

John Luther Adams - Become Desert (2019)

Written by bluesever
Friday, 28 June 2019 15:21 -

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1. *Become Desert* 40:23 Seattle Symphony Ludovic Morlot - conductor

John Luther Adams writes music that lacks any trace of human feeling. It is “process” music—cold, implacable, but often very beautiful in its way, as here. *Become Ocean* won a Pulitzer Prize, an award that debased itself significantly in recognizing John (not Luther) Adams’ vulgar, incoherent, opportunistic 9/11 tribute *On the Transmigration of Souls*. So the prize doesn’t mean much anymore, at least in music. The present work also has a message, evidently. As the composer puts it, “Life on this earth first emerged from the sea. Today, as the polar ice melts and sea level rises, we humans face the prospect that we may once again, quite literally, become ocean.”

Let me say straight out: there is nothing that I hate more than being preached at, especially by artists. Few groups are less qualified, as I trust the above silliness attests, and since untexted music is utterly incapable of expressing an idea as abstract as the consequences of global warming, never mind “become ocean”, Adams’ little homily only distracts the attention from what his music does in fact do, and do well. *Become Ocean* consists of 40 minutes of long, slow crescendos. The orchestra is divided into three parts (color coded à la Scriabin in live performance), each moving at its own pace, but you can’t really hear it that way because the basic slowness and uniformity of rhythm vitiates any sense of independent activity.

Harp and pianos embroider big, slow, dense chords as they approach and recede. There are several points at which dynamics and orchestral layers coincide to produce climaxes. The biggest of these occurs about five minutes before the end, revealing that try as he might, Adams has not been able to eliminate all trace of dramatic tension from his music. Impersonal it may be; random it most certainly is not. So this is what you have: an essay in harmony (sometimes consonant, sometimes dissonant), texture, and dynamics. It does not sound to me especially

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“watery”. It could just as easily be outer space, a desert, or any large, empty, undulating landscape. Eliminate the extra-musical subtext and take the piece on its own terms and the result is a sonic sculpture that is quite captivating and very easy to listen to.

The packaging and presentation are atrocious, so bad that they can't go unmentioned. You actually get two discs, one a straight performance of the work, the other a DVD containing the work plus a bunch of still shots of water and ocean. It's kind of like a video aquarium without the fish, and about as interesting. It cheapens the musical experience to a degree that you have to see to believe, which is perhaps why there's not a word about it anywhere on the flimsy cardboard slipcase. The accompanying booklet contains nought but the personnel list of the Seattle Symphony. That's it. Not a word about the composer, the work, or anything else of interest or relevance. It's one thing to write a piece of music that is cold and monolithic, but quite another to treat the consumer with similar indifference.

The pretentiousness of the whole enterprise really is offensive—so typical of all that's wrong with the performing arts musico-industrial complex today, with its smug self-regard purchased at the taxpayer's expense. Surely the composer deserves better, never mind the excellent and hard-working musicians of the Seattle Symphony under the capable baton of Ludovic Morlot. In sum, I can recommend the music wholeheartedly, even if everything else about this irritating production makes me want to let these two discs Become Coasters. ---David Hurwitz, classicstoday.com

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