ON MATTERS OF THE SPIRIT

Joseph Cermatori

Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.

John Cage, “Experimental Music”

What can “the spiritual” mean today to our supposedly post-metaphysical, increasingly globalized world? What usefulness could the concept have to an era in which spiritual belief has been utterly co-opted by radical right-wing cultural politics, and just as utterly commodified by the wellness and experience tourism industries? Of what might a uniquely contemporary spirituality consist, a spirituality appropriate to our times? At a moment when these questions—and many related ones concerning secularism and post-secularism, broadly put—have radically divided opinion across the worlds of contemporary political, academic, and artistic debate, Lincoln Center unveiled its first annual White Light Festival, devoted to the topic of “the spiritual dimension of music.” While the festival didn’t actively seek definitive answers to these questions, it nevertheless invited reflection on them. Moreover, it provided ample opportunities for audiences to begin thinking about these problems in the light of three weeks’ worth of performance events, ranging from concerts by the Icelandic “post-rock” band Sigur Ros in concert with the Latvian National Choir and the UK’s Hilliard Ensemble, to The Manganiyar Seduction, an evening of Hindustani classical music and traditional Sufi performed by a group of thirty-eight Rajasthani, Muslim musicians. The festival’s producers could hardly be faulted for a lack of ambition.

Still, there was no shortage of missed opportunities, not least of which was the festival’s seeming reluctance to take any clear stance on the topic of spirituality at its heart. Apart from a handful of the usual program notes, interviews, and a well-circulated marketing blurb, the festival’s programmers mostly opted to let the curated performances speak for themselves, an admirable aim in many respects, but one that left both the festival’s activities feeling divorced from the surrounding debates and its politics vulnerable to critique from the popular press. Seizing the opportunity to define the festival more explicitly than its own programmers had done, the New York Times’s culture section ran two headlines to air its skepticism: “Marketing device or access to our inner souls?” (November 17, 2010, by Daniel Wakin), and “White
Light: Is It Driven by the Soul or by Sales?” (November 22, 2010, a roundtable featuring the Times’s full suite of music critics). These features informed its readers, to no one’s surprise, that Lincoln Center is a bourgeois institution, catering to bourgeois patrons, operating within a capitalist economy, as interested in its own financial well-being as much as anything else. This was deeply regrettable: only weeks after proposals for a Muslim Community Center to be constructed in the vicinity of Ground Zero had drawn national and international debate, and a related series of threats about Qur’an-burnings in Gainesville, Florida had amply demonstrated the urgent needfulness for dialogues on these issues, the White Light Festival was seen to be allowing a hostile press to set the terms of the discussion.

For all the white light that emerged from Lincoln Center last fall, there was, quite bluntly, precious little clarity on offer from the festival’s programmers when it came to the subjects of spirituality and spirit. Rather, the strongest articulations of these concepts came from the various artists themselves, sometimes through music, and other times through the opportunities they were occasionally given to articulate their opinions in words. One such opportunity occurred during the latter of the festival’s two scheduled panel discussions, on the topics of “Silence” and “Sound” respectively, which brought together musicians and numerous experts on comparative religion, cognitive neuroscience, communication studies, mindfulness meditation practices, and applied physics. For all the advanced learning in evidence at these discussions, they often wound up demonstrating only that we still fundamentally lack a common language—or, rather, a basic vocabulary—for speaking about matters of the spirit. (In both panels, the various interlocutors frequently found themselves speaking at cross purposes, compounding mysticism with even greater degrees of mystification, recycling familiar positions on how technology and media are largely responsible for our “increasingly frenetic and fragmented world,” as referred to by the festival’s public relations materials.) But because of difficulties that attend articulation with regard to “the spiritual,” these dialogues provided several fruitful openings for the figure of the artist—and specifically, the musician, given the supposed ineffability of music, transcending linguistic and rational forms—to enter the discussion.

