

Wolfgang-Andreas Schultz:

First Symphony – the Voices of Chartres

The Gothic cathedral of Chartres near Paris is possibly the finest example of its type anywhere: it is certainly the most mysterious. Encrypted in its architecture, in its sculptures and stained glass windows is a vision of the world and of the nature of humanity which is well suited to provide a balance to our present one-sided focus on rationalism and material comfort. Deciphering the message of Chartres takes us back to the almost buried spiritual wellsprings of Western thought, making us recognize that the intellectual world of Europe has many other facets – and that Chartres was the place where all of this was able to converge into a unified vision.

It would be quite mistaken to believe that the view of the world held by the “School of Chartres” (a Medieval school of philosophy located there) was identical with that of the Church. It was necessary to be very circumspect in the way one expressed oneself in those days, in order not to be branded a heretic. Even before the cathedral was built, this place had been a Celtic shrine: a healing spring at which a virgin goddess was revered. Later identification with Mary presented no problems. There are many clues in the cathedral which point to the integration of this original pagan nature worship – the idea of a Christianity which had made its peace with nature. Classical antiquity – similarly “pagan” in nature – was also studied at Chartres, whereby the philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras took pride of place. With his monochord (a single-stringed instrument) he discovered the natural harmonic series, whose notes stand in proportions to each other which are fundamental to the structure of the cosmos: the idea of a cosmic harmony (or the “harmony of the spheres”). Religion and science coexisted peacefully with one another – would that be thinkable again today?

We should not forget that the science of Ancient Greece returned to Europe by way of Arab civilization, particularly through Spain, at that time still primarily Moslem. The Occident owes an immense debt to the Arab world: several of our musical instruments, the technique of measuring rhythms in numerical values, the love poetry of the troubadours, rhyme and possibly even the pointed arch of Gothic architecture. Arabic authors were read in the School of Chartres - that, too, an activity which was not without danger. Perhaps it is therefore not all too surprising to find quite a number of clues in the cathedral pointing to other cultures and religions: in the oldest part, the crypt, a building with a pagoda-style roof is to be seen, and a figure of Christ holding his fingers in the sign known in India as “mudra”. We know that St. Francis made a journey to Africa to learn from Islamic mystics there, and there was evidently contact with the religions of the Far East in the Middle Ages. In Chartres we experience a truly cosmic Christianity which does not deny its points of contact with other religions.

The greatest mystery of all, however, is that the cathedral has much to tell us about the human soul, its metamorphoses, its growth and progress towards maturity. This is often spoken of as a “path of initiation”, on which a person dies in his old form only to be reborn in a new, transformed self. The idea of a type of human development which we call today the “evolution of consciousness” was already prefigured in Chartres. Here lies the deeper significance of the mystery of death and resurrection.

But how can all this be put into music?

In the first movement, “Landscape with Cathedral – the Voices”, the atmosphere of the landscape itself seems to bring forth a concert of all the different voices which have left their mark on the cathedral:

- At first the music attempts to capture the atmosphere of the landscape; after a triple “call” from the high woodwind there follows

- A roundelay in 7/8 time, its musical language evocative of pagan nature worship; the motifs of the landscape appear in reprise and are combined with those of the dance, and then follows
- A wind theme like a distant male-voice choir with a melody recalling Gregorian chant – as the voice of Christianity – supported by long held notes as a drone, as in Byzantine ecclesiastical music; a field of conflict is generated between the themes standing for Christianity and paganism - after this development episode the music becomes calmer and leads over into
- A theme which proceeds by the steps of the harmonic series, symbolizing Pythagoras' harmony of the spheres and with it classical Greek antiquity; this merges with the Christianity theme and opens the musical horizons for
- A poetic flute solo which stands for Islamic love poetry, which always signified more than purely earthly love.

