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EL SALTO: A UNIQUE SETTING FOR NEW MUSIC AND SPIRITUAL INQUIRY

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El Salto arose out of a very personal set of beliefs and circumstances. In the 1970s my parents moved from the east coast of the United States to New Mexico, then Colorado, to study Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, and Native American religions. Surrounded by an eclectic mixture of religious traditions since I was small, I have always been drawn to questions of spirituality yet never felt that I belonged to any single religious outlook. In my teens I decided to become a composer, and classical music became the guiding force in my life. With my love of music came a deeper interest in the Christian images and stories that underlie so much of it.

Studying composition in college, I became disaffected with the classical music world in a way I could not put my finger on. Living in New York City after college, I attended every new music concert I could find, trying to identify what bothered me and hoping to find signs of encouragement. Most of these concerts left me unimpressed with their low attendance and lackluster atmosphere, though a few of them were outstanding and inspiring. But whether these concerts were great or mediocre, I could not let go of my deep belief in their necessity: I ardently supported their ethos of creative experiment and the importance of seeking new means of artistic expression.

Meanwhile, I sang in the choir at an Episcopal church admired for its music program. I loved the sense of ceremony and deep significance, and the sheer beauty of the liturgy. Though I often wanted more variety in the music, I loved the way music was treated with a combination of utilitarian practicality—lacking the pretensions of the concert hall—and a deeply felt sense of music’s aesthetic power. And although I did not agree with many of the doctrines I heard about, I strongly felt the importance of addressing the questions they raised.

With my love-hate attitude toward conventional formats for both religious worship and classical music performance, it was probably inevitable that I would begin looking for some way to combine what I loved about each of them. Beginning in 2002, I set out to create my own personal musical and spiritual ideal. Three years later, while studying composition at Yale, I implemented the first El Salto with the support of many friends and colleagues.¹

What: The Basic Elements

The formula I arrived at is simple. Performances of contemporary classical music are at the heart of the project. Alongside the music (for every kind of instrumental or vocal combination), members of the community read short texts aloud in the manner of a church reading. Texts come from the widest possible range of sources: literature, philosophy, scholarship, scripture, the morning paper, or anything else interesting or enlightening. For each El Salto,² musical selections and readings flow around a unifying theme on a religious, ethical, or psychological subject. A short talk, given by someone knowledgeable in the subject at hand, provides a chance to explore the theme explicitly—much like a homily. Each El Salto begins and ends with a congregational song that I created specifically to embody El Salto's spirit and purpose. A cantor (or two) leads the song and helps to facilitate the flow of events throughout. El Salto occurs at a regular time (once a week or once a month) at a fixed location, and admission is free. A relaxed coffee hour afterwards provides a chance for people to socialize and discuss issues raised by the readings and music.

Each El Salto is a little different, but a sample from our second El Salto, held on the evening of January 31, 2006 at Dwight Chapel at Yale, will demonstrate one way the elements might work together. The event lasted a little over an hour.

- Opening Congregational Song: The El Salto Song
- First Reading: "The Quaking," from the Qur'an, Sura 99 (trans. Michael Sells)
- First Musical Presentation: *Lacrymosa* for soprano and string quartet (Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky)
- Second Reading: "The Law of Human Nature" from *Mere Christianity* (C. S. Lewis)
- Second Musical Presentation: "Desired Constellation" from *Medulla* (Björk)
- Short Talk: "Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet" (by Robin McClellan)
- Third Musical Presentation: String Quartet No. 8, Fifth Movement (Dmitri Shostakovich)
- Third Reading: "Orientation" from *Carrying the Songs* (Moya Cannon)
- Closing Congregational Song: The El Salto Song (repeated)

About the program [from the bulletin handed out during the event]

The texts and music you will hear revolve around questions of decisions, conscience, moments of truth, our innate moral sense, and living with moral complexity. The program is designed to raise questions rather than to answer them; we invite you to draw your own conclusions, and we hope that you will come away with some new perspective. Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky's Lacrymosa, from the "Dies Irae" of the Roman Catholic [Requiem] Mass, is the centerpiece of the program. Though the text is not from the Bible, it reflects on passages from Revelation that describe the terror of judgment day. But first, you will hear a passage from the Qur'an that presents an Islamic view of the same incredible moment, the "day of reckoning." The Qur'an

seems more matter-of-fact than the Catholic version: according to the translator's interpretation, it simply warns us of a time when we will come face to face with the reality of our everyday choices.

