

ASO CHORUS ANNOUNCEMENTS - October 21, 2008

HAIL TO THE CHIEFS -AND CHIEFTAINS [see below]

Excellent work last evening on *Atomic!* -Thanks to your powers of concentration, great sense of humor, Todd's invaluable assistance and Norman's keen ears and eyes.

“BECAUSE ONE HAS ONLY LEARNT TO GET THE BETTER OF WORDS...”

So where ARE the words in Act II, scene 3 in *Doctor Atomic* (p. 238-274, “Countdown”)? Why does this scene, possibly the most emotionally intense in the work – a scene that layers several of the libretto’s sources, remain wordless for the chorus? I find five factors:

1. DREAD

The “final countdown” begins the scene (p. 238 in our scores) with an agitated, churning, ascending unison orchestral *toccata* in 16^{ths} pitted against a wailing descending *unison* chorus in quarters on “ah.” Peter Sellars, the opera’s librettist and stage director for the 2005 world premiere with Donald Runnicles, described this moment to the chorus as, “The split second before you watch a disaster.” -The horror that this really is about to happen.

[Incidentally – and more importantly, intuitively – the chorus’ descending melodic motif here is based in part on the eerily chromatic measures of descending material in the female chorus music of the opera’s opening scene on pages 26-27. This opening scene is an oddly inspired moment where the chorus – in Messiaen-like measures – takes over the 1st person jargon sung by the scientists to describe how the bomb will actually be assembled. Adams cleverly transforms this seductive music describing the creation of the bomb into a frenzied depiction of the dread of its detonation.]

2. DOUBTS

Thuds and whacks in the orchestra then punctuate General Groves’ concern over Oppenheimer’s state of mind and the security threat of some of the scientists. At [W2], page 253, these figurative drumbeats become more regular, suggesting a primitive dance.

3. DREAMS AND 4. DANCES

Oppenheimer joins in (breaking into poetic utterances of French symbolist poetry about time’s inexorable march forward), and the chorus, female at first, sings (and in the original production, dances) on page 253 a wordless chant. Kitty Oppenheimer then adds her commentary (in Rukeyserian lines) that hints at why the chorus is wordless and dancing:

“To keep the weakness secret, to deny it and break through. In the dream of chieftains, the corn distinct again in gold-white tufffeathers.”

It turns out the chorus is performing a Native American ritualistic dance [Sellars and Adams refer to it as “corn-dance” from Kitty’s abovementioned lines]. The maid Pasqualita also joins in at this point (pages 259-260) as the drumbeats intensify, singing of Tewa dream-myths that tell us this is a dance to raise the dead. But in the dream “the dead did not come.” -A reference to native ancestors (calling them to action on this ancient plain) and a premonition of the people and land that would be laid waste in Hiroshima.

[Adams explains in interviews his choice of the Native American point of view is to comment on both the potential ecological and human disaster visited upon the modern world by the weapon developed in the ancient, lore-rich desert of New Mexico. He says the corn-dance may also be viewed as a rain-dance in this fanciful sequence of an imagined desire to impede the experiment. Storms beset the actual experiment and are sung about in the pages before this particular scene.]

While the chorus continues its dance (pages 262-264) the idealistic young scientist Robert Wilson chimes in about the parallels of his reading Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and the shared Los Alamos experience.

5. DÉNOUEMENT

On page 266 the choral sopranos count down (in an extended *hemiola*) the seconds of the clock, singing “tick, tick” while Oppenheimer returns to his ecstatic rhapsody (sung up an octave by Gerald Finley, by the way, in ms. 317-320):

“The seconds are strongly accentuated, and each one spouting out of the clock says: ‘I am Life!’ Insuperable, implacable.”

Pasqualita rejoins on page 269 (while the chorus returns to the wordless chant):

"The dead are on the march! We never dreamed a threat, and the dreams spread."

The dead are not marching towards us to save, counsel or help us – they are marching away from us. -Again an omen and a premonition.

Kitty Oppenheimer (accompanied by the chorus' wordless chant) gets the last word, as the scene dwindles down:

"And love which contains all human spirit, all with the eyes and hands, sex, mouth, hair, the whole woman – fierce peace and the sense of the world."

"Fierce peace!" she sings over and over again.

WHAT NEXT?

What could possibly follow such a complex and supercharged scene? How about a duet for timpani and chorus based on apocalyptic texts from the *Bhagavad Gita*? Few composers could pull off something like this.

"This one" does, expertly and eloquently.

See you ALL next week, as we can only pull this off together when everyone is in attendance at rehearsal!

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