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Interview with James Wood, by Juan Carlos Pérez Davila (Bueu, Pontevedra)

James Wood, or virtue in Music

Con el estreno en la primavera de 2005 en cinco catedrales británicas de la ópera “Hildegard” el compositor inglés James Wood inicia el capítulo operístico de su carrera compositiva.

Nacido en 1953, su currículum incluye una brillante carrera como percusionista de élite, diseñador de nuevos instrumentos, creador y director de grupos como la Critical Band y el New London Chamber Choir, un enamoramiento con la microtonalidad que se plasmó en la creación del London Centre for Microtonal Music. También fue profesor en los cursos musicales de Darmstadt.

Otro interés marcado lo centra en los últimos desarrollos de la electrónica y electroacústica musicales, y marcadamente en las recientes técnicas de espacialización.

Su obra tiene recepción internacional, quizás, fuera de su país, especialmente en Francia, donde estudió con Nadia Boulanger y en el Ircam, y en Japón, a cuya cultura se siente próximo, algo que plasma en obras como “Jôdo”, gran éxito en aquel país.

Su genuino interés en la espiritualidad le llevó a interesarse en la figura de Hildegarde Von Bingen, abadesa germánica del siglo XII, y una de las mentes más preclaras de su época, que mantuvo contacto y correspondencia con los más brillantes intelectuales de su tiempo.

Una de las primeras compositoras de la que queda constancia, si no la primera, y auténtica polígrafa, su curiosidad intelectual y su producción literaria incluyen la medicina y la botánica.

Sus raptos místicos se concretaban en visiones que ella detallaba y que, hoy en día, conservan todo su carácter hermético y lleno de simbolismo.

La vida de Hildegard y sus visiones centran la ópera “Hildegard” que, hasta donde sé, no tiene distribución en el mercado

El estilo de James Wood alterna pasajes de lirismo delicadísimo, a menudo subrayados por secuencias electrónicas que recuerdan a cantos de pájaros, con percusión sutil pero intensa, afinaciones de entonación justa, heterofonías y la voz humana en monodía y polifonía, todo ello con una originalidad e independencia de inspiración y creación que lo hacen un compositor único e íntegro.

En el estreno participaron el New London Chamber Choir, la Critical Band, el Percussion Group The Hague, Sound Intermedia en la mezcla y espacialización. Directores: James Wood, David Lawrence y Jonathan Stockhammer. La parte visual corrió a cargo de Jo Joelson. Y entre las voces solistas, todas ellas espléndidas, destacan Sarah Leonard como Hildegard y Omar Ebrahim como cuatro personajes masculinos diferentes, entre ellos el maligno.

Interview with James Wood

ORO MOLIDO. – *We all know how music can transform a religious text into an almost life changing or, at least, life-enhancing experience. What can religious content add to music? i.e., does transcendence manifest itself clearly if the musical language portrays transcendence in a faithful way?*

JAMES WOOD. - I would ask the first part of your question in another way – what can music add to religious fervour or feeling? The answer to this, of course, is a great deal. (Witness, for example, the tradition of gospel music in the southern states). But perhaps you really don't mean it this way round – what can religious content add to music? - Surely, if one is honest, nothing. If you hear a piece of music without knowing what it is, or what it is supposed to be about – maybe you think you don't like it very much. Then you are told it's about the Crucifixion – does that change your perception? Do you suddenly like it better? I rather doubt it, even if you can understand why the composer wrote what he did.

O.M. - *Some people wonder what they feel when they hear Bach's St. Matthew Passion. They wonder because they feel something ennobling and life transforming they accept wholly, although they don't believe in the existence of spirit.*

J.W. - Many people have talked about Bach and religion - the fact that he wrote a cantata every week, almost as an accountant would fill out your tax returns by the required date every year. Did he really FEEL the subject every week, and was he inspired by the lectionary's weekly subject every time? I'm sure not, even though he was undoubtedly a religious man. Sometimes the weekly subject would be emotive, and would set him off without any difficulty, sometimes he must have felt tired, lacking in inspiration, and fell back on his phenomenal technique. And yet – it is quite possible that listeners who heard his less inspired cantatas could well have been spiritually transported by them. Here would be an example of music having a power that is beyond our control.

O.M - *To cut it short, I have felt the same spiritual thrill on hearing Hildegard.*

J.W. - I am really pleased to hear this!