When the panel on sound provided auditory physiologist Christopher Sherra with an opportunity to offer an elaborate anatomical and evolutionary account of the sense of hearing, the composer John Luther Adams remarked in response: “I hear Professor Sherra talking about all this, and it only makes the phenomenon of hearing all the more mysterious to me, not less.” Adams’s comments illustrate the ways in which every disenchantment performed by the advance of scientific knowledge thus portends to bring about a subsequent re-enchantment of the world, a re-entrenchment of the position that reality is fundamentally ambiguous, inexplicable, or as Adams put it, mysterious. The intractability of this mysteriousness has been well known to modernity since the time of Nietzsche’s The Gay Science, at least: for all the description auditory physiology might be able to offer into the science of sound, it can offer almost no substantive explanations. To claim, as some have, that there exist no questions that cannot be eventually answered by the supposedly disenchanted, objective, rational regimes of scientific discourse and its positivist truth-claims is
therefore to suffer a dangerous failure of imagination as to what counts as a question. Some of history’s most subtle scientific and philosophical minds—Darwin, Gödel, Whitehead, Einstein, Heisenberg, Hawking—have recognized this danger. In response, Adams articulated a robust notion of spiritual engagement, one based not upon the dogmatic convictions of any institutional religion, but upon the necessity of the artist’s social role in defending a society’s consciousness of the fundamental mysteriousness of phenomena. While such mysteriousness is arguably ineradicable, consciousness of it and the role of artists as preservers of this consciousness have made it come under ever increasing attack. In recent decades alone, witness the wars over funding for the arts and humanities in the university and in society, especially the meteoric rise of behavioral psychology, evolutionary biology, anthropology, and sociology as disciplinary formations with the supposed power to account authoritatively for the meaning of all human activity and experience. Likewise, there is the relentless persistence of now antiquated forms of anthropocentrism and vulgar materialism within critical culture and the epistemological close-mindedness of militant atheism. But are we still talking about spirituality, specifically? Perhaps we are simply talking about a certain skeptical attitude toward the human mind’s ability to know its reality, and a corresponding attitude toward existence that is aesthetic both in (a) acknowledging the world as a phenomenon akin to art, and (b) asserting the usefulness of sensations or feelings for understanding this phenomenon (in the etymological sense of “aesthetic” suggested by Hegel). Perhaps instead of “spirituality,” we are simply talking about an agnosticism that values “spirit” inasmuch as it is constituted by its affective, aesthetic, and imaginative engagements with the world, and that advocates for the defense of these engagements against those forces most noxious to them. Perhaps we need another word or concept altogether, one that is more easily applicable to a wider range of attitudes regarding matters of spirit, one that hasn’t been cheapened by overuse and consumer culture. (Would it, for example, make sense to speak of the spirituality of someone like Antonin Artaud? Walter Benjamin? John Cage? The word seems to pale before the complex and overdetermined networks of metaphysical belief bound up in the writings of these various figures.) What’s needed is precisely more debate and more specificity on the questions of whether and how liberation theologies can exist without theism, and what form these theologies might take—for now, “spirituality” will have to suffice as an unsatisfying placeholder. The official rhetoric surrounding the White Light Festival, however, kept a safe distance from these concerns. Even so, there was much to admire about the festival’s featured artists and their various performances. The festival kicked off its opening night with an evening of music and performance by Meredith Monk that bore the title The Soul’s Messenger, referring to the human voice. Monk’s work has frequently been discussed in the pages of this journal, and it has attracted considerable attention for the unique ways it brings together artistic and spiritual practice. At the outset of Monk’s performance, the festival’s founder and Lincoln Center’s Vice President for Programming, Jane Moss, introduced Monk as the first artist who came to mind when Lincoln Center
began to conceive of the White Light Festival. But as Monk herself acknowledged, in an interview offered in the festival’s program: “We all have to not get too precious about this idea of spirituality. If it turns into ‘everything is wonderful’ and we are not actually connected to direct experiences, that’s not the way to go.”

