

Kaija Saariaho – La Passion de Simone (2013)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Première Station* | *First Station* 3:18 2 *Deuxième Station* | *Second Station* 3:10 3 *Troisième Station* | *Third Station* 4:44 4 *Quatrième Station* | *Fourth Station* 4:45 5 *Cinquième Station* | *Fifth Station* 1:46 6 *Sixième Station* | *Sixth Station* 4:53 7 *Septième Station* | *Seventh Station* 5:17 8 *Huitième Station* | *Eighth Station* 5:38 9 *Neuvième Station* | *Ninth Station* 4:32 10 *Dixième Station* | *Tenth Station* 4:15 11 *Onzième Station* | *Eleventh Station* 3:10 12 *Douzième Station* | *Twelfth Station* 4:53 13 *Treizième Station* | *Thirteenth Station* 5:06 14 *Quatorzième Station* | *Fourteenth Station* 3:41 15 *Ultime Station* | *Final Station* 7:16
Dawn Upshaw – soprano Simone Weil – spoken texts Tapiola Chamber Choir
Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra Esa-Pekka Salonen – conductor 2013 Ondine Oy, Helsinki

La passion de Simone is a one-person oratorio by Kaija Saariaho based on the writings of philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943). Unlike many assimilated Jews from Europe, Weil was lucky enough to be able to escape Nazi-occupied France and left for New York. Later she moved to London, where she worked from across the channel with the French Resistance, but died of tuberculosis in 1943, largely by refusing food or treatment. Although Weil was a German Jew, the text of this work is in French. The text, though including quotes from Weil, is as much a commentary on her life and work written for the composer by Armin Maalout.

I was deeply impressed with both the seriousness and textural beauty of Saariaho's music. She creates an almost prismatic web of sound that underlines the solo and choral writing like a low-lying mushroom cloud; even when the music gets busy, as in the "Second Station," the wind and brass figures seem subjugated to the overall ambience of the orchestral sound. Indeed, the chorus often seems to be a part of the orchestra, not something external or independent of it.

No one would ever claim that the solo vocal writing is tonal or melodic in the strict sense of the

words, but as a friend of mine likes to say, the music does “begin.” There is a definite directionality to its progression. He and other listeners attuned only to tonality, however, may not appreciate the dark shards of brass playing tone clusters that interrupt the musical flow here and there, but I found it intensely interesting. Moreover, Saariaho has the gift of being able to match the music to the mood of the text, even though I personally felt that the words of the “Third Station” do not entirely evoke nightmarish brass explosions. The text here is:

Another person would have Turned away from the world To care for his own suffering. You turned away from yourself To fix your gaze upon the world.

Over the years, soprano Dawn Upshaw’s voice—never entirely steady to begin with—has become even more fluttery in tonal emission and a bit thin in sound, but her musicality and phrasing are beyond question. More importantly, Salonen’s conducting—so very familiar to American listeners from his years with the Los Angeles Philharmonic (where he is still Conductor Laureate)—is simply magnificent, leaving no detail unattended to in his progression from beginning to end. He even manages to find rhythmic cells within this largely amorphous music that help propel it and give it forward momentum, a task I do not envy him in. In the very busy Fifth and Sixth Stations, for instance, the music becomes exceedingly busy, with a battery of percussion driving the brass, wind, and string figures as well as chorus, which is now separate in sound from the orchestra. Salonen finds exactly the right mood and tempo for this, which then blends into the Sixth Station where the percussion moves away temporarily and the stabbing brass is confined to occasional chords, driving a sonic wedge between voices and instruments. I should also mention that every so often, certain lines are spoken (actually whispered) rather than sung. At first I thought it was Upshaw, since no one else is credited on the CD back insert, but in small print on the first page of the booklet, Dominique Blanc is credited as speaker.

By Stations 13 and 14, which discuss Weil’s illness and death, the orchestra all but falls away as the (whispering) speaker and singer dominate the proceedings. Only in the 15th and “Final Station” does the orchestra return in full force, summing up the piece musically as the text sums it up dramatically “By your death, everything that you had said/Was transformed into a testament/You walked towards your own annihilation/And you won a resurrection.”

It isn’t often that I say anything about SACD sonics (particularly in solo piano or chamber music) because I don’t have an SACD player, but in this case the sound is absolutely fantastic. Even on a conventional CD player (and this may be due as much to Salonen’s conducting as to the recorded sound), the orchestra and chorus seem to “spread out” and envelop you from the very first note, and this feeling never leaves you at any point throughout the cantata. Thus I simply must give big kudos to the recording engineers, Antti Pohjola and Enno Mäemets, the latter of whom also did the sound mixing. Not only did they capture the full ambience of Saariaho’s sound world, but they also managed not to blur the orchestral details when it was important for the inner voices to be heard. You really feel that you are sitting in the hall where this piece is

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being performed and recorded as you listen to it; in many places, the sound is so rich that it is almost tactile—you almost feel that you can reach out and touch it.

On the last page of the booklet, it says that La passion de Simone originally premiered as a stage work directed by Peter Sellars. I can only pray that he didn't do to it what he did to conventional opera 30 years ago, which is to ruin it, but since it included choreography (by Luca Veggetti) my fears are compounded. Why the heck would anyone dance to this music or, even worse, to these lyrics? How do you dance through a life of misery, selflessness to others, and a personal search for spirituality in a dark and ugly world? More importantly, why would you dance this? But no matter. Although it is noted that this recording "was made in connection with this live concert performance," the medium of a CD happily spares us these unnecessary images except for the photos on the cover and CD inlay. We are, then, happily free to imagine the music and words as separate entities, which indeed they are, and to marvel at the skill that Saariaho used in creating this marvelous work. ---Lynn René Bayley, arkivmusic.com

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