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

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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 canon 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 heeds 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 sterilities 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 braces.

If you ever find a way to expunge hero worship of the martial man from the makeup of humankind and to make de trop 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. □

MUSIC

Paul Crowley

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

John Adams's 'El Niño'

John 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 tak-

ing 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 Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, a dancer, and two women in the film. Bass Willard White plays Joseph, Herod, God, and the biblical narrator. A trio of countertenors, shadowed onstage by a trio of dancers, adds an eerie and ethereal quality, especially in the Annunciation scene. Adams draws on a variety of texts, including Scripture, apocryphal gospels, and the writings of Sor Juana de la Cruz, Hildegard of Bingen, and several contemporary Mexican poets. All of this melds surprisingly well.

El Niño has two parts. The first—soft and intimate—takes us from the Annunciation to the dream of Joseph and the visit of the Magi. The narrative is marked by intriguing musical detours. For example, the first song, "I Sing of a Maiden," is bright and even hopeful, delivered by the three countertenors, Daniel Bubeck, Brian Cummings, and Steven

Richards. Their high-pitched voices interplay with the soft innocence of Upshaw'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 suffering 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 contradictory angels you approach, pouring yourself 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 confusion 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 Nativity. 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 proclaim 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 darker 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 undertakes the slaughter of the innocents. Adams uses a Castellanos poem about the 1968 massacre of Mexican University students at Tlatelolco: "Darkness engenders violence/and violence demands darkness/ to coagulate in crime." Although these lines may seem didactic, this portion of the piece provides a shocking realization of the political force of the original biblical story. The production ends with one of the most sublime 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 theological point of view, makes it all the more compelling. When Mary visits Elizabeth in a laundromat, both the sacred 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 Ascension, 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. □

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