For Monk, the practice of music and performance incorporates John Cage’s notions of silence and repetition with Gertrude Stein’s sense of the work of art as a landscape that invites an audience’s engagement. Over the course of the evening—alongside fellow musicians Allison Sniffin, Katie Geissinger, and Bohdan Hilash—Monk performed some of her best-known compositions since the late 1960s, weaving together her signature vocal techniques into a dense and shifting emotional texture, full of wonder and melancholy.

Of this evening’s many notable moments, its conclusion was perhaps its most poignant. Monk closed the concert with a performance of the woundingly simple “Between Song,” written in response to the death of her longtime partner Mieke van Hoek, and based on one of van Hoek’s poems. The poem is a kind of prayer, but without an addressee, without a request, and even, without a subject or a verb: a meditation on no action, but instead on relation and liminality. The verses enact a ruminative movement—“Between the clouds and the night / Between the window and the street / Between the air and the men walking / Between the heavens and the sound / Between the skull and the brain / Between the lens and the eye / Between the tears and the lens / Between the skull and the brain / Between the lens and the eye / Between the tear and lens / Between the skull and the brain / Between the lens and the eye / Between the tear and lens”—coupled with a similarly repetitive pattern in the piano and vocal melody. Ultimately, the words give way to a profusion of glossolalia, wordless melismas, shrieks, birdsong, and achingly suspended notes. Performed by three interlacing soprano voices, these sounds sneak in first between the poem’s stanzas and then gradually take over, becoming an excited chorus of lamenting or ecstatic cries, a hymn to the inexpressible. The three singers gazed deeply into one another’s eyes as the singing gradually died away and the instrumental accompaniment fell silent, and finally took a small step apart from one another, concluding the event.

An entirely different approach to spiritual experience in art was taken by Janet Cardiff’s sound installation, The Forty-Part Motet, which opened to the public just a few hours prior to Monk’s performance, also part of the festival’s first night. The installation took place in a large, rectangular recording studio at Jazz at Lincoln Center in Columbus Circle, and featured forty speakers installed in an ellipse around the perimeter of the room and arranged in eight groups of five, facing inwards. At the center, a pair of cushioned benches effectively transformed the studio into a gallery space. The forty-part motet of the installation’s title was Thomas Tallis’s Spem in Alium. Written sometime around 1570—perhaps even for the fortieth birthday of Elizabeth I—the piece is a landmark work in the history of Renaissance polyphony, most notably for having been composed for eight choirs of five voices. Cardiff’s installation played a multi-tracked recording of the piece performed by the UK’s Salisbury Cathedral Choir, with each speaker assigned to a single voice. The voices creep in, gradually overlaying and interweaving one another until suddenly the
The result was as impressive as it was defamiliarizing. Performed by forty speakers playing forty, individually recorded voices, this Spem in Alium sounded nothing like a live choral performance, and even less like the piece as one might hear it over one’s MP3 player. The Columbus Circle recording studio had none of the marvelous ring and resonance of the small Renaissance chapels that inspired the concept of a cappella music originally and that are still used as recording spaces for motets like Tallis’s because of the fullness of sound they create. Something here sounded distinctively hollow and suggestively imperfect. The individual voices in Cardiff’s installation didn’t ultimately blend into a seamless whole, as they might in a live performance or on a commercial recording. Instead, the effect was altogether more that of collage, with the individual voices remaining somewhat unblended.

Listeners were invited to move about the space during the motet, and so it was possible to spend the duration of the motet tracing the circumference of the ellipse, pausing at each speaker, and listening for the human specificity of each voice. One could, for example, move from a bass voice that was lagging behind the group, to a baritone with fantastic breath support, to a tenor incapable of finding the center of the individual pitches. Part of the point of Cardiff’s installation was that the motet has been reframed by its relocation from a sacred architectural space to a non-sacred one: by virtue of this reframing, it became impossible to listen romantically, without distance, as though one were hearing the piece performed in the distant chancel of a medieval cathedral.

