
Letters to the Editor

From Steve Lake

In his review, so-called, of Arvo Pärt's album 'Alina' *Tempo 212*, Peter Quinn writes, 'It is a great shame that ECM felt the need to release this CD, as it provides extremely thin gruel indeed and is suggestive of a desire to cash in on Pärt's current popularity at the expense of any aesthetic criteria'. Whether Quinn loves or hates the music is beside the point. He's entitled to his opinion, even if he cannot articulate it coherently. But his implication that ECM is bandwagon-jumping in the matter of Arvo Pärt cannot pass unchallenged. This is one of the most absurd remarks we've read in the last 30 years. For the record, ECM's release in 1984 of Pärt's 'Tabula Rasa' served to introduce an all but unknown Estonian composer to the musical world. The reception given to that album and to subsequent recordings including 'Arbos', 'Passio', 'Miserere' and 'Te Deum' changed the landscape of modern music, and other record companies, composers and musicians soon scrambled to be part of this new 'movement'.

But Arvo Pärt spelled out the distinctions in a press conference at the time of 'Litany': 'I have had a great opportunity to make recordings according to my natural musical breathing. As an example, before we recored 'Passio', we had *thirty* live performances and for most of those performances the people of ECM were there. We were looking for a sound and the right space to record. In contrast with another big name company where my work was sight-read and two cuts were taken and not even listened to. Can you understand how cosmic the difference is – not only for the recording, but for the soul of the composer?'

As for the alleged absence of 'aesthetic criteria' in the 'Alina' recording, we have to point out this album, like all of Mr Pärt's ECM discs, was made with the full participation of the composer, including in this instance the restructuring of the title track and the editing of the final takes. So what can Quinn conclude from this? That Arvo Pärt himself is trying to 'cash in on the popularity of ARvo Pärt? Really, we expect more informed commentary from a publication of *Tempo's* standing.

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From Tristram Pugin

Christopher Dingle's article on *La transfiguration* (*Tempo 212*) raises a major question: Messiaen's appraisals towards the reforms which followed on Vatican II and the degree to which they are reflected in his work. It is a highly sensitive question. Messiaen himself would only have evoked it in the present of those very close to him and with the utmost discretion.

The reforms went far beyond 'vernacularisation'. In fact neither Latin as a liturgical language (not even the Tridentine mass book of Pius V which is the foundation of Catholic liturgical practice from the 16th century to the Second Vatican Council) have been abrogated by the Church. Both however require special dispensation from Rome to be used – dispensation which, in this country, has been granted, albeit with serious limitation to the Latin Mass Society. It is important to realize that the essential differences remain when the Tridentine Mass is celebrated in , say, French and the 'Montini' Mass is celebrated in Latin. These differences are obviously beyond the scope of this letter but they are significant, and have an effect on the interpretation of doctrine if not on the doctrine itself.

Messiaen was not of course a church composer, even in the sense that Liszt and Bruckner might be considered such. He wrote no music apt to be used as a prescribed part of liturgical celebration. Thus the *Messe de lat Pentecôte* is not an organ mass with instrumental strophes meant to alternate with sung strophes in the Mass for Whitsun, but a series of meditations on the mysteries of the Pentecost suitable for extra-liturgical church performance. In this Messiaen followed the path marked out by, among others, Carissimi in an earlier 'post conciliar' time. Thus the changes brought about by Vatican II had no direct bearing on his choices as a composer. To give but one example. The 'new mass' greatly plays down

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'correspondences' between the old and new Testaments – for instance the burning bush as an emblem or prophecy of the virgin birth – mostly by suppressing the tridentine choice of old testament antiphons. But any composer who wished to write a non-liturgical piece on such a 'correspondence' was and is perfectly free to do so.

Thus Messiaen felt the impact of Vatican II from the organ loft at La Trinité during Sunday Mass. There is little doubt in my mind that he would have been saddened and confused by many of the 'changes'. But he chose to live this as a personal crisis (if crisis it was) rather than lend his support to those asking the Church to allow those who wished to carry on with what had become 'the old rite'; nor with the traditionalists at St Nicolas du Chardonnet who, under Francois Ducaud-Bourget, Knight of Malta and Grande Médaille de le Résistance, had the courage to get on with the 'liturgie de toujours' without official permission in expectation of better times.

As for *La transfiguration*, the theme of it had always been central to Messiaen's work since his confessor at La Trinité had introduced him to the work of Dom Columba Marmion. The Ascension and the ensuing Transfiguration were a central doctrine of the Church for him, since through them Christ shares his Glory with humankind. The choice of Latin may well have been Messiaen's way of saying that Latin still had a place in Catholic devotional life. Though one must not forget that nothing kept a composer from using Latin in a non-liturgical work. Quite the contrary, since it was a way of reaffirming

Catholic 'heritage' in a place where it didn't matter – the concert hall. Nor should one forget that the new mass existed in an official Latin translation, to be used in international functions where no one language was dominant. There is no sign, so far as I know, that Messiaen ever made a gesture protesting the reforms of Vatican II, no matter how much personal anguish they may have caused him. Had he done so we might be a few steps further down the road towards reinstating the tridentine mass as a freely available alternative to the mass that issued from Vatican II.

This Easter I went to the Northern Spanish town of Zamora renowned for its Holy Week processions. All week long at most hours of the day and deep into the night, often in pouring rain, the streets were lined by people of all ages and social classes, most of whom had friends and relatives amongst the marchers. When the time came for Easter midnight mass in the great cathedral that stands high above the River Duero and its ancient romanesque bridge there were only a few hundred people at the most, something unthinkable in Spain only a decade ago. I went out into the night to see how the new fire was getting on. I arrived in time to see two priests and a sacristan throw their cigarette ends into it before lighting the Pasqual candle and carrying it rather than processing with it into the church. One can only hope that Messiaen was spared the sight of such things...

Highbury
