

## IN REVIEW

### NEW YORK CITY — *John the Revelator*, Lionheart & Ethel, World Financial Center, 11/10/06

February 2007, vol 71, no.8

The collaboration of composer Phil Kline, one of the most interesting composers on the current "Downtown" music scene, with the acclaimed vocal group Lionheart (known best for its luminous renditions of organum and other early music) and the adventurous string quartet ETHEL made for an exciting season-opener for the Arts & Events season at Manhattan's World Financial Center. The program presented the world premiere of *John the Revelator*, a concert-length setting of the Latin Mass, complete with several English-language propers.

Although originally known for his works involving tape loops and multiple boom boxes, Kline showed a true gift for vocal writing in his 2004 works for singer Theo Bleckmann; specifically *Zippo Songs* (based on texts found etched onto the Zippo-brand cigarette lighters of Vietnam War soldiers) and the biting *Three Rumsfeld Songs* (referred to in some circles as the *Rumsfeldlieder*). Kline was also the primogenitor in the 1990s of The Alternative Schubertiade, in which Kline and numerous other composers of the "Downtown" scene created and performed works inspired by Franz Schubert's music.

The Mass derives its name, *John the Revelator*, from an old gospel-blues song written by Blind Willie Johnson. As that choice implies, the work incorporates elements of blues, gospel and other traditional American musics. However, Kline's homage to his American roots wisely does not manifest itself in a slavish reproduction of these styles. The performance styles and music are uniquely his own. Kline cast a wide net in his choice of texts for the nine propers. These sources include the Bible (Old Testament only), shape-note hymns, Samuel Beckett and especially the contemporary poet David Shapiro. These texts tend toward the darker, more somber, pleading end of the spectrum, even when incorporating lines such as "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!"

And in fact, the overall character of *John the Revelator* tends toward the melancholy. This effect was compounded both by the Wintergarden's murky acoustics and by numerous recollections, gently induced by the texts, of the World Financial Center's tragic history. The music incorporates drones, close harmonies, unusual imitative passages that owes less to traditional counterpoint than to the revelations of Kline's work with tape loops, lyrical lines for solo singers and for the cello, and an impressive array of musical characters.

*John the Revelator* received a devoted performance, one that would please any composer. Lionheart demonstrated that their trademark purity of sound does indeed translate beautifully to contemporary music. Kline's use of the group — as a whole, as well as in solo and smaller groupings of singers — was well crafted throughout. Once again, ETHEL showed themselves completely at home in new, exploratory music. Kline tended particularly to feature the cello, here exquisitely played by Dorothy Lawson. □

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