Elsewhere in the room, one listener was kneeling on the floor in hero pose; another not far away was sitting in a lotus pose, apparently in deep reverie. At other points during the festival, I noted similar moments of yogic engagement. During a performance by the Tallis Scholars of Magnificats and Misereres from the Renaissance and today, the audience member seated immediately to my left—a former acting teacher, as I later learned—spent the entire concert with legs crossed on the cushioned seat, hands draped over her knees palm-up, fingers clasped in jhana mudra. In each of these cases, and in spite of all good intentions, the experience was deeply off-putting. Speaking as one who has often enjoyed and reaped therapeutic benefits from the practice of yoga and meditation, I found myself in these instances wondering at the fine line that separates what Eve Sedgwick and Peter Sloterdijk have usefully called “enlightened false consciousness”—false consciousness that knows itself to be false—from outright naïveté and wishful thinking. Cardiff’s piece was, in many respects, a revisiting of Benjamin’s essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.” It was an effective alienation of the act of listening to spiritual music, a remarkable provocation to consider the meaning of spiritual experience in the age of electronic and digital media. If, however, audiences at times felt invited to engage with the music by seeking something like “connection” or “wholeness” rather than thinking critically about whether in fact the art itself was inviting them to do so, it was because the festival’s publicity materials had already invited them...
to do so explicitly. This was another missed opportunity to foster discussion and the exchange of ideas.

The festival’s second night featured an evening of songs by the British singer-songwriter Antony Hegarty (of Antony and the Johnsons). The ninety-minute evening of songs featured the Orchestra of St. Luke’s under the baton of Rob Moose, lush instrumental arrangements by Nico Muhly, Thomas Bartlett (a.k.a. Doveman) at the piano, and Chiaki Nagano’s butoh-inspired film *Mr. O’s Book of the Dead* playing silently as a visual counterpoint in the background. Here again, the lyrical content often involved the theme of death, played against a cinematic backdrop that appeared as a kind of *memento mori*. Like Monk, Hegarty’s approach to composition frequently incorporates repetition and drone effects to create a sense of stillness or calm.

The lyrics to “The Spirit Was Gone” might be taken as representative of this larger approach. The song is made up of five simple verses, sung then repeated over the sparsest of accompaniments: “The spirit was gone from her body / Forever had always been inside / That shell had always been intertwined / And now were disentwined / It’s hard to understand.” The song’s closing returns to the words “The spirit was gone” and echoes them mournfully, over and over, before closing with the words “It’s hard to understand.” Above all this, Hegarty’s unmistakable voice trembled, its characteristic vibrato a continual shudder, his singing framed by his equally characteristic vocabulary of gesture—a sequence of fidgeting movements of the hand, head, and neck. These were gestures of brokenness, of self-effacement and awkwardness, gestures expressing almost nothing but their own inadequacy at expression itself, sometimes attaining a hieratic character. Set against the macabre images of *Mr. O’s Book of the Dead*, swathed in a long black gown and frequently haloed by a single stage light positioned directly over his body, he cut an ethereal figure onstage.

That evening, Hegarty’s repertoire drew repeatedly from a handful of images—dead bodies, “dust and water” (the title of another moving song performed that night), dust and earth being transformed into coal, salt, silver, oxygen: his is a materialist spirituality, one highly attuned to humanity’s place within its larger ecological surround. One of the most affecting pieces performed that evening, “Another World,” expresses in plangent tones the grief caused by an awareness of the planet’s slow death: “I need another place / Will there be peace? / I need another world / This one’s nearly gone / ... I’m gonna miss the trees / I’m gonna miss the sun / I miss the animals / I’m gonna miss you all.” Significantly, the songs frequently seemed to end almost before they began, dying away before they had had the chance to blossom.

