

hoc est corpus meum

By Julie Harting

My first exposure to music was from my father, a tuba player in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Reading, Pennsylvania, Orchestras. He had a fairly large record collection of symphonic works. Every Sunday morning before church, while I was stretched out on the living room floor reading the Sunday comics, he would play one of his records. He favored symphonic work that used a lot of loud, lower brass—Rimsky-Korsakov's *Russian Easter* and *Scheherazade*, and Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*. He also liked the symphonic works of Brahms and Beethoven. A special favorite was Brahms's *German Requiem*.

We had a variety of instruments in our house. My father had a tuba, a string bass, and a violin. One summer my older sister took piano lessons and we rented a piano for a few months; my brother had acoustic and electric guitars. I fooled around on all of these instruments, but my *instrument* was the tuba since our school district didn't have an orchestra or string program. I played in high school and local concert bands, stage band, dance band, pep band, a Dixieland band, a Pennsylvania Dutch folk band, and local community-college orchestras.

When I was eighteen I found myself working at the American Tourister Luggage factory in Warren, Rhode Island, as a foot-press operator, smashing metal attachments onto pockets that were to be attached to the side of the luggage. It was while working there that I decided to study music seriously, so I went to Boston, where I attended a summer session at Berklee College of Music.

Although Berklee is known as a jazz school, I was there "on a fluke." I was not a "jazzier," but a "legit" tuba player. I still remember the dumbfounded looks I got when in the school cafeteria at breakfast one morning, after listening to other students—mostly male guitar players—talk about Coltrane, I naively asked, "Who's John Coltrane?" Eventually I learned about and listened to Coltrane, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans, Gil Evans, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Bud Powell, Art Tatum, Charlie Parker . . .

The most memorable experience for me at Berklee was listening to Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. I was taking a jazz analysis class. The teacher's main concern was to open our ears. He would never tell us the name or composer of the piece we were listening to because he wanted us to listen without preconceptions. He played a slow movement of some strange music, unlike anything I had ever heard. As I listened, I

started contemplating Christ as a mediator between God and humanity. An image formed in my mind of Christ suspended in air, with one arm stretched upward to God and the other arm stretched downward to earth. I remember being somewhat embarrassed about having this image because I was too sophisticated to "believe in Jesus" and I never thought about God, except perhaps as some kind of vague "energy." It astounded—"astonished" is too weak a word—me when at the end of the listening period the instructor told us that we were listening to *Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus* from Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*.

This was my first introduction to twentieth-century music. I went to the Boston Public Library and listened to their entire collection of Messiaen records. Throughout the summer, I discovered Stravinsky, Bartók, Ives, Ruggles, Varèse, and Debussy. I also saw a lot of live music in Boston—McCoy Tyner, Sun Ra, and Keith Jarrett in concert, and Seiji Ozawa conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I attended concerts at New England Conservatory, where I heard Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, third-stream concerts, and Jaki Byard. My ears were opened and I was excited and inspired. I gave up playing the tuba and began studying composition, counterpoint, harmony, ear-training, and piano. My life as a composer had begun.

My first compositions were somewhat Ivesian in concept (combining simple tonal melodies with very dissonant chords) but lacking Ives's genius, expression, and great spirit. But shortly after I started composing, I stopped hearing tonal music. Or perhaps I should more accurately say I stopped *feeling* tonal music. Tonal melodies did not ring true to me anymore; I felt they were false. They did not correspond to truth or beauty or reality. When I sat down at the piano to "express" myself, or when I sang melodies quietly during one of my long walks, the melodies were not tonal.

Eventually I came around to tonal music again—through Schoenberg's *Theory of Harmony*. I did an exhaustive study of this book with Harold Seletsky, who studied with Josef Schmidt, a pupil of Berg. Studying Schoenberg's approach to harmony provided a working link between tonal music and *Erwartung*. This seemed to "fill me out." It was only after I studied Schoenberg's harmony book that I felt comfortable writing twelve-tone music.

As I continued to compose, I became more puzzled by the concept of form in music. I wasn't satisfied thinking of form as simply a modified version of ABA, or some other form that was imposed on a piece, but felt that form should be integral to each particular piece. Although he was referring to visual art, I was intrigued by Kandinsky's definition of form as "the outer expression of the inner content." I liked the idea that form depended on an inner "feeling."

After many years of composing, I began to feel my music as a vague, indistinct image of light and mass; or as shades of gray and white; or areas of heaviness and lightness. I began to feel this most acutely when I was composing my Second String Quartet. As I went over in my mind what I had already written, different sections began to feel grayer or whiter, and more dense or less dense—each section having its own peculiarity. I began to instinctively arrange these sections, deciding how long or short sections should be based on some kind of “balance of form” that I felt intuitively. A dense grayer section was “negated,” “balanced,” or “answered” by a lighter, less gray section.

