

Aaron Jay Kernis:
***Musica celestis* for String Orchestra**

For a composer coming of age, the 1980s presented a bewildering period marked by openness to multiple stylistic currents. The richness of possibilities that beckoned is apparent in the gamut represented by Aaron Jay Kernis' mentors: from the west coast Minimalism of early John Adams to the twelve-tone rigor of Charles Wuorinen. Between such extremes, the heady eclecticism of the 1980s and '90s extended to embrace a rebirth of the Romantic impulse, neo-tonality, pop culture references, and reclamations of once-obscure composers from the historical treasure trove of world music.

In Kernis' pantheon of influences, Mahler and Beethoven share a table with Hildegard of Bingen, Arvo Pärt and John Lennon; the sonic technology and complexity of the modern orchestra become grounded in a sensibility that feels as much at home with the textures of Minimalism as with the resonance of an Indonesian gamelan.

Musica celestis ("heavenly music") originated as the slow second movement to Kernis' String Quartet No. 1 and became the larger work's subtitle. (The String Quartet No. 2, subtitled *Musica Instrumentalis*, garnered its composer a Pulitzer Prize in 1998.) In the tradition of Samuel Barber's similarly extracted Adagio for Strings, *Musica celestis* is an arrangement of that Quartet movement for string orchestra (with double bass added), completed in 1991. In that form it has become perhaps the best-known piece by Kernis to date.

Kernis ascribes his inspiration to the medieval concept of the music of the spheres, "which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God without end." He cites his discovery of Hildegard of Bingen, yet *Musica celestis* evinces a broader range of influences: from English pastoralism and the Barber Adagio to the radical simplicity of Beethoven's "Holy Song of Thanksgiving" from the A minor String Quartet, Op. 132—all framed by a sonority reminiscent of the "silvery blue" A major harmonies from the Prelude to *Lohengrin*.

Between its seemingly timeless opening and end, *Musica celestis* presents its basic material—"a simple, spacious melody and harmonic pattern"—in different lights. Particularly in its long-sustained climactic passage (which begins about two-thirds through, a ratio sanctioned by the Classical "golden section"), Kernis emphasizes stratospheric extremities of range, and not just in the violins—here even the cellos play notes high in the treble clef.

The musical texture of the piece involves variations of the hymn-like basic melody. Meanwhile, the near stasis of its pacing opens into a quickening section of scalar ascents in the interior of the work. Texture and tempo reveal the composer playing with fundamental paradoxes: between tension and resolution, basic diatonicism and transient dissonance and, finally, the conundrum of seeming change against an underlying permanence.

—Thomas May