

Augustana College's Major Premiere

Wuorinen's "Celestial Sphere" stirs and fascinates

Jack Hiemenz



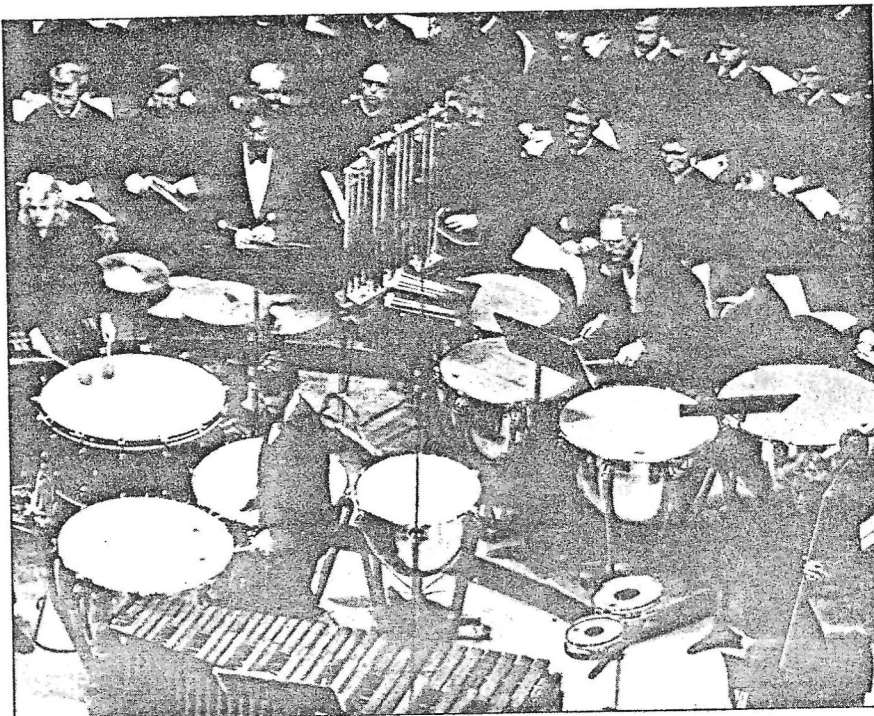
Shirley Fleming

Wuorinen: has some slithery fun

How are we to regard Charles Wuorinen? As an undervalued genius? As a Jeremiah among composers? As something of a prune? When his hugely ambitious sixty-minute choral/orchestral piece *The Celestial Sphere* was premiered last April in upstate Illinois, Wuorinen gave a pre-performance lecture in which, once again, he denounced his perennial enemy, the "cabal" of New York music critics. If he was hoping to beat them to the punch, though, he was wasting his breath. For I was the only out-of-town critic attending the unveiling—despite industrious promotion by the college sponsoring it. Had the cabal gotten lazy—or was this its ultimate triumph?

Convincing rapture

Whatever the reason, the critics missed out. For *The Celestial Sphere* is an exciting piece—convincing in its rapture, marvelously thun-



Percussion for *Sphere*: an important large choral work

derous at its climaxes, striking in its confident integration of chorus and orchestra. At every turn one senses, as one does in all choral masterpieces, the composer's delight at being allowed to work on a grand scale, to manipulate massive forces, in this case some 350-odd singers and a ninety-piece orchestra. How is it, one can't help but wonder, that major music organizations in the big cities have all but ceased giving us premieres of large-scale choral music, that an important piece such as *The Celestial Sphere* was performed not by the New York Philharmonic but by the Handel Oratorio Society of Augustana College, located in the small city of Rock Island, Illinois?

The answer, perhaps, has to do with the traditional nature of choral performances: as expressions of a community's collective life, its ability to perform massive feats for reasons other than monetary gain. Musically,

the Handel Oratorio Society has embodied Rock Island's collective spirit ever since its founding, a hundred years ago, by Olof Olsson, professor and future president of Augustana College and Theological Seminary. Olsson had visited London in 1879, where he attended a performance of Handel's *Messiah* and was overwhelmed. Returning to his school on the Illinois prairie, he started the society, hoping to use music as a means of communicating faith. To this day, the society has performed sacred music exclusively, including annual *Messiah* performances.

An option for modernity

Its church affiliation notwithstanding, the society decided, in commemorating its hundredth anniversary, against commissioning a trendy piece by some established "church music" composer, and instead opted

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for a composer closer to modern music's mainstream—one, moreover, not noted for his cultivation of regular meters and easy-going diatonic melodiousness (of the sort, for example, that was heard last January in New York, when that eminent choral ensemble Musica Sacra premiered a lengthy work by Alan Hovhaness).

For the society's amateur singers to take on so rigorous a modernist as Charles Wuorinen, whose music has caused coyotes to howl even at modern music concerts, was asking for ... well, work. Conceding that *The Celestial Sphere* was "perhaps the most demanding music the Handel Oratorio Society has ever faced," Donald Morrison, the society's music director, set up a Herculean rehearsal schedule. Beginning in January, it involved weekly rehearsals for full

chorus; five additional rehearsals for each section; and nightly rehearsals during the final week. As for the score's symphonic interludes, the student orchestra (bolstered by additional players lent by the University of Iowa) performed them in a February concert, thus offering the local audiences a foretaste of the April premiere.

Devotional fervor

Fortunately, *The Celestial Sphere* has a devotional fervor to warrant such an effort. Wuorinen describes the work, whose subject is the Pentecost, as "my divine service." It is structured somewhat oddly, in that both the opening and closing choral sections are settings of the same 1693 devotional poem, William Fuller's *Lord, What Is Man?* In between come two sections set to biblical texts—the first describing Christ's ascension, the second the events of Pentecost, including the descent of the Holy Ghost in the form of tongues of flame. The Fuller poem, a rather crabbed affair which describes man as a "worm," is solemnly set forth the first time around; heard again, following the Pentecost, its music becomes a joyous affirmation.

Some may find *The Celestial Sphere* a bit severe. There are no solo parts, no bouncing counterpoint. Wuorinen, never a terribly playful composer, doesn't engage much in word painting; still, he does have some slithery fun with the word "worm," and he adds a colorful (though overlong) stretch of tinkling, bell-like electronic music to describe the flames flickering over the heads of the Apostles. In short, *The Celestial Sphere* excites and fascinates in all sorts of ways. In this majestic choral/orchestral tapestry, Wuorinen has made a powerful statement and added to a repertory badly in need of replenishing. That I was the only visiting critic in attendance—what happened to you, oh Chicago, Des Moines, St. Louis?—is an indication that provincialism isn't always confined to the provinces. **MA**