

***On the Transmigration of Souls***

**John Adams (1947 B )**

Written: 2002

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 25 minutes

When the New York Philharmonic planned the opening concerts of the 2002 season, they soon realized that they fell on the first anniversary of what we now call 9/11. They turned to John Adams, one of America=s foremost active composers, and asked him to write a commemorative piece. John Adams describes the events that followed:

The request to compose this piece came in late January, which meant I had not much more than six months. Normally you begin planning an orchestral work of this scope more than a year in advance. . . . I didn=t require any time at all to decide whether or not to do it. I knew immediately that I very much wanted to do this pieceBin fact I needed to do it. Even though I wasn=t exactly sure what kind of a shape the music would take, I knew that the labor and the immersion that would be required of me would help answer questions and uncertainties with my own feelings about the event. . . . Being given the opportunity to make a work of art that would speak directly to people=s emotions allowed me not only to come to grips personally with all that had happened, but also gave me a chance to give something to others.

My desire in writing this piece is to achieve in musical terms the same sort of feeling one gets upon entering one of those old, majestic cathedrals in France or Italy. When you walk into the Chartres Cathedral, for example, you experience an immediate sense of something otherworldly. You feel you are in the presence of many souls, generations upon generations of them, and you sense their collected energy as if they were all congregated or clustered in that one spot . . . you feel very much alone with your

thoughts and you find them focused in a most extraordinary and spiritual way.

I want to avoid words like "requiem" or "memorial" when describing this piece because they too easily suggest conventions that this piece doesn't share. If pressed, I'd probably call the piece a "memory space." It's a place where you can go and be alone with your thoughts and emotions. The link to a particular historical event—in this case to 9/11—is there if you want to contemplate it. But I hope that the piece will summon human experience that goes beyond this particular event. "Transmigration" means "the movement from one place to another" or "the transition from one state of being to another . . ." But in this case I mean it to imply the movement of the soul from one state to another. And I don't just mean the transition from living to dead, but also the change that takes place within the souls of those that stay behind, of those who suffer pain and loss and then themselves come away from that experience transformed.

Something I had seen on an amateur video taken minutes after the first plane had hit the first tower stuck in my mind: it was an image of millions and millions of pieces of paper floating out of the windows of the burning skyscraper and creating a virtual blizzard of white paper slowly drifting down to earth. The thought of so many lives lost in an instant—thousands—and also the thought of all these documents and memos and letters, faxes, spreadsheets and God knows what, all human record of one kind or another—all of this suggested a kind of density of texture that I wanted to capture in the music, but in an almost freeze-frame slow motion.

So I eventually settled on a surprisingly small amount of text. And this text falls into three categories. One is the simple reading of names, like a litany. I found friends and family members with different vocal timbres and asked each to read from the long

list of victims. Then I made a sort of mantra-like composition out of the tape-recorded reading of these names, starting with the voice of a nine-year-old boy and ending with that of two middle-aged women, both mothers themselves. I mixed this with taped sounds of the city—traffic, people walking, distant voices of laughter or shouting, trucks, cars, sirens, steel doors shutting, brakes squealing—all the familiar sounds of the big city which are so common that we usually never notice them.

While a recording of the reading of names and the city noises quietly surrounds the audience, the onstage chorus sings texts that I took from missing-persons signs that had been posted by the families of the victims in the area around Ground Zero. These signs, photos of which were taken by Barbara Hawes, the New York Philharmonic's archivist, had tremendous poignancy. Most had been hastily written and xeroxed, usually with a snapshot photo along with a physical description and often a heart-wrenching little message at the end, something like "Please come home, Louie. We miss you and we love you." What I discovered about the language of these messages was that it was invariably of the most simple and direct kind. No one stunned by the shock of a sudden loss like this has time nor inclination to speak or write with eloquent or flowery language. Rather one speaks in the plainest words imaginable. When we say "Words fail" in situations like this, we mean it. So I realized that one of the great challenges of composing this piece would be finding a way to set the humblest of expressions like "He was the apple of my father's eye," or "She looks so full of life in that picture."