O.M - *Does an authentic religious inspiration gives a transcendent dimension to music?*

J.W. - Sometimes. I think this comes back again largely to technique... And 'idea'. But more importantly I think it depends on the composer's philosophy of music. For me, music is a transcendental art (whether it is about a religious subject or not). But I know that by no means all composers see music that way. Some composers use music for political comment (for example the tradition of folk music in Panama and other parts of Latin America, and for example Henze's *Raft of the Medusa*, and almost all of John Adams). Some composers use music as satire (I'm thinking of Kagel in particular – *Orchestrionstraat* and *Die Mutation* and many other pieces) - whilst other composers have other agendas. I may well be considered naïve (as Messiaen is also often considered), but I have an unfaltering belief in music as a transcendental art, even though it is surprising how much music does not set out to exploit or fulfill this power. And the more the world descends towards chaos, the more important a role music can play for us in keeping our sanity – our joy – and our love of life.

O.M - Can a middle ground, where ennobling (for lack of a better word) values manifest themselves, be found where atheists and believers can recognise themselves as parts of the cosmic family?

J.W. - Yes, I'm sure it can, and has frequently been proved to exist – this goes back to Bach again, and to your next comment. Let's imagine two people listening to *La Transfiguration de notre Seigneur* (Messiaen) - both love the work – one is an atheist, and the other is a devout Catholic. Both are transported to a state of some kind of spiritual or musical ecstasy. The only difference between their responses is in the interpretation of those individual responses, and the meaning of their response to them. I'm sure this is a very frequent phenomenon.

O.M - I remember the most prestigious musical critic of Spain state that the only transcendence possible was that created by man (he is an atheist).

J.W. - Technically correct, of course!

O.M - To what extent did you rely on inspiration, (divine inspiration in some way or another), as Hildegard did, for your opera?

J.W. - It is very difficult for a composer to talk about inspiration. All I can say is that, throughout the two years during which I was worked on the composition of *Hildegard*, I found the music came very easily. I never got 'stuck', and this is usually a good sign, meaning, I suppose, that I was being guided by the hand of inspiration. But I think there are several reasons for this – one is that I had a very clear 'story', and an extremely rich source of potent texts. I spent a good two months plotting out the form of the opera at the beginning of the process, and found little reason to deviate very much from this plan. So I think my plan was good, and left me a huge amount of scope to elaborate the ideas in each scene without losing the overall direction. Many people have commented to me that the music in *Hildegard* is very inspired, not least Jonathan Stockhammer, but I'm not sure how to react to this comment.

O.M – This "Hildegard" version 2005 - to what extent is it a work in progress?, and to what extent is it a complete work?

J.W. - In fact the composition of *Hildegard* is all finished, and has been since around the summer of 2004. Since then I have been working on the electronic realization. The 2005 version consists of 17 out of the 22 scenes of the opera. We settled on this shortened form of the opera for 2005 for the following reasons – firstly lighting was to form an important part of the spectacle, and so we had to start the performances around 9.00 in the evening. It was felt that 10.15 – 10.30 was the latest finish time that was acceptable both to the Cathedrals (practical reasons) and to the public (getting home afterwards). So we settled on a sequence lasting about 1 hour and 20 minutes without an interval. The second reason was so as to let the choir learn the piece in stages – already the 2005 version includes a huge amount to learn, but any more would have been very dangerous in a single rehearsal schedule. Thirdly, the performance had to be rehearsable in a single afternoon rehearsal the day of the performance, to avoid huge extra costs of hotels and living expenses for the singers and musicians. Finally, it was a chance to try and test the largest scenes before undertaking the whole opera.

O.M - *Would you regard it as the "summa" of your compositional achievements?*

J.W. - Yes and no – yes in the sense that it includes a very wide range of my styles and techniques, including three different types of harmonic language; but no in the following sense: when planning a two-hour opera, it is necessary, in my view, to have some very strong unifying thread or ‘anchor’ with which to tie the whole piece together. In *Hildegard* I did this with the use of the harmonic spectral passages, mainly of narrative. This will become clearer (I hope) when the work is performed as a whole. This has resulted in some passages of quite simple, rhetorical music (like the very opening, for example), whose function is to provide a kind of foundation to the listener’s trajectory, as he embarks on his journey through the work. Without wishing to be pretentious, I would equate this function to that of Wagner’s Eb chord in *Rheingold*. I certainly would not have written passages like the opening scene in any other context (in a 20 minute piece for example), and would therefore never wish for this kind of music to be taken out of context. The danger, in one’s work as a whole, is to let the ‘facility’ of this kind of rhetorical musical style invade other types of one’s own concert music, thereby losing sight of the more important developments in one’s musical style (*Autumn Voices*, for example). I hope you can understand what I am saying. It’s difficult to explain.

O.M - *Do you use, in it, all your the musical sources you can resort to...microtonality, percussion, choir, soloist voices, electronics, spatialization...?*

J.W. - Yes indeed – I suppose it is my ‘*Monteverdi Vespers*’ in the sense that I bring together almost all my techniques into *Hildegard*.

