Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898):
Days of Creation: Fifth Day

Genesis, *which Charles Wuorinen completed on December 1, 1989, was commissioned under a grant from Meet the Composer by the Minnesota Orchestra and the San Francisco Symphony, and for their respective music directors, Edo de Waart and Herbert Blomstedt. The work is dedicated to John Duffy "in personal affection and in admiration of his many good works on behalf of new music." Mr. Duffy is the founder and executive director of Meet the Composer, Inc., an organization that exists for the purpose of promoting contact between composers and performers as well as composers and the public through commissions, travel grants, etc. The first performances of* Genesis *were given in San Francisco on September 26-28, 1991 by Herbert Blomstedt and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and San Francisco Symphony Chorus, Vance George, conductor.*

The following program note was written by Michael Steinberg for the premiere of Genesis *by the San Francisco Symphony, and is reprinted here by kind permission, with modifications for these performances. Mr. Steinberg, program annotator for the San Francisco Symphony and former Artistic Director of the Minnesota Orchestra Viennese Sommerfest, frequently hosts Minnesota Orchestra Concert Conversations and presents Coffee Concert previews.*

Herbert Blomstedt, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, was not just the first conductor of *Genesis*; he was, in an important sense, the inspirator and godfather of this powerful work. In one of his conversations with Charles Wuorinen during the four years, 1985 to 1989, that he, Wuorinen, was the San Francisco Symphony's composer-in-residence, Blomstedt said, "Wouldn't it be nice if somebody wrote a new Genesis," or words to that effect. Moreover, having conducted several of Wuorinen's instrumental works—*Movers and Shakers, The Golden Dance, Another Happy Birthday*, the Piano Concerto No. 3, and *Machault mon chou*—Blomstedt was curious to see what effect the challenge of writing for chorus might have on the composer's musical language. From these exchanges came the impetus for Wuorinen to add his *Genesis* to the list—not large, but distinguished—of compositions on that subject by Haydn, Schoenberg and Milhaud.[1]

Wuorinen's Manhattan town house is filled with books, scores, prints and a Grotrian grand piano, which especially pleases him as being the first outstandingly good instrument he has owned. (He is an excellent pianist who wrote his first two concertos for himself to play and who still performs in public on occasion.) One would like to stick around and browse. Nose and eye are quickly informed that this is a place where good food is valued and provided. The host's voice and delivery are measured, the vocabulary is rich and precisely aimed, and opinions on many subjects—his composing colleagues, the merits of a 1980 Chateau Palmer as compared to those of its 1982 counterpart, the Second Vatican Council, the fluoridation of New York City water—are strongly held and strongly expressed. Information flows freely on matters from Chinese syntax to the latest in rotisserie devices.

As he prepares to answer questions about *Genesis*, Wuorinen lays out a full score, a Latin Bible, and a copy of the *Liber usualis*, which is a combination of the principal liturgical Latin books formerly used by the Catholic church, the missal, the breviary, the gradual and the antiphonal. The *Liber* is the source of the text for the first and third movements of *Genesis*, and Wuorinen refers to it in the preface to his score as "the now lamentably disused *Liber usualis*."

Virtually Wuorinen's first decision about *Genesis* was to write a non-narrative, non-programmatic treatment of the subject. What, along those lines, can be usefully added to Haydn? Or, as Wuorinen puts it, "There's no point in doing another naturalistic representation with whanging and banging." Besides, interested as he is in both theology and science, he did not want to pass up the opportunity to try a more contemplative and imaginative approach.

He cites the work of Stanley Jaki, a Jesuit physicist, theologian and historian of science. Jaki has made the point that it is wrong to say that Greek thought engendered Western science; rather, the real impulse emerges from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The account in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis, Wuorinen says, is of a reasoned, orderly creation of the world, an account of a process accessible to reason. The insistent refrain of "and God saw that it was good" attests to this. There is no hierarchical bar to keep humankind from understanding the nature of the world; incentive exists, therefore, for scientific investigation.

The process of creation, Wuorinen remarks, is usually regarded as violent. To illustrate, he pulls out a late—sixteenth—century Roman missal with a woodcut of, as he says, "God rushing around creating everything." But, he points out, the Biblical account makes no distinction between word and event. The formula, over and again, is: "And God said . . . and it was so." What is stressed is the series of ritual repetitions of "Dixitque Deus . . . Dixit quoque Deus . . . Dixit autem Deus . . . Dixit etiam Deus. . . ." With the exception of its fourth section—and of that and the reason for that, more below—*Genesis* is a non-explosive, non-violent work.

