviate irritation caused by going through airport terminals. In doing this, he pioneered the concept of "ambient music," which he differentiated from "canned music" (or "Muzak")—environmental music unworthy of attention. Ambient music, in Eno's eyes, was intended to induce calm and create space to think, and had to "be as ignorable as it [was] interesting" (Brian Eno, "liner notes from *Music for Airports*," EnoWeb, http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/).

In Frank Scheffer's film, *Music for Airports* is performed in a "live" instrumental version arranged by the experimental music group Bang on a Can All-Stars. Each of the four movements—1/1, 1/2, 2/1, 2/2—are arranged respectively by Bang on a Can members Michael Gordon, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Evan Ziporyn. The movements are scored for instruments used consistently by the Bang on a Can ensemble, including cello, clarinet, electric guitar, percussion, piano/keyboards, and double bass. When Bang on a Can performed their new instrumental version live during the Holland Festival in 1999, it was performed against the backdrop of digital film by Frank Scheffer, shot at Amsterdam's Schipol Airport. Scheffer uses only out-of-focus shots, which merges well with the ambient music of *Music for Airports*. It is Bang on a Can's performance juxtaposed with Scheffer's film footage that is presented here.

Compared with the music on the original album of *Music for Airports*, the use of acoustic instruments (in addition to piano) makes this version more interesting. Particularly striking is the sound of the stringed instruments, electric guitar as well as percussion in each movement. The use of clarinet is not as noticeable.

Scheffer's out-of-focus filming style is also employed differently in each movement. This is mostly seen in how specific parts of

the airport are featured, resulting in differing color schema in each movement. The color schema is of course contingent upon the original images Scheffer was able to obtain, but it is interesting how consistent the colors seem in each specific movement. For example, Movement 1/1 shows images of people walking through revolving doors and the terminal, and riding up and down elevators and escalators—blacks and whites predominate near the beginning of the movement, and shades of green are presented later. Movement 1/2 primarily contains images of planes outside the airport windows, and the color schema consists mostly of shades of blue. As the movement progresses, the time of day also changes from day to night, and then ends with a plane taking off. Movement 2/1 employs mostly blues, whites and blacks of people moving about, possibly outside the terminal. Movement 2/2 probably contains the most distinct images of human forms moving about the terminal, employing mostly yellows, whites and flesh tones.

Combined with Bang on a Can's arrangements of Eno's music, Scheffer has captured this ambience well through his out-of-focus filming style. Had the filmed images been more distinguishable, the "ambient" effect would not have been as strong. Considering again Eno's statement that ambient music "must be as ignorable as it is interesting," the out-of-focus filming style achieves the same effect from a visual standpoint (Brian Eno, "liner notes from *Music for Airports*," EnoWeb, http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/ [accessed 18 November 2009]). Through the use of non-distinct images, the viewer is able to be immersed in an environment of color and movement without necessarily paying too much attention to anything specific. The result of viewing is simultaneously intriguing, calming and hypnotic.

The second film on this DVD, *In the Ocean*, tells the story of Bang on a Can within the larger context of the New York and American music scene. The instrumentation of the group includes clarinets, cello, keyboards, electric guitar, and bass, making it part rock band, part chamber group. According to their Web site, the group was constructed in part to blur the lines between classical and popular ensembles. The music composed by members of the group

is intentionally genre-defying (Bang on a Can All Stars, "About," http://bangonacan.org/all_stars/about [accessed 18 November 2009]).

The first part of this film frames the musical landscape from which Bang on a Can emerged. The film almost exclusively focuses on New York City, with music of the various composers set against the backdrop of city scenes interspersed with interview footage. Interviews with Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and others who influenced Bang on a Can, as well as Bang on a Can musicians are included throughout. Reich and Glass discuss how their minimalist music was originally ostracized by the American academic establishment, which is in part why Bang on a Can musicians were originally attracted to their music. Founders Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe also discuss how the forming of their group was a means of bridging "uptown" music (associated with the "academy" and high art) and "downtown" music (associated with minimalism, inspired in part by popular music). The film eventually transitions to a focus on Bang on a Can itself, with members Gordon, Lang and Wolfe acknowledging the influence of Reich and Glass on their music, as well as Dutch composers Louis Andriessen and Martijn Padding.

Towards the end of the film, the focus goes back to Bang on a Can's arrangement

of Brian Eno's *Music for Airports*, where Eno openly appreciates the work Bang on a Can brought to his music. He believed that Bang on a Can brought emotion to the music that he originally did not put there.

The film follows a logical progression in presenting all the elements surrounding Bang on a Can's formation. The interviews with composers influential to Bang on a Can do well in explaining musical and cultural circumstances from which the group emerged. Additionally, the excerpts from each of these composers' works, set against the backdrop of New York City scenes, enhance these explanations both aurally and visually. As a result, viewers will emerge from this film better able to contextualize Bang on a Can's role within the current American musical landscape, as well as achieving a heightened awareness of some of the issues currently surrounding American music as a whole.

The program notes accompanying this DVD, in both English and French, do well to frame the context of both films, and also serve as a means of tying both together. It is useful to read these prior to viewing the films.

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Christa Ludwig, *Die Winterreise*. DVD. Produced and directed by Eugene Sánchez Lansch. [Halle, Germany]: Arthaus Musik, 2009. 102 147. \$24.99.

The performance of *Die Winterreise* preserved on this disc took place in Athens in 1994 and was specially prepared for television; it was not for the benefit of an immediate audience. The performers, renowned mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig and accomplished pianist Charles Spencer (who is also professor of Lied Interpretation for singers and pianists at the Hochschule für Musik in Frankfurt), are of one mind—in perfect accord—as they bring forth Schubert's great song cycle to life. As a bonus, the disc contains the first part of a master class showing Ludwig publicly coaching three aspiring professional singers in matters of phrasing and interpretation. The second part of the class is on another disc,

"Christa Ludwig: Lieder Recital," which was not received for review here.

The liner notes that are included with this recording include a transcript (in English and French as well as the original German) of an interview with Ludwig conducted in December 2007 during which the singer discusses (1) approaching the performance of *Winterreise*, describing the issues of the "female perspective," transposition, and contemporary significance of the poems; and (2) her own musical background and pedagogical philosophy. This material yields insight into her conception of the cycle as the "journey of a soul" which, to her mind, renders moot the question of whether the cycle is more appropri-