Paul Crowley

MUSIC OF THE INVISIBLE
Messiaen’s ‘Saint Francis’

Saint François d’Assise, Olivier Messiaen’s only operatic work, received its world premiere in Paris in 1983. It has rarely been performed since, partly because of the sheer scope and audacity of the project, but also because of its subject matter—faith itself. This fall, the San Francisco Opera, newly directed by Pamela Rosenberg, gave the opera its U.S. premiere in its namesake city. It was a brilliant gamble, possibly opening a new operatic door in America. This is an opera unlike any other—an unabashed paean to music, to nature, and to the mystical path to joy seen in the figure of Francis (sung movingly by baritone Willard White).

Messiaen, who was born in 1908 and died in 1992, was a devout Catholic. For many years he served as principal organist and director of music at L’Église de la Trinité in Paris. Much of his œuvre is infused with his own mystical faith, nourished in the soils of a French Catholicism at once pious and completely modern. In the person of Saint Francis, Messiaen found the meeting place of many of the drives of his own soul: the poverty, humility, and suffering of Jesus; the revelation of God in nature, especially in the beauty and song of birds; and the pathway to God through the prayer of music itself.

Those looking for a comforting spiritual romanticism in Messiaen had better look elsewhere. As subtly conducted by Donald Runnicles, this music stands closer to Wagner in its lush magnitude and to the early Stravinsky in its shocking effect. The recognizable influences here are Debussy and Bartók. There isn’t a trace of the more didactic religious evocations of recent “transcendental” composers such as Tavener, Pärt, or Górecki, much less the abstraction of Adams. This is to religious music what Rilke is to religious poetry: It converts through both its sheer boldness and its inner allure. Dissonance emerges through highly structured chord strata and haunting tonalities and atonalties working with and then against one another. Hindu raga rhythms flow underneath. Rarely heard instruments, notably the ondes martenot, produce colorful, sonorous, and wild tones. Singing voices are introduced by a signature leitmotif, something like an aural rendering of a pure intimacy between Francis and the Angel—as Francis is transfixed by the music of heaven—uncannily expressive of mystical union. (The day I attended happened to coincide with the Blue Angels’ air show over San Francisco. At precisely this point in the opera, I could hear the muffled roar of the fighter jets overhead, a disturbing intrusion into the drama on stage, but the very irony of it giving the message of Messiaen’s blue Angel all the more poignancy.)

The Angel-Musician invites Francis: “Listen to this music that suspends life from the ladders of heaven; listen to the music of the Invisible.” And so we do. Messiaen’s unique musical signature comes into full play in “The Sermon to the Birds,” the sixth tableau. It is the synthesis of his personal vision: the spiritual apex of Francis’s earthly life, the heavenly “music” to which he was attuned, and Messiaen’s own love for bird song (he was a well-traveled ornithologist who recorded bird sounds). The longest scene in the opera, it may be the most transcendent. Human voices give way to a glittering cacophony of bird voices that become interlocking and shifting polytonal structures, punctuated by seemingly chance atonal effects, something like an aural rendering of a Jackson Pollock painting, in seventy-five staves! The effect is ethereal, the action on stage stops, and for a moment we are lifted out of the opera itself. At this point I simply closed my eyes.

The final two tableaux, representing the final act, conclude the opera’s long journey. The angel (soprano Laura Aiken), a visitor from “far beyond” who makes tremendous noise and rattles the cages of more than one of the friars, is transformed as she listens to the Heavenly music and the music of heaven. The Angel is transfigured, as Francis is, by the sweetest rapture. The Angel-Musician says: “I have found this music in you.” Francis, having lost sight of the Angel, asks the friars if they have heard any music. They manage to recall the Angel’s music, and as the friars list its attributes, the Angel-Musician sings out the opening refrain, “François, François.” France and the Angel then embrace and kiss. The final tableau, the “Vision of the Invisible,” opens a new operatic door in America, as the Blue Angels’ air show over San Francisco. The opera divides into eight scenes or tableaux. They translate not into plot, but into luminous occasions along Francis’s road to God. An anxious tone is set right away with the words of Brother Leo (Johannes Kränzle): “I am afraid on the road.” Francis himself moves fearfully along that road (here a spiraling platform), only to meet his worst fear, a leper. His anguish is offset in the stunning third scene where he embraces and kisses the leper. The music pauses just long enough to mark Francis’s conversion, signaled suddenly by an exuberant dance theme that later recurs in fragments, always in connection with the joy promised at the end of the road of fear and suffering.

Francis then meets a one-winged blue Angel (soprano Laura Aiken), a visitor from “far beyond” who makes tremendous noise and rattles the cages of more than one of the friars. She also has an affinity for Francis. As the Angel seeks him out, “François, François” becomes a plaintive refrain, a divine wooing. The rendering of a pure intimacy between Francis and the Angel—as Francis is transfixed by the music of heaven—is uncannily expressive of mystical union. (The day I attended happened to coincide with the Blue Angels’ air show over San Francisco. At precisely this point in the opera, I could hear the muffled roar of the fighter jets overhead, a disturbing intrusion into the drama on stage, but the very irony of it giving the message of Messiaen’s blue Angel all the more poignancy.)
the stigmata and the death of Francis, describe the arduous path of the Christian through suffering to the light of resurrection. The Cross is inscribed in the scenery itself, as a visible, three-dimensional scar on the floor of the stage. The stigmata arrives with eerie force: the Saint stands atop a platform that rises slowly above the stage. The entire musical burden is shifted to the massive chorus, while fierce sharp chords pronounce the onset of the bloody wounds. In the death scene, Francis is thrust toward the audience and over the orchestra, like a supine crucified Christ. Yet supernatural joy prevails. A pure white light shines on the Saint’s body as the music of the moment fractures the spell that Tharp and her artists, through sheer verve and hit-tune infectiousness, have cast.

The gap between aim and result, here, may be particularly troubling insofar as Movin’ Out exemplifies a current theatrical trend: the concoction of shows centered on classic popular-music tunes. Just a few blocks from Tharp’s production, in the year-old Mamma Mia—a collection of Abba’s greatest hits propped up on a wafer-thin excuse for a narrative—is playing to 90 percent percent audience capacity. Elsewhere in the country, My Way: A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra is one of the most-performed plays in regional theaters this season, while, in the United Kingdom, the Broadway-bound We Will Rock You, based on the music of Queen, proved such a smash that the creators are brewing up a sequel. Dramaturgical machinery has chewed through the songs of Janis Joplin, John Denver, Hank Williams, and the pop groups Culture Club, the Pet Shop Boys, and Madness, just to name a few, and the results have met with considerable popular success.

The phenomenon responds to the same human predisposition for re-embrazing the familiar—as opposed to greeting the new—that has turned movie studios into franchise factories (Spy Kids 2, Austin Powers) and that keeps TV channels airing formulaic dramas and sitcoms. Pop-soundtrack plays may also reflect the short attention spans of a public accustomed to sound bytes, the fre-