

Mass of the Divine Shepherd – Theological Reflections

V. J. Tarantino

The image of the Shepherd is foundational within the Judeo-Christian tradition, originating in Scripture and depicted in the earliest Christian art. Julian Darius Revie's *Mass of the Divine Shepherd* renews in modern idiom the beauty of this ancient devotion.

Marie-Dominique Chenu, a council father of Vatican II, postulated artistic works as theological "sources." *Mass of the Divine Shepherd* stands as a deeply contemplative, intuitively theological composition, with an artistic objective of spanning and uniting a global musical culture in worship. Both the product and the process of this work invite analogy to the Eastern Christian tradition of icon writing, in which artistic creation is itself conditioned and ensouled by prayer, such that the art becomes a locus of the presence of the divine.

Tonight, we gather in the name of the Shepherd, and so are we assured of his presence among us. Necessary to any encounter is dialogue; in *Mass of the Divine Shepherd*, repetition, imitation and canon are no mere device, but engender a colloquy among children, adults, and orchestra, each in a unified persona. Moreover, Revie casts the audience not as passive spectator, but as a critical, unnotated voice, a receptive co-creativity essential to the performed work.

The score as written makes use of expressive *affective* notations, drawing out the distinctive spirituality of the piece; the musicians must take to heart such dispositional cues as "reverently joyful," or "awakening in radiant glory." These notations presume a vibrant interconnection throughout the hall – an unspoken, contemplative dynamic between performer, audience, and the art itself.

Mass of the Divine Shepherd displays a Bonaventurian architecture; three groupings of three-movement sets naturally elide one to the next, recalling the nine choirs of angels ordering the celestial hierarchies. A unique choreography of the singers evokes this symbolism dramatically; the audience will experience itself immersed in sound, compassed in harmonies, as the hall becomes literally domed with angelic sonority, cascading gently over the people. In this way, the *Children of God* movement explores the possibilities inherent in a single, sustained C major chord, falling pristine like a blanket of snow from above, yet lightly disturbed by repeated C minor sonorities emanating in dialogical counterpoint from the mezzo-soprano soloist on stage.

In the *I Believe* movement, a musical climax of the piece, the men begin by droning "I believe in God" after the manner of the rhythmic monotone priestly prayer of petition associated in early Judaism with the end of *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles. As this chant, more entreating than avowing, perdures, the orchestra enters with an historical compendium of sacred music – from ancient Hebrew plainchant which Jesus himself likely sang, passing through all of the ages of the Church up to today – rising and swirling, layered and overlapped. From there, the words of the articles of faith are themselves scrambled, thrown to the wind, as if to denote the ultimate failure of propositional truth unless animated by the Holy Spirit with the substantially supernatural theological virtue of faith, and assimilated to the heart as love – for St. Paul writes, *if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing*. As the Holy Spirit, represented in 32th note quintuplets, comes to the fore, the conclusion of the Creed is overlaid with an echo of the men's priestly *credo* – now in the voices of the children, no longer as petition but as spirit-filled affirmation.

Mass of the Divine Shepherd culminates in the *Lamb of God*, in which Revie draws upon the full resources of his art to “break apart time” and “expand sonority into an infinite realm,” to express through celestial, ethereal ambience the mystic image of the Lamb focal to the Book of Revelation, bringing time and eternity into relationship. The final “grant us peace” is reserved to the children – to the pure of heart, who shall see God. The final word “peace,” sung by a child soloist, represents musically the voice of the Shepherd who is also the Lamb, meek and gentle of heart, a tiny whispering sound against the encroaching silence. In the end, the incarnate voice of the Shepherd, of the Lord of the Universe, is the delicate treble of a *tali* – meaning, in the Aramaic of Jesus’ time, both *lamb* and *boy*.