The actual words of God, the words that follow the various forms of "Dixit Deus," are always sung by the women of the chorus. This, Wuorinen emphasizes, is not a feminist statement. What, rather, he has wished to convey by this unexpected, untraditional choice of register is a sense of "otherness" or "not-us-ness," the distinction between God and humanity. As for the decision to set God's words for multiple voices, Wuorinen acknowledges the model to be found in Stravinsky's *The Flood*, where the divine words are assigned to two basses.

Another early decision was to set the Biblical text in Latin. One reason is practical: Latin, with its many open vowels, is a wonderful language to sing, and choruses are familiar with it and know how to sing it. Hebrew or Greek, Wuorinen remarks, would have been interesting and valid alternatives, but he is not familiar with the prosody of either language. As for English, the problem is, which version? Everyone acknowledges the King James as a literary master-

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1. Arnold Schoenberg contributed the beautiful Prelude to *Genesis*, a composite work by seven composers and organized by Nathaniel Shilkret, who also composed the second section, titled "Creation." Darius Milhaud wrote the fourth part, whose subject is Cain and Abel, but he is better remembered for his jazz-inspired dance score of 1923, *La Création du monde*. Bartók was also asked to contribute a movement, but realizing that he was already too ill to be likely to be able to deliver, he returned his commission money.

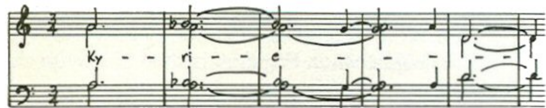
piece, but its occasional inaccuracies and its archaisms are a nuisance. What the various revised versions have in common is that sooner or later they all sound dated. Against that, the Vulgate of Saint Jerome has the advantage of being a fixed and permanent text, and it was important to Wuorinen to make *Genesis* universal rather than parochial.

Genesis is in five parts. The first, third and fifth are vocal and are designated as movements; the second and fourth are instrumental interludes. The first movement, "Invocation," begins, literally, with an invocation—with a great cry of "Kyrie—Lord." Catholics old enough to remember the words of the Mass as they sounded before the Second Vatican Council's liturgical reforms of 1962-65 decreed worship in the vernacular, likewise music-lovers who know their masses from Machault to Stravinsky, are conditioned to expect "Kyrie" to continue as "Kyrie eleison—Lord, have mercy upon us." But here the next words are "Kyrie orbis factor—Lord, Maker of the Heavens."[2] And "Kyrie orbis factor" is followed by "Stelliferi Conditor orbis—Author of the Star-filled Heavens," which in turn leads to "Artifex terrae marisque et siderum—Sculptor of Earth, Sea and Stars"—and more.

What Wuorinen has done here is to make a text by lining up the titles of all the Gregorian chant masses that refer to the Creation—seven in all. Rather than a linear discourse or narrative, they form a series of celebratory starbursts. He thinks of *Genesis* as a hymn of thanksgiving for existence. Finally, remembering that the first of his titles began with the word "Kyrie," Wuorinen ends with a great two-measure chordal cry of "ELEISON." The two words are the brackets that hold the "Invocation" in place.

And the music? First, it should be pointed out that Wuorinen quotes not only the words of these Gregorian masses, but their melodies as well. For example, the Gregorian "Kyrie orbis factor" begins like this:

The opening of *Genesis* goes this way:



and after the initial cry, tutti, fortissimo the chorus basses lead off with a variant of the continuation of the Gregorian melody:

It is as true as ever that Wuorinen is not about to join the ranks of the born-again tonalists or of those who, forgetting that the Romantic movement was about adventure, not retreat, presume to call themselves neo-Romantics. He remains a maximalist through and through, writing music dense with notes, with event, with cross-reference and allusion. He has never thought that there must be something wrong with a piece that reaches his listeners at first encounter (populist musicians and critics like to accuse certain composers of holding that attitude), but he does believe in challenging performers and listeners to do better than they knew they could. He likes music that reveals its riches gradually rather than all at once and that rewards attention and effort.

At the same time it is true that, perhaps beginning with the Piano Concerto No. 3 of 1983 (played here by David Buechner in the 1988-89 season), recent years have brought what Wuorinen himself has called a clarification of his musical language and style. The Sonata for Violin and Piano and the Third String Quartet (the latter also based on Gregorian chant) are especially beautiful examples of this. Asked about this by the critic Tim Page, Wuorinen replied:

"From my vantage point it's a little difficult to say what's happened—I've just kept on scribbling. But 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 centricity'—I don't want to use the word 'tonality' because it's dangerous and usually misleading. 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."

