

**Concert Report: Ensemble Secundum Silentium
at St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights (February 14)**

Published February 22, 2010

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The world, musically and spiritually, has become a very small place indeed. An English composer -- who can trace his family roots to the Elizabethan Age, and is himself a convert to Russian Orthodox Christianity -- is inspired to set texts by a Swiss-born poet, who is a practitioner of Sufism. These songs are performed on a February evening by an American ensemble, led by a Bulgarian. The ensemble has a Latin name.

The group in question is Ensemble Secundum Silentium, which presented a program of works centering around the contemporary British composer Sir John Tavener this past Sunday evening at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights. Ensemble Secundum Silentium is essentially a string orchestra, comprised mainly of students or recent graduates of CIM and directed by Zahari Metchkov, who is himself on the Faculty at CIM (as well as Youngstown State University). In this performance, the orchestra was reduced to a quartet: Greta Mutlu and Michelle Abraham, violins; Cynthia Black, viola; and Joshua Zajac, cello; in addition to directing, Mr. Metchkov also supplied various keyboard and percussion parts.

Tavener is among those composers whose musical style and religious themes have been succinctly -- if inaccurately -- described as "Mystical Minimalism", and the work which opened the concert, 'The Last Sleep of the Virgin', written in 2002 for string quartet and handbells, is fully within

that style. Handbell music is typically an exercise in group dynamics, performed by a choir whose members each play two or three bells. In this instance, Mr. Metchkov handled twenty, suspended in two rows from a wooden frame and struck with mallets -- mallets of differing hardness produced differing tone colors, which, in a twenty minute piece for handbells, is a great boon. The bells played melodies drawn from Byzantine chant, around which the strings played drones, quiet trilled figures, and somber counterpoint. Despite the bells being positioned front and center, Mr. Metchkov played them almost at the bottom limit of audibility, with the pleasant result that the chant lines never protruded from the string texture.

The contemporary composer John Tavener claims to be a direct descendant from the 16th century composer John Taverner, much in the same way the modern string instruments are (collateral) descendants of the Renaissance viols; so it was rather fitting that the program included a work by the elder Taverner. 'In Nomine' is an instrumental transcription of a section of Taverner's Mass 'Gloria Tibi Trinitas', and subsequently served as the model for innumerable Elizabethan consort works of the same name. It was odd, but not unpleasant, to hear this performed on modern instruments.

"Mystical Minimalism" is associated with a musical style which is predominantly tonal, full of somber diatonic harmonies and minor-modal scales; but this is not the only musical language with which to address the Divine, as displayed by the two works for solo organ with which Mr. Metchkov chose to finish the first half of the program. Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's 'Veni Creator Spiritus', from 2002, buries the joyful Gregorian hymn-tune in masses of unsettling dissonant counterpoint, before unexpectedly evaporating into a quiet cadence. Olivier Messiaen's 'Transports de joie', excerpted from his 1934 cycle 'L'Ascension', uses dissonance to the opposite effect. It is extroverted, un-self-consciously joyous, and not a little campy: its thunderous finish ends with a chord progression which would be right at home in the theme music to

a 1950's TV sitcom.

Messiaen might well have enjoyed the poems by the European mystic Frithjof Schuon which Tavener set in 2004 for soprano, string quartet, piano, and four Tibetan temple bowls: their themes of the Divine in Nature, Romantic Love, and blending of the Sensual and Spiritual realms echoes imagery found in much of Messiaen's work. Ensemble *Secundum Silentium* gave us a selection of eight of the songs; for these Mr. Metchkov (on piano) and the quartet were joined by percussionist Christopher Zajac and soprano Megan Drake. In setting these,

Tavener often adopts a style reminiscent of Messiaen's: sweeping melodies for the voice and strings set against richly chromatic, bell-like chords in the piano. At other times, his language is almost Mahlerian, with the awe-inspired and ecstatic intimacy of the Rückert-lieder. Ms. Drake, who graduated from Oberlin College and is currently enrolled in a doctorate program at CWRU, shone in the difficult soprano role, with its high tessitura (often hanging on high A's) and its angular melismas on odd, unaccented syllables.