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PREACHING TO THE CHOIR: PHIL KLINE AND ARVO PÄRT

Phil Kline
John the Revelator
(Cantaloupe)

Phil Kline creates a mass of multiple meanings with *John the Revelator*. The opening tracks of it sound all the world like well-wrought church hymns (“Northport”) and parts of staggering weight and dimension, such as “Hear my Prayer.” The album progresses through various tempos of the tony sort of Minimalism not unlike Philip Glass’ 1986 pop classical amalgam *Songs from Liquid Days*. “The man Who Knows Misery” chugs along like a

well-stoked anxiety engine, while “Kyrie” and “Gloria” finds such sentiments caught floating mid air.

John the Revelator is a twist on the Latin Ordinary, the static portions of the Mass that form the backbone of Catholic ritual, with Kline inseting readings of Samuel Becket (“Meditation: The Unnamable”) and David Shapiro (“And the Snow fell”) as the *Propers*, or portions that are interchanged throughout the year. The flawless, naked harmonies of men’s vocal sextet Lionheart give the more icy portions of the text a barbershop quartet comfort, and traverse the acrobatics of “Alone” with dazzling ease.

This is an interesting move for a composer such as Kline, who made his name crafting outdoor boombox symphonies and high tech multimedia installations, to take us back to church. But ultimately, the church is a place of communion between the mundane and the sublime. Kline’s music is undeniably arty, but it is equally easily experienced. The cyclone at the heart of his loose interpretation of the of the old blues song “Dark was the Night” is rigorous and complex listening, but the feeling of doing so is akin to entering a vast but impeccably designed building – you have no real idea what goes into creating a place like this, but you at once feel like it was designed with your presence in mind. When the dark hum of the chorus gives way to an unmistakable train motif, implied by the train imagery of the blues, the systematic and metaphoric means of escape, one is compelled to run alongside and jump in the first open boxcar.

“Anthem” and “Offertorium” are showcases for the sonic dexterity of the string quartet Ethel, one of the burgeoning groups of new music ensembles taking identity tactics from indie rock instead of the academy. These pieces offer a gateway to the rest of the Mass; without it, one would have gotten lost in all the harmony. But then, is that not the point of the Mass? The catholic ritual is not designed for the inquisitive; it is built around the practical application of the spiritual, laying pipes to the Hereafter through which our souls may flow. *John the Revelator* abruptly concludes on the line “And through eternity, I’ll sing on” as if the soul is sucked up through this theological plumbing, which is probably the best case scenario for encountering the spiritual in such accommodating environment.