O.M - *What do you think that spatialization adds to the reception of the piece on the part of the audience?*

J.W. - I think it is very important, and genuinely does immerse the public in the musical drama. It was especially stunning in Norwich and Salisbury Cathedrals. There’s no doubt, though, that one gets a different experience depending on exactly where one is sitting.

O.M - *Microtonality gives, without doubt, an uncanny air to the work, which harmonic ambience were you seeking?*

J.W. - I think the essence of this lies in the *Vision, Virginitas*, which I always thought was the most radical piece I have ever written. The use of long, sustained and accurately tuned spectral polyphony hopefully creates a disembodied feeling – or a feeling that the ground is not solid under one’s feet – like I can imagine being in space. This can hopefully induce a kind of intoxicated or ecstatic sensation.

O.M - *The shadow of "Saint François d'Assisi" by Messiaen was, somehow, hanging over "Hildegard"?*

J.W. - I am totally ashamed to say that I have never heard *Saint François*. However, of course I have always adored Messiaen, and he has always been a huge inspiration to me. People have commented that there is quite a bit of Messiaen in the piece – they’re probably right, but the reason is a technical one, not as a result of influence. The fact that I use a certain kind of mode (not the same as any of Messiaen’s) in the ‘chromatic’ (rather than spectral) sections does result in chords that are reminiscent of Messiaen’s.

O.M. #8 - *The operatic genre reaches the audience more deeply than concert pieces, what kind of emotional effect, purely operatic, do you want to convey to the audience ?*

J.W. - This is a very difficult question, because I am so inexperienced in opera, and stage direction. Indeed I have never been very fond of opera as a genre. All I can say is that the setting (in Cathedrals or Abbeys) is very important for me, since this creates an ambience that will bring the audience closer to the phenomenon of divine revelation, which is so important to the understanding of a mystic such as Hildegard, and to mysticism in general.

O.M. - *As regards the ideological ground of "Hildegard", which message do you wish to convey to the audience of this work?*

J.W. - Apart from what I have said in the answer to question 8 above, I think it is dangerous to have expectations about the way one wants people to hear any piece of one's music. If one does, one will almost certainly be disappointed, because my experience is that music says all sorts of things to different people – things that one never expects, but which, nonetheless, are very powerful.

O.M. - *The muted trumpets in the scene "VISION : The One Enthroned ", producing a "wah wah" effect surprised me, they are a masterly effect of sarcasm, could you comment something about this?*

J.W. - I think you mean trombone? If I understand which passages you are referring to, this is part of the 'soft shadow' referred to in the Vision's text. It wasn't intended as sarcastic – just using the glissando (and modulation of mute and multiphonics) as a depiction of something indistinct.

O.M. - *In several scenes, Hildegard's voice, speaking in search of guidance, or defending herself, is underlined by an electronic sequence, which seemed to me one of the most lyrical moments of the opera, do you agree?*

J.W. - Yes, I'm very happy with this aspect of the piece, and this particular technique is developed a lot further in the complete work – something I'm particularly looking forward to hearing (and I know that Sarah Leonard is looking forward to performing these passages too).

O.M. - *Is music composed by Hildegard herself present in the composition? In what way?*

J.W. - Yes indeed. All the 'plainchant' passages (*VIRTUTES*, for example the prerecorded sopranos and soloists *Scientia Dei* and *Anima Illa* in Act I scene 2) are based on the equivalent passages in Hildegard's *Ordo Virtutum*. Having analysed the melodies and the implied rhythms of the original chant, I reconstructed my own melodies by applying the steps of the melody to different modes, sometimes (as in Act I sc 2) using spectral harmonics as the new melodic field. Quite often I depart from a strict application of steps to mode, but that is the basic idea – this is very similar to my technique of using birdsong models in *Autumn Voices* and *Crying Bird*. The idea in Act I sc 2 was in fact to make a transition from almost pure Hildegard into this new world of chant which this technique creates. If you listen to the original Hildegard (do get the *Sequentia* Recording!), you will notice that the only thing different in the very opening *Virtutes* phrase of that scene between original Hildegard and me is the F quarter-sharp (eg 2nd note of phrase) defined by the C-spectrum. Later in the phrase it departs further from the original as the steps go higher.