In *Genesis* you also find a hierarchy of difficulties. To say it as simply as possible, the orchestral parts are more difficult than the choral parts. Orchestras like those that commissioned *Genesis* can pretty much play anything. Most orchestras, however, work with choruses made up for the most part or entirely of non-professional singers. Such choruses can be marvelous, but still, certain twentieth-century masterpieces like Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and Sessions' *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd* begin to approach the outer limits of what is practicable for them, while some, like Luigi Nono's *Il canto sospeso,* are likely to be out of reach altogether. Wuorinen wanted to be sure that *Genesis* would not be out of reach. He took pains, therefore, to make sure that the lines and harmonies of the choral parts enter the ear easily. (Think back to Herbert Blomstedt's question about how writing for chorus might affect Wuorinen's style.) That said, it should be emphasized that the assignment for the chorus is still anything other than a piece of cake, and that a chorus has to sweat bullets to get it right. The orchestral parts—and this is particularly true of the two purely instrumental interludes—are brilliantly colored in the most characteristic Wuorinen manner, and thoroughly challenging to the players and their conductor.

"Invocation" is a grand tutti framed between the choral exclamations of "Kyrie" and "ELEISON." Each section within the "Invocation" is vividly characterized. For example, both "Kyrie orbis factor" and "Stelliferi Conditor orbis" bring the contrast between a chordal beginning and a polyphonic continuation, but each has its own distinctive orchestral texture. The latter includes a measure of repeated woodwind chords that refers to the "beyond the stars" passage in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Elsewhere, Wuorinen devises similarly effective contrasts between chordal and poly-

We've got to show our audiences that they have the capacity to respond to music in ways they've never dreamed possible.

We keep hearing that the symphony orchestra is going to become a museum. But the simplest analysis proves that this is impossible. A museum contains objects; all you have to do is house them. . . . But a concert hall is a living thing. It is impossible for an art which has to be recreated all the time to be housed in a museum.
—Wuorinen

Days of Creation: Sixth Day

2. "Orbis," which denotes a circle or a disk or anything round, most often refers to the heavens when used in a sacred context; however, it can also be found as "orbis terrae" meaning the earth.

phonic writing and between lines of greater or lesser smoothness. The pacing throughout is likewise varied and skillful.

The first orchestral interlude is called "Meditation." The tempo is easy-going, and the direction to the performers is *piacevole*, which means both pleasant and pleasing, and carries overtones of "friendly." Here too the melodic lines are informed by the Gregorian chant sources. Most of the orchestra is used at some point or other in the "Meditation," but the effect over all is chamber-musical and the dynamics hardly rise beyond mezzo-forte. The constant meter changes—3/2 7/8 3/4 7/8 5/8 6/8 7/8 just in the first seven measures—may look alarming to the score-reader's eye, but the effect for the ear is gently fluid, not jagged.

For the central and largest section of *Genesis*, which he calls "Creation History," Wuorinen turns to the Creation account in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, a passage that Wuorinen points out is the traditional First Lesson for the Easter Vigil. For this of course he brings back the chorus. No "whanging and banging," certainly, but still, Wuorinen does not set the text as though it were just so many columns from the Minneapolis phone book. He is mindful and captivatingly evocative of atmosphere: waves of percussion and muttering low strings suggest the state of pre-Creation earth, "without form, and void;" a wonderful ascent and tumble, soft, in just a few bright instruments, accompanies God's command, "FIAT LUX—Let there be light;" there is no mistaking day and night. This "Creation History" is a joyously busy music, which ends quietly as God rests on the seventh day.

The emphasis in the treatment of the text in the "Creation History" is on the series of ritual repetitions of "Dixitque Deus ... Dixit quoque Deus ... Dixit autem Deus ... Dixit etiam Deus ...." and on "et factum est ita (and it was so)." God's word and the action it commands are simultaneous: the word *is* the deed. The details of the fruit-trees and the great whales and the rest of it are less important than God's words. Wuorinen distinguishes, therefore, between God's words, which are set forth in the sharpest clarity, and the rest of the text, which is folded over upon itself, with different clauses being sung on top of one another.

The second orchestral interlude is titled "Cosmology." Here is Wuorinen's one bow in the direction of the violent Creation tradition. This is, in fact, a "big bang" Creation. This imaginative music starts with a tremendous crash and consists after that of receding and diminishing waves of energy until nothing remains but a great stillness.

After this comes the "Doxology," an expression of praise of God's glory. "Alleluia" is the shortest example, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost" a longer and familiar one. "Alleluia" is in fact the first word the chorus sings, and it does so to the same music that began the "Invocation." As he does for "Invocation," so does Wuorinen turn to various canticles in the *Liber usualis* for the words. All the texts are about "making" and here, too, Wuorinen introduces the appropriate musical references. Like the "Invocation," the "Doxology" is richly varied in color, texture, and dynamics, and it—and with it the entire *Genesis* cantata—ends in a blaze of celebration: "Cantata Domino canticum novum quia mirabilia fecit Dominus, Alleluia—Sing unto the Lord a new song, for the Lord has done marvelous things—Hallelujah."

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The text and translation of *Genesis* are provided in a program supplement.