Monk, Cardiff, and Hegarty set an initial tone for the festival’s investment in contemporary music and art. As one would hope from Lincoln Center, however, there was classical music in abundance as well, and numerous attempts to juxtapose older and newer musical forms within the same event. For example, when the Hilliard Ensemble teamed up with Norwegian jazz saxophonist and composer Jan Garbarek for an evening of traditional Armenian, Lipovan, Byzantine, and Spanish songs, set against contemporary works by Garbarek and others, and performed in the Upper
Top: Judith, performed by Norbert Rodenkirchen, Katarina Livljanic (foreground), and Albrecht Maurer. Photo: Courtesy Corinne Silva and Lincoln Center. Bottom: Daevo Khan conducts the Manganiyar musicians. Photo: Courtesy Stephanie Berger and Lincoln Center.
East Side’s Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, the similarities and differences between the two musical idioms were evocative. Processing around the sumptuous cathedral space throughout the evening, allowing each haunting piece to follow the one before it without time for applause from the audience, Garbarek and the four ensemble singers created a palpable sense of mood. Circled round by ghostly voices, sometimes the saxophone sounded almost like a wailing shofar, and other times like the clarion trumpet of the apocalypse.

Where the juxtaposition of contemporary and classical forms was concerned, one of the festival’s most suggestive pairings in this regard occurred during a performance by the Latvian National Choir, presenting two motets by Bach and two U.S. premieres by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt side by side, braiding together the sumptuousness of late baroque polyphony with the eerie spareness of Pärt’s tintinnabular approach to counterpoint. The night before, the Latvian National Choir had unleashed a totally unexpected quantity of fury in their performance of the Estonian composer Veljo Tormis’s ferocious “Curse Upon Iron”—a full-throated scream of a choral piece on the theme of war, drawing inspirations from various folk and shamanic traditions. It was a musical event not soon to be forgotten by anyone who experienced it. By contrast, the choir’s approach to Bach and Pärt was tastefully restrained as they communicated the two composers’ shared interest in sacred meditation and introspective devotion.

All told, however, Pärt was without a doubt the festival’s most frequently programmed composer, with works featured in five out of the festival’s fifteen events. Pärt’s exquisite and widely admired compositions are perfect for the theme of music and spirituality. (It is only appropriate that the festival took its name from a quote in which he compared his music to white light and the spirit of the listener to a prism that could divide the colors within it.) But his abundant representation on the festival program ran the risk of becoming too much of a good thing, and it resulted in the necessary exclusion of other worthy composers whose work went entirely unfeatured: David Lang, Laurie Anderson, and John Zorn, just to name a handful of examples.

Still, these absences were not enough to diminish the festival’s high points, among the highest of which was Judith, an evening of dance and music-theatre by the Croatian singer and musicologist, Katarina Livljanić, and staged by Sandra Herzic. The piece was based on the text of the 1501 epic poem Judita by the Croatian humanist Marko Marulić. Working with philological advisor Bratislav Lucin, Livljanić drew excerpts from Marulić’s poem—itself an adaptation of the story of Judith and Holofernes from the apocryphal book of Judith—and fitted them to a series of reconstructed Gregorian and Glagolitic chant melodies originally used for the performance of Passion rituals and the telling of folktales in Medieval and Renaissance Dalmatia. Marulić, it seems, was responsible in his time for reviving an ancient practice of sung folktales, and so Livljanić sought to use his published poetry to conceive a creative reconstruction of this practice. She drew a special inspiration from the Croatian tradition of lamentation songs sung by professional female mourners, who to this day attend funeral services to sing episodes from the lives of the recently deceased.
Together with the musicians Albrecht Maurer and Norbert Rodenkirchen—improvising on a combination of period instruments including a Renaissance fiddle, a *lirica* (i.e., a traditional Croatian string instrument), and a *djovnice* (i.e., traditional Croatian set of wooden flutes)—Livljanić retold the legend of Holofernes’s beheading, pairing these melodies with a spellbinding repertoire of epic gestures. Dressed in glowing white, but otherwise hemmed in by darkness, she looked like a figure out of Caravaggio or De La Tour—or alternatively, like a raconteur at the campfire’s edge—as she recreated the dramatic tale. Bathed in this glow, her face was pure alabaster, eyes constantly transfixed upon some distant point as she intoned the haunting melodies, her ghostly mezzo soprano returning repeatedly to the same cadences, the same final note sung over and over again, echoed in the droning *lirica*. Surprisingly, there was nothing monotonous in this continual return: the musical rhythms and textures varied considerably throughout the evening, with the moments leading up to Holofernes’s beheading being marked by a frantic, jerky, and sawing movement in the strings, accompanied by the stomping of the instrumentalists’ feet.

