What Child is This? John Adams’s "El Niño"

Paul G. Crowley
Santa Clara University, pcrowley@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/rel_stud
Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

Copyright © 2004 Commonweal Magazine. Reprinted with permission.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.
had been given a genuine flaw and had "become much more the better/ for being a little bad"? In any event, dialogue can be packed with virtue, yet all virtue is undone when the enemy draws near and the music swells. We want to see Aubrey with his sword unsheathed; we want to see him win.

Whether at war or peace, below or above deck, the world of the HMS Surprise has been captured by Weir and his longtime collaborator, the cinematographer Russell Boyd, in wonderful detail and with exhilarating grace. Yes, there are the obligatory cliché shots with the helicopter-borne camera whirling around the masts like a seagull, but there are many visual surprises as well, some of them sheer poetry: the sailors' kits suspended near their cots and, in the dark, looking weirdly like giant incisors; the orange light that issues from the enemy's cannon an alarming five seconds before the report is heard and the Surprise is hit; the sails being lowered against the red of evening with the grace of a well-executed minuet while Aubrey and the doctor play Boccherini on fiddle and cello; the continual contrast between the broiling red of the sailors' below-deck quarters and the chill, blue world of sea and sky through which the Surprise sails. This visual delicacy abuts salty, sometimes brutal realism: the way sailors can collide during a battle precisely because they are at their proper posts but the tempo of the battle heed not the tempo of their jobs; the sand sprinkled under an about-to-be-amputee's pallet; a sailor suddenly realizing he must scream into his captain's ear because Aubrey has been temporarily deafened by the cannon; the bracing flavor of some of the dialogue ("What's the butcher's bill?" the captain asks the surgeon when he wants to learn of casualties).

But none of this is realism for the sake of realism, much less realism as an indictment of how brutally common people were treated in bygone days. Rather, it's closer to the "realism" of the more spectacular amusement parks that implicitly portray the past as better than the present precisely because, to us in the present, the past seems free of the complications and frustrations and stabilities of modern life with its taxes and mortgages and political correctness and media heraldings that all is not well abroad or at home. The bracing, nostalgic otherness of the early nineteenth-century seafaring world of Master and Commander reaches its climax in the final battle between the Surprise and the French ship Acheron (literally "River of Woe" in Hades—boo! hiss!), an action set piece that is a model for all action moviemakers in the way it produces excitement through clarity, always letting you know where death and danger are coming from, where the characters we know best are situated within the combat, why swords work better in certain quarters while guns effect more damage in another, and exactly when and why and how the tide of battle turns. After the slapdash, blurry, computer-combat scenes of Gladiator, The Matrix, and everything Arnold Schwarzenegger has made in the last dozen years, Weir's craftsmanship bracess.

If you ever find a way to expunge hero worship of the martial man from the makeup of humankind and to make drop all those narrative works that satisfied the need—from The Iliad and Beowulf through Star Wars and Lord of the Rings—by all means do so. Earth would become, if not a better place, at least a tidier, milder, more sterile, less vainglorious one. But before you expunge and purify, do me a favor. Kill me. For I don't want to be alive in a world in which Master and Commander couldn't be made and enjoyed.

Paul Crowley

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

John Adams's 'El Niño'

J ohn Adams's oratorio, El Niño, which was commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, debuted in Paris in 2000. Like the much-praised La Pasión Según San Marcos, a contemporary retelling of the Gospel of Mark by Osvaldo Golijov, it is not a classical work, but a boldly unconventional approach to a sacred story, in this case the Annunciation and birth of Christ. El Niño refashions the story as the drama of a young Latino girl and her boyfriend in contemporary Los Angeles. When I saw El Niño in San Francisco in 2001, what really startled me was how far it pushed the customary bounds of the oratorio genre. Music, film, and dance all serve as instruments of theological understanding.

Both Paris and San Francisco productions were directed by Peter Sellars, the (in)famous opera wizard whose shows have often stirred controversy because of visual overload. (His 1999 production of Peony Pavilion in Berkeley was a case in point, with several actions taking place at once, all of which appeared on television screens placed throughout the auditorium.) In El Niño, the Sellars touch is unmistakable: the massive chorus is in street clothes and dancers periodically perform on a small stage in front of the orchestra. Literally on top of all this—above and behind stage—a film is playing which parallels the drama that is unfolding onstage.

While I was thrilled by the visual display of this unorthodox presentation, I agree with critics who said that there was simply too much to take in. Happily this hyperactivity has been tempered in the DVD version of the Paris production (ArtHaus Musik), where the various elements are blended into a coherent audio and visual experience. The DVD provides insightful interviews with Adams, conductor Kent Nagano, soprano Dawn Upshaw, and Sellars. I recommend it highly to anyone who was unable to see the production in person.