It's not my intention to attempt "healing" in this piece. . . . Instead, the best I can hope for is to create something that has both serenity and the kind of "gravitas" that those old cathedrals possess.

Modern people have learned all too well how to keep our emotions in check, and we know how to mask them with humor or irony. Music has a singular capacity to unlock those controls and bring us face to face with our raw, uncensored and unattenuated feelings. That is why during times when we are grieving or in need of being in touch with the core of our beings we seek out those pieces which speak to us with that sense of gravitas and serenity.

8 2008 John P. Varineau  
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***The Ring, an orchestral adventure***  
**Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**  
**compiled and arranged by Henk de Vlieger**  
Written: 1848-1874 (arrangement in 1992)  
Style: Romantic  
Duration: 68 minutes

In the nineteenth century, an era known for its larger-than-life figures, there was none larger than the composer Richard Wagner. To some of his contemporaries, he was a god. Ludwig II of Bavaria once wrote to Wagner, "I can only adore you . . . An earthly being cannot requite a divine spirit." Others felt that he was destroying music. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "Is Wagner a human being at all? Is he not rather a disease? He contaminates everything he touches, he has made music sick. . . . Wagner's art is diseased."

Like the man himself, Wagner's music is larger than life. His greatest work and, indeed, the apex of the entire world of opera is his monumental *Ring of the Nibelung*. What Wagner was striving for was what he called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the total or complete artwork. *The Ring* took twenty-four years to complete and is actually a cycle of four epic operas. Based

on German and Scandinavian folk tales, Wagner had complete control over all aspects of the production. He not only wrote the scenario, the words, and the music, he designed the sets and costumes, invented some new instruments for the accompanying orchestra and eventually designed and built the opera house in Bayreuth to stage the operas.

A short synopsis of almost fifteen hours of music is impossible, but here is an attempt: The first opera, *The Rhine-gold* acts a sort of introduction to the whole cycle. A Nibelung dwarf, Alberich, manages to steal a hoard of gold from the Rhine-maidens. He fashions a ring from it which gives him the power to rule the world. Meanwhile, Wotan, the chief of the gods, is admiring his new palace, Valhalla, which was built for him by two giants. As payment, he has promised them his sister-in-law Freia. Instead, he travels into middle-earth where he manages to steal Alberich's ring and gold. Alberich lays a curse upon the ring. After accepting the ring and gold as substitute for Freia, the giants then turn on each other. The victor turns himself into a dragon in order to protect his hoard.

In the second opera, *The Valkyrie*, Siegmund and Sieglinde, who are unaware that they are the twin children of Wotan and a mortal woman, meet and fall in love. Wotan's wife Fricka demands that Wotan punish the illicit relationship between his illicit children by death. Wotan charges yet another illicit daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, to make sure that Siegmund dies in battle. Instead she protects him until Wotan appears and causes Siegmund's sword to fail. Wotan punishes Brünnhilde's disobedience by putting her into a magic sleep on top of a mountain, protected by a ring of fire, penetrable by only the bravest and fearless of men.

That man is none other than the son of Siegmund and Sieglinde and the protagonist of the third opera, the fearless Siegfried. With the restored sword of his father he manages to slay the

dragon, steal the gold, and rescue Brünnhilde. Of course, they fall in love.

The final opera, *Götterdämmerung*, details Siegfried's unwitting betrayal of Brünnhilde and his eventual death. In the final denouement, Brünnhilde appears, takes the cursed ring, orders a huge funeral pyre to be built and then plunges herself and her steed into the fire. As the fire flares up, the Rhine overflows its banks and the Rhine-maidens eagerly retrieve their gold.

Wagner's orchestral writing is some of the most compelling and descriptive music in all of music. Henk de Vlieger, a percussionist for the Netherlands Radio Orchestra, has taken sixteen of the purely orchestral sections of the four operas along with some cleverly rewritten sung parts and arranged them into an hour-long orchestral piece that follows somewhat the general plot of the entire cycle.