

hoc est corpus meum for solo violin
by Julie Harting

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*.

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. These feelings of light, density, and spatial dimension continued as I composed other pieces. While I was working on a movement of 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.

There are certain musical elements that need to be present in order for me to feel 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 *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, B~ 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 *zoe*, a Greek word that, to my understanding, means life. But *zoe* 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.