

Journey of the Magi

Written at the time when the Christian world is celebrating the 2000th Anniversary of the birth of Christ, *Journey of the Magi* recalls one of the most mysterious and little documented stories surrounding the first Christmas. Of the four Evangelists, only St Matthew tells of the journey made by three astrologers from the East who travelled westwards to Bethlehem, apparently guided by a star, to worship the new King.

It has been proposed by several theologians that this story is more symbolic than factual, and indeed many classical artists and poets have exploited this symbolism to impressive effect. For me too, *Journey of the Magi* is not just about the journey of three astrologers, but more about the spread of religion, like the gravitation of the waters to the moon, man's need for religious belief of one kind or another, and his natural gregariousness through a common belief.

Accordingly, *Journey of the Magi* moves from a state of chaos (darkness) to a state of order (light). This is achieved musically in several different ways - firstly in terms of the spatialisation of the performers. Over the course of the work the musicians move from a state of maximum dispersal around the audience at the opening towards a state of maximum integration on the stage at the end. The music, too, follows this trend, moving from its most diffuse and blurred at the opening to its most focussed and sharply defined at the end - rather like watching the formation of a crystal or icicle through a time-lapse camera. The opening state of chaos (darkness) is marked by the use of five conch shells, which can be heard responding to the opening horn call, representing the sea, the Flood, and thus chaos.

Secondly, there are five principal musicians who are deployed around the audience in the shape of a constantly evolving five-pointed star - of these only the horn player remains constant. The other points of the star change in both instrumentation and position as the star gradually reforms itself on stage.

Thirdly, at the core of the music is a continuous thread of melody based on the transcription of the star-patterns of eight constellations (and their geometric permutations) associated with the period of our winter solstice (hence symbolically that of the birth of Christ). This melodic thread is then passed continually from point to point of the star following ever changing routes, thus enabling the listener to track the gradual evolution of the star's shape and movement.

In the centre of the stage are the three musicians representing the Magi - piano (partially prepared) and two percussionists who play gongs and other rich-sounding instruments with complex spectra, representing the gold and exotic spices brought by the Magi as gifts. These musicians of course remain stationary - their journey is witnessed by us as it were through their eyes, as they move westwards following the signs in the sky, like a mariner constantly calculating his position and direction from the ever-changing patterns of stars around him.

Journey of the Magi was commissioned jointly by the French Ministry of Culture (Commande d'Etat), Les Percussions de Strasbourg and MUSICA Festival. It was written between January and July 2000 for the combined forces of Nouvel Ensemble Modern and Les Percussions de Strasbourg, conductor Lorraine Vaillancourt.

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