Now all the themes introduced up to this point join together in a major passage of symphonic development. In order to prepare for the spiritual journey of the second movement, they are joined by two new themes representing the two figures to whom the cathedral is consecrated:

- The trombone motif of John the Baptist; this theme, too, takes its place in the symphony of the voices of Chartres – after this development passage has reached its climax, there follows
- The rose window with the Virgin Mary at its centre: a passage for wind harking back to Renaissance models, ornamented by strings divided into many parts. After this, with a few reminiscences, the first movement ends quietly.

In the second movement “Inner Space – the Path through Two Times” we approach the cathedral and, after a long introductory passage, enter the inner space of the building. The specific form of this movement was prompted by another impulse: the sacramental altar of Rogier van der Weyden, which depicts an impressive Crucifixion scene in a Gothic cathedral. This is the basic model: an intensely personal, subjective, human experience set in a supra-personal, almost objective space.

The Cross appears in musical form as the Gregorian hymn “Crux fidelis”, which is heard at the beginning of the introduction in the high woodwind. Once inside the building, this is followed by the “human” theme in the strings and the demonic “countertheme” of its “shadow” (in the meaning given to the term by C.G. Jung), for any human spiritual growth demands the confrontation with the dark sides of one's own character. A third theme concludes the first part of the movement. Then the “path through two times” begins: the supra-personal space is represented by variations of the hymn “Crux fidelis”, which always retains the same slow pace and whose ritual character is reinforced by techniques taken from the music of other cultures.

Simultaneously with this unchanging, slow-paced layer of music a symphonic development episode takes its course, with many different forms of expression for the personal, individual sphere of experience; in this the tempo, expressively varied, accelerates constantly, culminating in mortal terror and coming face to face with the demons. The transformation, the inner serenity and peace of those who have passed through this experience are concentrated at the end into a vision of Paradise characterized by musical sonorities from the world of Japanese Zen Buddhism. With this, floating off as if into eternity, the symphony ends.

A summary of the second movement:

- The movement opens with a monologue on the first violins: this hints at the fact that what is now to come is the experience of a single human individual. This monologue contains the seminal material for the three themes of the movement.
- The hymn “Crux fidelis” is now stated in the upper woodwind. It is joined by various motifs from the first movement, including the theme assigned to Mary. After the entry into the inner space, there is an exposition of

- The first theme in the violins, standing for the individual human being: an expressive theme with wide intervals, which is subsequently repeated an octave lower. After a short transitional passage with strangely wan sonorities, the space opens out for
- The second theme, that of the “shadow” and the demons we carry within us, stated on violas and muted brass. Both themes are then combined with one another and completed by a short
- Third theme which homes in on the fundamental after a striking downward leap of a tenth.
- The music which now comes is similar to the introductory passage; in the major development which ensues the hymn appears in a number of different variations, while the themes are transformed, combined and deconstructed in many ways; the themes of the first movement, too, are included. Each variation is announced by a ritual formula for percussion with bell, gong and temple block:
 - 1st variation: the hymn in a high register, embellished in the manner of Korean cultic music;
 - 2nd variation: the hymn in a very low register; the trombones hark back to the world of Tibetan Buddhism with its long trumpets;
 - 3rd variation: the hymn in the lower middle register of the trombone, ornamented by the bassoon and bass clarinet and underlaid with a drone as in Byzantine church music;
 - 4th variation: the hymn in an upper middle register, only in sporadic single notes on the muted trumpet and xylophone. The development culminates here in the meeting with one’s dark sides – after the collapse, the finale is ushered in by very soft strings, like the breaking of dawn. The first and second themes are combined in the radiant climax, then the music gradually subsides with motifs of the third theme while the
 - 5th variation of the hymn appears, now in the high register again and ornamentally garlanded in the manner of the Japanese “Gagaku” court orchestra. This variation does not reach a conclusion, it fades away and makes way for the finale, as if Paradise were a Zen garden. The music ends with the Japanese temple bell and opens simultaneously into vistas of eternity.