

Notes on my "Mystic Child", Haskell Small

After I performed my composition "A Journey in Silence: Reflections on the Book of Hours" at the Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight several years ago, their abbot wrote me to say,

"The final impression left to me by your composition could be expressed with the words of the French novelist Bernanos. He writes: 'We need a whole life to reconnect with childhood'. There seems to me that there is a glimpse of this childhood which is at the origin but also at the end. A monastic life symbolises and realises every day this journey into childhood which is our real future. Each of our monastic days is a step closer to the end, already present in us because it is also the origin: eternal childhood."

The philosophy expressed in these words moves me deeply and was the inspiration for my new work, "Mystic Child". Reminding me of the oft quoted sentiment that a musician must be either six or sixty to play Mozart (and with his music saturated with a childlike spirit, is not Mozart the perfect mystic child?), I wanted to write a piece of music devoted to this idea, a "Journey" imbued with the mystic sounds of chant and angels singing, but also infiltrated with aural visions of childhood. Borrowing from another one of my compositions with this very title, "Visions of Childhood", I have continued my fascination with the innocence of our tender years by quoting again the childhood taunt "Nanny Nanny Boo Boo", but this time tinged in mystic clothing and taken a step further- offering not just a haunting retrospection of our childhood, but now also a peek into the future at the destination of our life's journey.

The first of the five movements comprising my piece is relatively tame, opening with a searching, questioning tone before succumbing to a mild playfulness and a hint of the mysteries to come. The short second movement is a dialogue between a chant-like refrain and jazzy, frisky "recitatives". The third is the most extended movement, intensely expressive, leading to an oasis floating in space that introduces the "taunt" theme and also a "reveille" motif suggestive of the spirit rising. The fourth movement is a brief interlude that reflects the second movement's struggles and provides a counterweight for the structure as a whole. It features caustic chords sardonically commenting on prayerful outpourings that hark back to and develop the first movement's main theme, before leading directly into the last movement, a "moto perpetuo".

A non-stop, frenzied roller coaster ride, turning the motifs inside-out and upside-down, this final movement is where our inner child finally cuts loose in an outburst of freedom and exhilaration. After a few minutes as the energy level subsides and we take a breath, we are greeted by a chorus of angels, at first ethereally, then breaking into a full-throated song of praise. Our journey is now near its end. One last bitter taunt reminds us of our regrets, and then, with a group of child-angels guiding our way, we review each stage of our life as our spirits gradually rise and we receive the blessing of eternal childhood.