

MUSICAL EVENTS

Creation, Revival

CHARLES WUORINEN'S cantata "Genesis," which was commissioned by the Honolulu Symphony, the Minnesota Orchestra, and the San Francisco Symphony, had its first performances last month, in San Francisco. It is a work unusual in these days: a joyful, affirmative, exuberant hymn of praise to the Creator for His creation. The cantata, which lasts about thirty-five minutes, has five movements: three for chorus and orchestra are divided by two interludes for orchestra alone. The text of the first movement, "Invocation," is made of seven Mass-chant incipits invoking God as creator: "Kyrie orbis factor," "Stelliferi conditor orbis," "Artifex terrae marisque et siderum," etc. In a program note Michael Steinberg calls it "a series of celebratory starbursts." The traditional chant melodies provide the musical material—audibly, but with entries at different pitches, rhythmic reordering, octave displacements, orchestral counterpoints. The start is a chordal cry followed by imitative chant entries, each a fourth higher than its predecessor, to which the orchestra adds other notes. The mood, exclamatory at first, gradually becomes more reflective. The first interlude, "Meditation," which is marked *piacevole*, flows gently; the material is again chant-derived, with increasingly chromatic inflections. "Creation History," the central movement, is a setting (in the Vulgate) of the first chapter of Genesis and the opening verses (telling of Sabbath rest) of the second chapter. This is treated calmly, "rationally," not in a busy flap and flurry of construction and manufacture but as a depiction of creation by dictate: "And God said . . . And it was so." But there is variety of texture, variety of pace, and some fascinating, beautiful instrumental detail. When rest time comes, the voices settle to a unison chant. The second interlude, "Cosmology," proposes a big-bang creation: a sustained crash, waves of energy, eventual resolution on a sustained, mysterious, widely spaced string chord. The finale, "Doxology," is a burst of Alleluias, beginning with the "Kyrie orbis factor" music from the start of the piece and moving at last into a "Cantate domino

canticum novum" that is also an ecstatic dance, holding episodes of Tippett-like contrapuntal rhapsody.

Wuorinen has said, carefully, of his recent music:

If there have been changes in my work, they have been in the direction of a greater connectedness with older musical traditions . . . what one might describe as the "pre-revolutionary" tradition of Western music. I don't think that I've become more conservative, but my harmonic language is now more clearly grounded in what I call "pitch centrality." . . . And my use of rhythm is more periodic, more regular, more intimately related to the background pulse than it used to be—which is a long, complicated, and rather pompous way of saying that the beat is clearer.

The idea of writing a large choral piece was suggested to him by Herbert Blomstedt, the San Francisco's music director, who had conducted several other Wuorinen compositions. "Genesis" had three performances, on successive days. The first was a shade careful; by the third, the San Francisco Symphony Chorus (trained by Vance George) was singing and the orchestra was playing with confidence and color, shaping the phrases, bringing them to life. "Genesis" is not an easy work. Impelled by counterpoint, challenging in its harmonies, it is richly and intently wrought—and exhilarating to hear.

—ANDREW PORTER