The effect of this performance style is something like early recitative: it is a highly oratorical idea of musical performance. (Indeed, Livljanić remarked in a post-show discussion that the story of Judith and Holofernes has provided the material for numerous operas, but she wanted something more intimate and psychologically probing for her interpretation.) Livljanić is an accomplished singer, capable of astonishing vocal effects. Once, she threw her head back in a wide-mouthed howl of a high note that trailed off into near-silence and continued to ring only in the form of a barely audible overtone. She is, however, also an impressive rhapsode: her arms and hands moved with a majestic weight, often effecting the visual flatness of sacred iconography. In *Judith*, Livljanić plays both the role of Judith and that of Holofernes in typical epic form, lending the piece a touch of monodrama. In her program note, she writes that Judith was “a Bethulian widow who kill[ed] the enemy Holofernes to liberate her people,” and in a post-show discussion, Livlanić explained that Marulić’s sixteenth-century audience would have understood the poetic narrative as an allegory on contemporary themes, given that Croatia was about to be invaded by Turkish forces at that time. In response to these prompts, the performance offered a stately, ritualistic drama of gestures in which the mourning of wartime subjugation and rape gave way to religious furor and divine violence: the piece felt distinctly contemporary and intensely visceral. It was one of the festival’s only sustained engagements with anger and the lust for revenge as spiritually inflected emotions.

Just before the famed beheading, the narrative was interrupted by an interpolated scene drawn from an anonymous Croatian account of ecstatic visions, believed by Livljanić to have also been written by Marulić. This scene, which Livljanić discovered while conducting research in Harvard’s Widener Library, took the form of a dramatic *agon* between the soul and the body, a genre of poetic writing that flourished during the medieval period. As the head was torn from the neck (and the soul rent apart from the body), the action arrested into a moment of cosmic stasis—not only an *agon*, but a spiritual agony—allowing the audience an internal view into the characters of Holofernes and Judith. After this extended scene of spiritual lamentation,
the drama concluded with Livljanić disappearing behind a darkened scrim, uttering in a ghastly whisper Marulić’s Croatian translation of Ecclesiastes, “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity,” while a stream of dust falls from above, a final memento mori.

In moments like these—in Adams’s skeptical reply to the positivism of science, Monk’s moving meditation on the passing of her partner, Cardiff’s refunctioning of sacred Renaissance music in an age of electronic media and technological reproducibility, Hegarty’s threnody for humankind’s severed bond with the environment, and the solemnity of Livljanić’s epic song of wartime violence and death—a bar was set high. In these performances, the festival redeemed itself of some of its shortcomings. With any luck, and with a measure of deliberation, internal debate, and soul-searching, the programmers of Lincoln Center’s second annual White Light Festival in 2011 may meet the standard set by these moments.

NOTE


JOSEPH CERMATORI is an MPhil/PhD candidate in theatre at Columbia University, and an assistant editor at PAJ, where he writes on theatre, music, and performance. His criticism and translations have been published in Theater, Theatre Journal, Theatre Topics, The Brooklyn Rail, and HotReview.org.

Other PAJ features in the ongoing series “Art, Spirituality, and Religion”—


2. “Art and the Spiritual,” a special section in PAJ 91, including an interview with Meredith Monk, “Performance and Spiritual Life,” and several essays (January 2009).

3. “Specular Suffering: (Staging) the Bleeding Body,” by Mary Richards, PAJ 88 (January 2008).


7. “Art as Spiritual Practice,” a dialogue with Meredith Monk, Alison Knowles, Eleanor Heartney, Linda Montano, and Erik Ehn, moderated by Bonnie Marranca, PAJ 72 (September 2002).