

Joby Talbot – Path of Miracles Nick Breckenfield | Sunday, July 17, 2005

Talbot

Path of Miracles [World premiere]

Tenebrae

Nigel Short

Ceri Sherlock – staging

Priory Church of St Bartholomew the Great, Cloth Fair, London, EC1

From its opening eerie rising glissando (a Taiwanese singing effect called pasiputput) for the gentlemen of Nigel Short's Tenebrae, to the final distribution of the pilgrims having reached Finisterre, west of Santiago – when the singers disappear from the audience's view, singing and chanting into the distance until all that is left is silence – Joby Talbot's ambitious *a cappella* "Path of Miracles" is little short of a musical miracle itself.

Postponed from its original première date of 7 July because of the bomb atrocities that hit London that day, it was heartening that both the City of London Festival, Tenebrae and the church authorities of St Bartholomew the Great were able to re-schedule the première so quickly, and for two performances as originally planned. While this meant that Evensong was cancelled to hold the first performance, the fact that the performances were on a Sunday rather than the original Thursday seemed perfectly apt. Audiences remembered the fatalities of 7/7 in silent contemplation and then in prayer before each performance.

Commissioned by Tenebrae, but with the première facilitated by the City of London Festival, "Path of Miracles" was inspired by the great medieval pilgrimages to the north-western tip of Spain. On a family holiday Talbot stopped at four main points of the pilgrim's route – Roncesvalles, nestling at the foot of the Pyrenees, Burgos, Leon and Santiago di Compostella itself. The original idea was for Tenebrae to tour the pilgrims' route and perform the respective parts in each place, before bringing the first three pieces together at the final destination, topped by the final section in what would have been the work's first complete performance.

While there is hope that one day such a musical pilgrimage could be achieved, the première itself was in the wonderful 12th-century confines of St Bartholomew the Great, hard by Smithfield Market. In the cool of the Norman stonework with the late afternoon sun streaming through the high windows, the ambulatory nature of the pilgrimage was encapsulated in Ceri Sherlock's spare but effective staging that congregated the choir at either end of the transept, in the choir stalls beneath the organ loft and before the altar.

The upper levels of the church were used as well, and individual singers (the work is scored for 17 separate voices) would peel off and intone their part around the church, creating a wonderful acoustic effect, most memorably at the start, where the ladies' voices rang high above the men's pasiputput from the gallery, in the recurring four-line stanza naming Santiago as the ultimate destination, and at the end as the choir dissipated throughout the church.

Talbot, eschewing 19th- and 20th-century vocal styles looked back much earlier to Renaissance polyphony and to 'primitive' (my word) music, eventually settled on a mixture of texts that start with a Biblical reference to Herod's murder of James – in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Basque, medieval French, English and German. As these overlapping versions of the same lines die away, English verses specially written by poet Robert Dickinson take over. The first section develops the theme from James's death to the establishment almost a millennium later of the Cathedral of St James at Santiago that would – when Jerusalem was cut off by the burgeoning Crusades – become a Catholic substitute as a destination for pilgrimage. There is a recognisable eastern tang to certain of the harmonies and the only non-vocal music is the prerogative of a set of chimes.

The second section, "Burgos", in Dickinson's words, contrasts the man-made difficulties (cheating inn-keepers, light-fingered Englishmen) of the 500-mile journey itself with the extraordinary effects St James's relics were reputed to have. The third movement – "Leon", for which the whole choir moved down the transept from altar to choir-stalls – concentrates on the geographical and physical ordeals for the pilgrims. Both this and the final part – "Santiago" itself – are introduced by plainchant interpolated into Talbot's original design.

As the pilgrims finally see sight of their destination, so to returns their zeal; the very opening incantation to Santiago comes back and, with the vocal lines picking up speed, Talbot launches into an excerpt from "Carmina Burana" (not one, as far as I remember, in Orff's version). This sudden snatch of secular song bursts onto our consciousness in a spirited five-beat rhythm, which then subtly adds a beat to slip into a more normal compound triple beat for three Latin verses.

There is a coda – as the pilgrims pass Santiago for Finisterre (Land's End) – the music slips into a suitably valedictory ending, closing with repeated lines "Holy St James, great St James/God help us now and evermore" – the text to which the choir members, resplendent in their long purple robes, start to disperse magically around the church. The audience's focus is on the single countertenor who walks one final time down the transept and under the organ loft.

In the first performance, albeit beguilingly atmospheric, there was a little untidiness in the final cut-off – the drone provided by those behind the altar hanging on longer than the countertenor's final words of incantation. In the second performance, ending after dusk, with only flickering candlelight illuminating the interior, the cut-off was perfectly managed between the disparate groups.

At over an hour, this is Talbot's longest single work to date. In its distinctive style, although using elements that are recognisably his (particularly passages that set up a minimalist repetitive rhythm overlaid with a soaring, slower melody), it is a major statement and supremely assured. Tenebrae – which has already recorded it for release later in the year – have surely got a major hit; I would go as far to suggest that Talbot's "Path of Miracles" is to the first decade of the 21st-century what Arvo Pärt's "Passio" was twenty years earlier.

- COLF
- Tenebrae