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Website Context and Research

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Acoustic Composition 24

Le Point Vierge (2021)

A Simple Monk and an American Lama

Three movements for two voices (one high/one low) and piano

This version of *Le Point Vierge* is a collection of three songs inspired by Thomas Merton's three meetings with Gelong Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet in the mountains of Dharamsala on 4th, 6th and 8th November, 1968. Each of the three songs is 3' 09" in length, and the theoretical duration of this triptych is 9' 29".

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a Trappist monk, prolific writer and poet who offered a unique literary bridge between Western and Eastern religious thought (and between sacred and secular culture). Merton was accidentally electrocuted in Bangkok, Thailand on December 10th, 1968. Although they only met three times, the Dalai Lama has referred to Merton as 'an old friend' on numerous occasions and visited his grave at Gethsemani USA in 1996. Their three meetings have proved to be a catalyst for sustained and meaningful dialogue between the leaders of Eastern and Western religions.

Le Point Vierge, or *The Virgin Point* is Merton's concept of the closest to God we can ever be, or hope to attain. A place of absolute purity at the very centre of our being untouched by sin.

Vocal Ranges:

The work is composed for two voice soloists; one high and one low. Preferably, as the two 'implied' characters are gender specific, the high voice would be performed by a countertenor who can sing a passing F4 (bars 44 and 52). The low voice requires a bass vocalist who can sing a passing F3 (bar 110), or (preferably) a baritone who can sing a passing F1 (bars 8 and 16). Although the 'implied' characters are gender specific, one can see no reason why the upper voice could not be sung by a female alto or mezzo-soprano.

Lower Voice:

F1 - F3 (middle C = C3): Ideally a baritone who can sing a passing F1 in bars 8 and 16.

Upper Voice:

B^b2 - F4: Ideally a countertenor who can sing a passing F4 in bars 44 and 52.

The Text:

The words were written by the composer after a period spent in saturation with Merton's poetry. Consuming so much new information in such a short period of time blurred the content, and I penned words, phrases and sentences from memory. It was very interesting to find how different the 'recollections' were. Concepts remained in context, but memory had conflated the thematic content of various poems and interbred the construct of similar sentences. Fortunately, the words were still recognisable as Merton's, but no sentence in verbatim (or even particularly accurate). This helps to avoid the cumbersome area of copyright, which often restricts the potential for future performances. The process proved to be a fluid and productive approach. The words appeared and the 'poems' took form.

Characters: Neither shall be defined, but both should be 'implied' ...

A Simple Monk (aka. His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet): Lower Voice

Placing the 'Simple Monk' as a Bass voice is representative of the primary vocal in Tibetan Ritual Music – The Bass Chant (inflected monotone, recto-tono recitation). When asked, the Dalai Lama has often described himself as 'just a simple monk'.

Contemporary dress: Deep plum/maroon and gold/orange with a maroon or gold belt and multiple wrist beads hiding an expensive looking watch. Perhaps a Burnley FC Top? A T-shirt with 'a message'? Consider holding Mala beads (Buddhist prayer beads). Could also carry a copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

An American Lama (aka. Thomas Merton - Trappist Monk and Poet): Upper Voice

Setting Merton in the countertenor range alludes to the historical practice of castrati and the Western predilection of placing the melody in the upper line. Merton was referred to as 'The Jesus Lama' by the Tibetan monks during his visit to Dharamsala.

Contemporary dress: Black and white with a black belt, a cross and rosary beads. The cross could be worn as jewellery, or could be on the T-shirt. Maybe wear a Newcastle FC shirt. Could also include a denim jacket and carry a little black book (Psalter), or perhaps a book of Merton's poems. The characters could swap beads and books during the performance.

Scene:

Thomas Merton's three meetings with His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet in the mountains of Dharamsala on 4th, 6th and 8th November, 1968.

Alternative Versions:

There is a version of this score with additional piano interludes, which can extend the programme time and alter the visual aesthetic of the performance. It is also intended that this work (in the future tense) be expanded into three short operatic scenes.

With Thanks:

Thanks are owed to friend, author and fellow academic, Dr David Torevell for 'philosophically commissioning' this work. This project emerged as a natural consequence of email conversations with David, and his enthusiasm for the piece as the idea evolved proved infectious. One 'downed tools' on other projects in order to assuage David's enthusiasm with a physical score. The piece was written and composed in a relatively short period of time. It seemed to say what it wanted to say. Sometimes, things just happen ...

Contact:

For further information and resources contact the composer at: contact@ianpercy.me.uk