

Good Friday Service of Word and Music

Friday, April 10, 2020

Agnes Norfleet, Pastor

Branson Yeast, Cello

Jeffrey Brillhart, Piano

Vocalise

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Though his chosen instrument, the piano, is categorized as a percussion instrument, Sergei Rachmaninoff became one of music's most inspired melodists. He poured his lyrical gift into some 80 songs, whose popularity is only limited by their being in the Russian language and thus off-limits to many prominent international singers.

One that is not hampered by language is the exquisitely beautiful Vocalise that closes his set of 14 songs, opus 34, for it is a wordless composition for soprano, sung mostly on the vowel sound "Ah." It was written in 1915 for the coloratura soprano Antonina Nezhdanova, a star of the Moscow Grand Opera, and when she objected to the lack of a poetic text, the composer gallantly replied: "What need is there of words, when you will be able to convey everything better and more expressively than anyone could with words by your voice and interpretation?"

Written in a minor key, like so many of Rachmaninoff's best pieces, Vocalise has a melancholy undertone that reflects the composer's dark mood at this time, as Russia struggled through World War I and hovered on the brink of revolution. Its opening melodic phrase is an artfully disguised version of the ancient "Dies Irae" ("Day of Judgment") plainchant theme for the Requiem Mass for the Dead; this grim musical idea was a recurring motive throughout much of Rachmaninoff's music. But the effortless, unending flow of melody — unfolding in beautiful, arching phrases — triumphs over the sadness.

From the Power of the Powerless, by Jurgen Moltmann

Agnes Norfleet

Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007

J.S. Bach

Bach's first cello suite became his most famous one. The cellist begins the well-known prelude in a gentle, radiant G major. The pattern of the suite follows that of the other cello suites: a free prelude, followed by a fast Allemande and Courante, a contemplative Sarabande, a Minuet and a closing lively Gigue.

Homily

Agnes Norfleet

Quartet for the End of Time

Olivier Messiaen

V. "Praise to the eternity of Jesus"

The importance of a composer's early influences is difficult to overestimate. In 1918, one year before Messiaen entered the Paris Conservatoire, his teacher Jehan de Gibon gave him a score of Debussy's opera Pélleas et Mélisande. Messiaen described it as "a

thunderbolt” and “probably the most decisive influence on me.” Perhaps this as much as anything would determine his musical roots, which lay in Debussy’s anti-symphonic outlook, rather than the 19th-century symphonic tradition. But even by the time he wrote Quatuor pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the End of Time), Messiaen had found his own modal system with a completely individual sound.

The quartet came out of, and was originally performed in, very particular circumstances. Near the beginning of World War II Messiaen was summoned for military service. He was captured in May 1940, and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp at Görlitz in Silesia (now mostly within the borders of Poland). In the dead of winter of 1940-41, he wrote the quartet for the instruments on hand among the camp’s inmates: violin, cello, clarinet, and (himself playing) piano. The first performance took place before a large audience of prisoners. It was his most ambitious work so far – a sequence of eight movements that spoke to this Biblical passage from Revelations:

I saw a mighty angel descend from heaven, clad in mist; and a rainbow was upon his head. His face was like the sun, his feet like pillars of fire. He set his right foot on the sea, his left foot on the earth, and standing thus on sea and earth he lifted his hand to heaven and swore by Him who liveth for ever and ever, saying: There shall be time no longer; but on the day of the trumpet of the seventh angel, the mystery of God shall be finished.

Messiaen’s understanding of this passage speaks not to a vision of the Apocalypse, nor to his own situation as a prisoner, but to the idea of the end of Time as the end of past and future and the beginning of eternity. The music was meant to be an extension of the Angel of the Apocalypse’s words, and one with particular musical meaning, for Messiaen was no longer interested in time as rhythm. He did not want to hear steady rhythms like military drums, and instead aspired to rhythms outside of time. Messiaen wrote the following explanation of the fifth movement:

Jesus is considered here as the Word. A broad phrase, “infinitely slow”, on the cello, magnifies with love and reverence the eternity of the Word, powerful and gentle, “whose time never runs out”. The melody stretches majestically into a kind of gentle, regal distance. “In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)

Branson Yeast, Cellist

Cellist Branson Yeast is a native of Houston, Texas and a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music and the Juilliard School. His performances as a chamber musician, soloist, and orchestral musician have brought him to Chicago, London, Lucerne, Hamburg, Heidelberg, St-Jean-de-Luz (broadcast on RadioFrance), and across the north-eastern United States. While at Curtis, Branson was the last student of the late David Soyer of the Guarneri Quartet, a Jacqueline du Pré Memorial Fellow, and his graduation recital aired on WHYIY Television. His passion for contemporary music has led him to make dozens of premieres of new works, including many chamber music and solo performances with ballet companies such as BalletX. Branson is a protégé of cellist Wendy Warner and was recently named Principal Cello of both Opera Philadelphia and the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia.