

# Apokalypsis

Reading the Book of Revelation today, one cannot fail to be struck by many frightening similarities between the apocalyptic visions which St John describes<sup>1</sup>—especially with his customary lavish, detailed and extravagant imagery—and the increasing number and frequency of catastrophes, both natural and man-induced, which our world is experiencing today.

*Apokalypsis* takes its principal texts from Chapters 8, 9 and 10 of The Book of Revelation. Here, St John's vision is of seven angels, to whom are given seven trumpets. As each angel sounds his trumpet, he foretells of a particular catastrophic event: first of a fire, mingled with hail and blood, which burns up one third of the earth's trees and grasses; the second of a mountain burning with fire which spews poisoned lava into the sea; the third of a star which falls from the sky and poisons the rivers with wormwood<sup>2</sup>; the fourth of a solar and lunar eclipse; the fifth of a filthy bottomless pit which belches forth poisonous gases into the air; the sixth of four 'angels' released from prison, who vow to destroy one third of mankind; and the seventh, in summation, of a book which tastes sweet in the mouth but then becomes bitter in the stomach. As he stands—one foot on the land, the other on the sea—he declares with a loud voice that "there shall be no more time".

The similarities between these events and our own current predicament are obvious, and yet our own attempts to avert the ultimate catastrophe continue to be dogged by bureaucratic impotence at best and political sabotage at worst.

In *Apokalypsis*, St John's texts are juxtaposed with contemporary forecasts and reports of recent natural and man-made disasters which bear a chilling resemblance to the original visions. St John's texts are sung in Latin by the choir and the solo singers, and the contemporary reports are recited in a kind of notated speech in English, by the reciters. (The reciters are amplified, their sound dynamically spatialised in different ways around the audience via a ring of loudspeakers).

Each of the work's seven main Parts deals with the texts relating to each of the seven angels. In each Part the main Latin text is presented both by the chorus and one of the soloists, who sings the texts uttered by each of the angels. These texts are interrupted at appropriate intervals by one or more of the contemporary recitations, performed by the reciters. Each section then culminates with one of the

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<sup>1</sup> The authorship of the Book of Revelation has been the subject of controversy among scholars for some time. However, it seems clear that it was written by a second century Jewish Christian prophet. Since tradition links the book to St John the Apostle, I have referred to him here as the author.

<sup>2</sup> Various interpretations of this 'Wormwood Star' have been put forward. In Latin it is referred to as Absinthium, of which the full name is Artemisia absinthium, the plant from which the liquor, Absinthe, is extracted. Absinthe was drunk widely in France and Switzerland in the early twentieth century, mainly by writers and artists who enjoyed its hallucinatory effects, but it proved addictive, and many people died from it. Astonishingly, the Ukrainian word for Wormwood is чорнобиль (Chornobyl) and refers to the Ukrainian city of Chernobyl...

'Soundings' of the seven angels' trumpets, performed by the saxophones. The organ's role is to accompany the soloists and the chorus, as well as to feature prominently together with the saxophones in each of the Soundings.

Each of the seven Recitations features a different principal reciter, but with each successive Recitation the number of reciters grows from one in Part I to seven in Part VII, as each principal reciter in turn takes on a supporting role to each new reciter. All the Recitations are underscored by the saxophones, who are dispersed to various positions around the space, some near, some in the distance, in constantly changing formations. As a climax to this gradual, powerful and cumulative process, at the end of Part VII all seven saxophonists form a ring around the public as the seventh angel announces the end of time.

*Apokalypsis* was originally conceived for performances in cathedrals, large churches and other large spaces, both to maximise the element of the live spatialisation of the saxophones, and also to exploit the buildings' splendid acoustics, in turn enhancing both the resonance of these magnificent instruments and their natural ability to blend and balance with the organ in a grandiose setting.

*Apokalypsis* was originally conceived to be performed without a break, but an interval could be inserted between Parts IV and V, if desired.