O.M - *In what way is that world, so distant from ours, embodied in your score, and in the visual part, conceived by Jo Joelson? Do you find correspondences between stylistic features of your music and that long gone world?*

J.W. - I have always been profoundly interested in early music and early musical theory, for many reasons which have a lot to do with the way my musical philosophy and technique has developed over the years. It is often forgotten that in Medieval Universities music was considered a science. Music was one of the four sciences which made up the Quadrivium – Arithmetic, Geometry and Astronomy being the others. This was in contrast to those Rhetorical Arts such as Philosophy and Rhetoric itself. You can trace the notion of music as science back to Aristoxenus (c.400 BC), via Boethius (c. 500 AD) whose writings on musical theory and translations of Ancient Greek Theory (including Aristoxenus and Pythagoras) formed the basis of musical scholarship in the medieval Quadrivium. This ‘line of succession’ was broken with the age of Humanism (Monteverdi and later), and was totally forgotten by the time of the nineteenth century. When I visited Bali in 1981 I experienced first hand a music which had retained a lot of that ancient philosophy, which is why the year 1982 was such a turning point for me. I scrapped all the music I had written before then and started working with a completely new technique. Coincidentally 1982 was also the year I first met and worked with Xenakis, and it was Xenakis who introduced me to the writings of Aristoxenus. Also coincidentally this very same year a new translation of Aristoxenus’ *Stoicheia Rhythmika* was published by OUP. These three extraordinary coincidences have had a major influence on my work, giving me a sudden, revelatory insight into the very essence of music, in turn causing me to adopt a completely new approach to composition. So I think the ancient past is already very present in almost all my music, not just *Hildegard*.

My collaboration with Jo Joelson was unfortunately neither long nor deep – furthermore budgetary pressures meant that she was not able to realize much of her vision for the production, although I liked very much what she did despite the modest resources she had.

O.M - *Can you describe and value the performance, just magnificent to my ears, of the musicians, and, perhaps, comment briefly on their virtues and achievements?*

J.W. - For *Hildegard 2005* I was blessed by exceptionally wonderful singers and musicians, most of whom I have known for most of my working life. Everyone loved working on the production and the music, even the choir who rehearsed from the beginning of February right up until the performances in May. We had one problem with one member of the ensemble who couldn’t stand strobe lighting or incense, but apart from that they were all magnificent. We are now preparing a short (40-minute) sequence for a concert performance in Antwerp on October 20, and I’m happy to say the choir still seems to have the love for the music, and also that their performance has matured over the four months’ break so is now better than ever. This time the ensemble will be Champ d’Action, so we shall see how they take to it. Special thanks and praise should go to our wonderful conductor, Jonathan Stockhammer, who was a joy to work with, both for me and for the musicians.

O.M - Low frequencies seem to symbolize the evil powers, whereas the higher ones symbolize virtue, don't you think that this could lead to a kind of musical manichaeism?

J.W. - Not quite right – evil powers are represented by inharmonic sounds such as rattles, oil drums, oboe multiphonics – all sounds not corresponding to the natural spectrum. Virginity (as the highest of the Virtues) is represented by the natural spectrum (including right down to its fundamental). The very opening gesture, a C-spectrum growing out of the low C just after the viola entrance, is the purest example of that Virtue.

O.M - Could you tell us about the current relevance of Hildegard?

J.W. - Hildegard is generally regarded as an important figure for many reasons. Her music is among the earliest music ever written down by a single composer. Her studies of healing properties in plants and animals prefigure many current theories in the world of herbal medicine. She was a woman of enormous influence during a time when it was almost impossible for a woman to have any influence at all. She was an important medieval mystic – important because of the enormous detail in which she recorded and analysed her visions, giving us an exceptional insight into a medieval mind; and her extraordinary poems, hymns and sequences are remarkable as literature.

O.M - Do you know, even approximately, the date of premiere for "Hildegard"'s definitive version?

J.W. - Next year there are plans to perform the complete work (except for the 3rd Vision 'The Devil', which I may, in any case, take out of the opera altogether) in a concert version. The plans so far include Rotterdam (Laurenskerk) on 27th April, Maastricht (Musica Sacra Festival) on September 16th, and also in Gent sometime in September. So that will be a chance to hear all the music except Vision 3. As far as a complete operatic production is concerned, we are talking to Liverpool 2008 about it, but the prospect of a fully staged production is enormously problematic, so I'm not going to even guess that!

O.M - What new musical elements did you use in "Hildegard" as innovations, which were not present in your previous work?

J.W. - I think the main new element is melodic style, not only the plainchant I referred to earlier, but also much of Hildegard's music, and also the lyrical writing for Volmar (which was not included in the 2005 version). The chordal writing, such as in the opening of *The One Enthroned*, and the end of the final Vision, harks back to a pre-1982 style, but the dance in *Songs of Unity and Concord* I think is quite new. As I mentioned before, the spectral polyphony in *Virginitas* was quite a new idea, although one that has been in the back of my mind for some time, as are the sections of Hildegard's letters (Act 1 scenes 6 and 8).

O.M - Are there any other musical projects for the future you would like to highlight?

J.W. - I still have work to do on completing the electronic part for the rest of *Hildegard* – beyond that I'm thinking about several new projects, most notably a piece for organ and electronics for which I have a lot of ideas already.