El Niño is a decidedly postmodern construction, a mélange of multiple per-
The Rapture

Beyond the window he stares out, oblivious
I've come back, my father is entering the afterworld.
I am still here, working Dad's “senior residence,”
occasional nurse, valet, waiter, and errand boy,
a pint of cherry ice cream leaking a slow drip in my hand.

Out there, they are together in a first snow,
my father and mother, she nine months dead,
two tiny figures walking backward to Paradise.
This is before my sister and her madness, the war,
before I appear, then relatives demanding bed and board for years.
Snow dots his top hat; it mists her wedding veil.
Snow is all they know, and darkness for the blizzards
to fall across these decades they walk away from now.

Soon in their backward amble they will enter
the gates, swung open for them, and begin to shed their clothes,
flinging everything skyward as their new bodies come together.

_Peter Cooley_

sonalities and perspectives. Mary has
several voices and faces, performed, at
various points by Upshaw, mezzo Lor-
raine Hunt Lieberson, a dancer, and two
women in the film. Bass Willard White
plays Joseph, Herod, God, and the bib-
lical narrator. A trio of countertenors,
shadowed onstage by a trio of dancers,
adds an eerie and ethereal quality, es-
pecially in the Annunciation scene.
Adams draws on a variety of texts, in-
cluding Scripture, apocryphal gospels,
and the writings of Sor Juana de la Cruz,
Hildegard of Bingen, and several con-
temporary Mexican poets. All of this
mels surprisingly well.

El Niño has two parts. The first—soft
and intimate—takes us from the Annun-
ciation to the dream of Joseph and the
visit of the Magi. The narrative is marked
by intriguing musical detours. For ex-
ample, the first song, “I Sing of a Maid-
en,” is bright and even hopeful, deliv-
ered by the three countertenors, Daniel
Bubeck, Brian Cummings, and Steven
Richards. Their high-pitched voices in-
terplay with the soft innocence of Up-
shaw’s soprano. This is followed by a
disturbing “Annunciation,” sung by
Lieberson, where “Mary” takes on a
more mature and emotionally complex
tone, suggesting an intuition of the suf-
fering to come. The work of Mexican
poet Rosario Castellanos, framed by
Adams’s choice of the minor key, arrests
us in the way that Rilke does in his Mary
poems. Mary addresses the yet-to-be-
born Jesus in Spanish: “Because you
were to break my bones, my bones, at
your arrival, break. And here you are,
announcing yourself. Among contradic-
tory angels you approach, pouring your-
self like gentle music, like a glassful of
balms and aromas.”

The turbulence stirring within Mary’s
heart is palpable and one can almost
sense it within the music. Joseph’s con-
fusion and anger, coupled with Mary’s
tearful self-defense, are painful: “Mary,
why did you do this? Who is he who

has deceived me?” White’s rich bass
serves these parts well. Eventually, this
drama gives way to the joy of the Na-
tivity. At the end of part 1, “Mary” is
pictured on film attending a baby by a
bonfire on a Southern California beach;
on stage, Lieberson and Upshaw pro-
claim the good news, weaving together
texts from poet Gabriela Mistral (“The
Christmas Star”) and mystic Hildegard
of Bingen (“O quam preciosa”).

The second part of the oratorio is dark-
er and more complex. It takes us into
the world outside the family where there
is more suffering and loss. The tone of
the piece changes radically as Herod un-
dertakes the slaughter of the innocents.
Adams uses a Castellanos poem about
the 1968 massacre of Mexican Univer-
sity students at Tlatelolco: “Darkness
engenders violence and violence de-
mands darkness/to coagulate in crime.”
Although these lines may seem didac-
tic, this portion of the piece provides a
shocking realization of the political force
of the original biblical story. The pro-
duction ends with one of the most sub-
lime denouements I know, another poem
by Castellanos, “Una Palmera,” on the
legend of a palm tree that bowed to the
Holy Family. It is sung by a chorus of
children whose arms wave like palm
fronds in the wind.

El Niño is the work of an essentially
secular composer, which from a theo-
logical point of view, makes it all the
more compelling. When Mary visits
Elizabeth in a laundromat, both the sa-
cred and the secular are explored in
new ways. The theological scope of the
oratorio is not as expansive as Handel’s
Messiah, which takes us from the birth
of Jesus to his Resurrection and Ascen-
sion, but El Niño is, in a sense, more
universal in its human reach. Mary,
Joseph, and the Child are symbols for
every woman, every man, every child.
El Niño tells of the human passage from
the miracle and promise of birth to the
sure fate of suffering and hardship, and
finally to a newfound innocence. This
is an oratorio for everyone, not only for
the believer.

_Paul Crowley, SJ, teaches in the religious
studies department at Santa Clara University._