

Preview

Paul Festa talks about Apparition of the Eternal Church, the Messiaen film to screen at Oberlin May 5

Oberlin brings its season-long Olivier Messiaen Festival to a conclusion on May 5th at 8 in Finney Chapel with a performance of Visions de l'Amen by duo-pianists Robert Shannon and Haewon Song and the Ohio premiere screening of Paul Festa's film *Apparition of the Eternal Church*.

Described by the Chicago Sun-Times as "perhaps the finest film ever made on how people experience music, and one of the best-crafted and moving documentaries in a very long time", *Apparition* is difficult to describe. Alex Ross of *The New Yorker* called it an "intensely personal documentary" and noted that "Festa's website gives a sense of the movie, although nothing can quite prepare you for the experience."

The brainchild of a Yale English major who studied violin at Juilliard, *Apparition* was born out of intense discussions about music with the late Albert Fuller. After coaching Paul Festa (above) and his trio at his private studio in Manhattan, he would invite everyone to stick around for champagne. As Paul, relates it, "He would talk, and we would listen. It wasn't that we couldn't say anything, but what he was saying was so instructive, such a revelation about the kinds of drama that lay behind all kinds of non-programmatic music. He heard the drama, he heard the opera. It was the most important thing I learned at Juilliard in three years. It just completely taught me how to reimagine music".

This intensive approach to hearing and discussing music stayed with Festa. "Every time I would come to New York after graduation, I would sit at Albert's bar and he would pour me a glass of champagne and we'd listen to music and talk through it. So collecting things to bring to Albert was always in the back of my mind".

Meanwhile, Paul was discovering Messiaen. "My entry to Messiaen should have been through the Quartet for the End of Time, which I played when I was a student, but it didn't get under my skin. I didn't really get it". Then he happened to check out a CD of French organ music from a public library in Lake Forest, IL where he was attending a writers' retreat. He became obsessed with Messiaen's *Le Banquet Céleste* (The Celestial Banquet, a commu-

nion mediation). "I listened to it over and over, several times a day. When I got back to San Francisco, I thought, I have to listen to everything this man wrote for the organ." So Paul bought Olivier Latry's six-CD set of the complete organ music. "The first track on the first disk was *Apparition of the Eternal Church*, and I had this really intensely emotional and disembodied experience listening to it for the first time. The first thing that came to mind was, I have to take this piece to New York and play it for Albert Fuller."

The piece is familiar to most organists but not to many others, even those who know Messiaen's other works. A stark, 10 minute piece with an inexorable but irregular rhythmic pulse that builds to a huge climax then subsides into quietness, *Apparition* comes directly out of Messiaen's intense Catholic theology—and is susceptible to a wide range of interpretations by the listener.

Not only did he play *Apparition* for Albert Fuller (left), Paul Festa also interviewed him in front of the camera while Fuller was listening to a piece he vaguely remembered playing at Washington Cathedral half a century ago. Fuller's colorful reactions begat the idea for a documentary film in which Paul would play the Messiaen piece for a number of people and get them to talk about what they were hearing.

Eventually, over the course of three years, Paul filmed 115 interviews. "I would greet anyone who walked into my apartment and say, Oh, by the way, would you mind sitting down and signing a release and putting on some headphones and talking for ten minutes? I just asked everybody. And there were certain people that I chased because they just weren't the sort of people that walked in my front door. I had taken Harold Bloom's Shakespeare seminar at Yale and was thrilled to get that interview. A lot of my English professors are in this film."

Besides musicians and academics, a vast range of personalities put on the headsets, talked away and made a variety of photogenic facial expressions in front of Paul's lens. The final cut of the film, made at the MacDowell Colony, includes 31 people, some of whom appear only in one or two clips. The

subjects run the gamut from the ordinary to the outrageous (and provide some rather racy commentary). And perhaps oddly for a film that puts out an intensely religious piece for discussion, *Apparition* includes a number of non-believers and antagonists.

“Why the focus on these people who are so divorced or alienated from the Church? For me as a secular person, as an agnostic bordering on atheist, and frankly also as a gay man, the Church is a really scary, off-putting place. While there are some obvious exceptions, it’s not a place where I feel that my beliefs and my identity are welcome. Then I have this encounter with a devout Catholic’s art, and it’s a life-changing experience. It makes me think that I’m obviously on the verge of having some kind of religious experience — a genuinely theological religious experience as opposed to a purely musical or aesthetic one”.

As it turns out, the experience was not religiously transformative. “It’s not leading me to believe in the religion that’s behind it, but it’s communicating Messiaen’s experience of that religion. Falling in love with Messiaen’s music forced me to articulate what it’s like to be a secular person in a religious culture. One of the things the film accomplishes is that it shows other non-believers who are also grappling with these questions.”

The response to *Apparition* has been enthusiastic. Festa’s first essay in film has received dozens

of screenings, many in cathedrals and churches, has picked up four awards and won excellent press notices. It has also produced strong reactions from audiences, and Paul Festa has been present most of the time to answer queries and lead discussions. “The film brings up a lot of things I think people really want to talk about but they haven’t really been able to formulate the questions. For example, the experience of the nonbeliever encountering a powerful piece of Christian art.”

One of Festa’s brilliant editing touches is depriving the viewer from hearing the music until the very end of the film, when Messiaen’s *Apparition de l’Eglise Éternelle*, played by Olivier Latry, forms the soundtrack to a rather chilling collection of text slides, followed by the credits. The piece seems to have been transformed by the comments that have gone before, and we may never hear it quite the same way again.

—Daniel Hathaway

Paul Festa’s Apparition of the Eternal Church receives its first Ohio screening in Finney Chapel at Oberlin on May 5th at 8 as part of the concluding concert of Oberlin’s Messiaen Festival, with Festa in attendance for questions and discussion. We talked with the film maker by telephone. To learn more about the film, visit Festa’s website, www.paulfesta.com.