Other than this image of light and density, the concept of what I think of as dimension in space is extremely important to me. Although I do not know exactly what it is—or why it is important to me—my sense is that the music that I like has dimension in space. I want musical gestures to feel three-dimensional, to fill some sort of musical space. A gesture that I perceive as not three-dimensional is not compelling to me.

These feelings of light, density, and spatial dimension continued as I composed other pieces. For instance, recently, when I was working on a large orchestral piece, I felt most particularly that I was composing the *eye* of the piece. These ideas have led me to consider that my aesthetic sensibility—my sense of what I feel is rightly proportioned, beautiful, and honest—is related to the human body.

This is one reason I am attracted to the music of Schoenberg. It is music (tonal and nontonal) that to me is arranged in a manner that seems to reflect my own aesthetics about the body. I came to Schoenberg relatively late in my musical development. It was only after I appreciated Schoenberg that I could appreciate Mozart. My sense is that Classical music (Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven) is somehow related to the body, and that the music of Schoenberg also reflects this relationship.

There are certain musical elements that need to be present in order for me to get a sense of my pieces as bodies. I need to have a central idea. The center can be a chord, a twelve-tone row, a nine-tone row, an eighteen-tone row, a musical theme, a musical fragment, a melody, or a rhythm. It doesn't need to appear at the beginning of the piece but I need to know it—to “gauge” where I am and whether the music is close to or far away from this center. This helps me feel the form.

Unity and repetition are other important concepts for me. Without unity and repetition—or some perceived relatedness of the musical material—I cannot distinguish distance from a point. Or rather, I can't perceive variations of light and mass related to a balanced whole.

In 1996 I finished a solo violin piece that I entitled *hoc est corpus meum*. My original inspiration for this piece was Percy Shelley's poem *Epipsychidion*. I

wasn't trying to convey the poem; I simply kept it by my manuscript paper and read it over from time to time to inspire me with a sense of beauty. After I began writing the piece, it came into my mind to name the piece *hoc est corpus meum*.

In *hoc est corpus meum*, the center is the opening three-note figure, its extension into a twelve-tone row, and the inversion of this row, which forms a complete phrase.

Approximately three-quarters of the way through the piece, I systematically rearranged the original row to produce a series of four tonal triads—F minor, A major, G minor, and B major—and their inversions (C major, G# minor, Bb major, and F# minor).

At the end of the piece, the F-minor triad and A-major triad are again stated. After a brief pause, the piece ends on a major sixth (C4–A4). (When I first heard this ending in performance—the alternation of the F-minor and A-major triads followed by the major sixth—I was struck by a mood of great nostalgia.)

I have tried to understand why I felt the piece should be named *hoc est corpus meum*. It seems to me that different thoughts and feelings were converging in this piece. In one sense, I think that this piece relates to all that I have been talking about regarding the body and about my slowly forming perception and understanding of this as an aesthetic concern of mine. It also has to do with my religious sensibilities.

I think of my religious sensibilities as the images and feelings in my mind, vague and less vague, that I perceive as being the most profound. *hoc est corpus meum* refers to the body of Christ. In my mind, Christ, as well as Dionysus, is a figure of *zōe*, a Greek word that, to my understanding, means life. But *zōe* means not only life but indestructible life and, more than that, the ecstasy of life. *hoc est corpus meum*—this is my body. The body is nostalgic and ecstatic at the same time. To me, the repetition of the row and the rhythmic repetition throughout the piece is a Dionysian element, an ecstatic element. The rotation of the row into tonal chords is disturbing. The tonal remembrance at the end is nostalgic.

But “*hoc est corpus meum*” does not mean for me only the body of Christ. It is everyone's body. It is the existential condition. It is the incomprehensibility of my body in this time and space, the incomprehensibility of my existence. It is the body—the physical presence—of everyone I see, which says to me: this is incomprehensible; this is not possible. And yet it (life) *is* and it endures.

I have often wondered why, since I was so enraptured by him, I never incorporated Messiaen's technique into my own music. His music seems to be more about “emanation” than about a three-dimensional sense of

Figure 1: *hoc est corpus meum*, mm. 1-8.



Figure 2: *hoc est corpus meum*, mm. 247-53.



Figure 3: *hoc est corpus meum*, mm. 308-14.



the body. Now, perhaps, the next step for me is to integrate this “emanationism” with my conception of the body.

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It always surprises me to hear people disparage dissonant music, to make claims that it is “angst-ridden,” “angry,” “jarring,” or “ugly” or any of a handful of negative terms. When I first heard the dissonant music of Messiaen, Stravinsky, Varèse, and Ives, it was the most exciting, powerful, and emotional music that I had ever heard. Although I have gone through different styles of composing, and am presently drawn to a very specific sound world, my basic love of “dissonant” music—complex harmonies and nontonal music—has always remained.