

GRAMOPHONE

The world's best classical music magazine

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Reviews

Kline

John the Revelator

Lionheart (Lawrence Lipnik *countertens*

Michael Ryan-Wenger, John Olund *tens*

Richard Porterfield, Jeffrey Johnson *bass*

Kurt-Owen Richards *bass*);

Ethel (Cornelius Dufallo, Mary Rowell *vns*

Ralph Farris *va* Dorothy Lawson *vc*);

Phil Kline *org*

Cantaloupe Music © CA21047 (49' • DDD)

**Compelling compositional invention
makes this choral work no ordinary Mass**



Phil Kline channels as much as he composes. His best-known works reinterpret past music and forms in fascinating ways, from transforming tape-player boom-boxes

into a mass of roving carollers in *Unsilent Night* to setting inscriptions scratched onto Vietnam War soldiers' cigarette lighters in *Zippo Songs*. His creations are contemporary and relevant, but remain true to the original spirit of the old material. In that sense, he uses postmodern means to more traditionally Romantic ends. Irony has little place in his sincere musical searching.

Commissioned by WNYC and the New York State Council on the Arts and premiered at New York City's World Financial Center Winter Garden in 2006, *John the Revelator* finds Kline inspired this time by one of the most enduring of Western musical forms, the Mass. Here he again looks to maintain the original framework and purpose, using the Latin Ordinary and providing his own Propers (a mix of psalms, biblical verses and contemporary poetry, while two shape-note hymns open and close the work). It's not that his Mass is liturgical but it's clearly meant to be heard in a religious context and not as a song-cycle.

Although Kline's Mass has a discernible theme of the need for faith in redemption amid the often oppressive darkness of life, he applies it in unpredictable ways. Foremost is his use of the ensembles. It takes some guts to write a work for two top-notch groups – the vocal sextet Lionheart and the crack string quartet Ethel – and not use them in every movement. But *John the Revelator* benefits immensely from having the choir sing alone for the Ordinary, especially as he calls for delicate, quasi-medieval counterpoint. When the quartet then joins in with post-minimalist rhythms and harmonies for the propers, the listener is jerked back into the present. The juxtaposition creates its own sort of mystery of spiritual experience, even if the setting is secular, with poems by David Shapiro (particularly "The Snow Fell") well chosen for their lyrical grace and meaning. Both groups perform the compelling work with a sombre yet vibrant presence. **Andrew Druckenbrod**