Björk's lyrics draw us inside that kind of dilemma—one we have all faced many times. Just as the Lacrymosa begs Jesus to forgive us, Björk's song may tempt us to forgive ourselves, just a little. Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet takes us even further from the clear-cut moral world Lewis describes. Written in 1960 in a fever of anxiety over his impending decision about joining the Communist Party (under pressure from the authorities), Shostakovich's music reminds us that moral choices are frequently far from clear, even for the most thoughtful and conscientious among us. Irish poet Moya Cannon's wistful "Orientation" (2006) echoes the uncertainty Shostakovich faced. Recalling the "carnage of our last century and of the century just begun," she refers perhaps not only to the physical carnage but also to damage to a more comfortable moral sense we may have enjoyed before. Might we, just for now, regain some sense of direction, of temporary certainty?³

Why: Three Paradoxes

In bringing together music, readings, congregational song, and community gathering in this particular way, El Salto attempts to address contradictions in the ways contemporary America approaches three things: new classical music, religion, and community life.

First, contemporary classical music presents an odd paradox. Concert presenters, performers, and composers often lament the demise of classical music. Most concerts highlight the older classical canon—offering works by the likes of Bach, Brahms, and Bartók—and music by living composers is relatively rare. As a result, contemporary classical music today amounts to a subculture within an art form enjoyed by only about a tenth of the population.⁴ At the same time, contemporary music is thriving. Composers, performers, and presenters alike approach their art with dedication, skill, and inventiveness, and the quality of the compositions and performances that can be heard in concert halls today is truly impressive. Ultimately, contemporary music's combination of obscurity and vitality means that an exciting and expressive art form does not communicate in a meaningful way with much of the society in which it exists.

Spirituality in America is also contradictory. Our culture remains deeply committed to the sacred, and religion is a hot topic in the media. But the authority once held by institutionalized religion has diminished even within Christianity, and religious worldviews that once dominated public life now share the stage with a secular discourse. Many people find that the dominant systems of religious belief—Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Jewish, and others—lack relevance and meaning. This has led to a bewildering array of alternative religious experiments.

The role of community in everyday life offers a third paradox. Contemporary society structures itself around different kinds of interconnected communities: the family, the neighborhood, the school district, the city, the state, and the nation. New technologies provide us with more ways to communicate than ever, and the Internet has led to cohesive new communities such

as MySpace and Second Life. Despite this profusion of community interaction, many people still suffer from loneliness, isolation, and alienation.

How It Works

How does El Salto propose to tackle three such disparate problems? Its approach to fostering community is the simplest: taking place on a regular basis and offering a chance to socialize with food and drink, El Salto provides a focal point around which community can form spontaneously. In addition, El Salto provides a forum for community announcements, socializing, and other kinds of interaction and engagement. Even in the course of the first two El Saltos, I made new and lasting friendships.

El Salto addresses contemporary music and religion through a single process, in which music and spiritual investigation reinforce each other. Two brief examples will illustrate how El Salto accomplishes this by placing the secular within a sacred context. For the debut El Salto in December 2005, we programmed Jonathan Russell's chamber instrumental work, *Expanding and Contracting*. The piece, composed using a predetermined set of numerical ratios, is a thoroughly secular work that belongs to the tradition of art for art's sake. But when the piece is heard alongside a Christmas work for voices by Benjamin Britten and a poem by Sylvia Plath, listeners might remember the piece not only for its internal musical relationships but also for the meanings it takes on in that particular context, and for the religious or personal issues the listeners may have thought about as they listened.

In January 2006 we programmed Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky's *Lacrymosa*—a work for string quartet and soprano with a text from the Latin Requiem Mass (see above). Despite its liturgical text, the piece was written for concert use and would not be appropriate in many religious contexts. The text is rife with meanings that are external to the sound of the music, but heard in a concert, these external meanings would be minimized. The listener would be encouraged to hear the piece primarily (though not exclusively) as a series of beautiful and interesting sounds. But when the piece is part of El Salto, its religious significance—if not the precise liturgical function of its text—can be brought out deliberately. With readings from the Qur'an and C. S. Lewis bookending the piece, its text may carry different implications than it would in a liturgical requiem Mass—but all of its implications can be fully felt, expressed, explored, and evaluated.

These examples demonstrate how El Salto augments the expressive power of music in ways that neither the concert hall nor religious ritual—as they exist in most conventional contexts—fully allow. When music carries many kinds of meaning at once—deriving from internal, aesthetic qualities as well as from extra-musical associations—its overall ability to convey meaning is magnified. A piece of abstract contemporary music, which might otherwise seem simply strange or hard to relate to for many listeners, may be able to take on real—and lasting—meaning. Yet El Salto also protects and preserves the pure artistic encounter of the concert hall, since the music itself is the primary focus and does not serve as support or background to any other activity.

Meanwhile, conventions borrowed from religious ritual (readings of texts from scripture and other sources, congregational song, etc.) invest El Salto with tangible religious significance. In this overtly sacred—yet religiously unspecific—atmosphere, the aesthetic encounter acts as a kind of sacrament: it becomes a mysterious, intuitive means of reaching toward the unknown. Through this heightened experience of music, the individual can make intuitive leaps of understanding, meeting his or her own soul, or God, or whatever is there in the music to be found. The secular and the sacred each preserve their unique character, but they join in sympathy with each other. Together, they become a powerful and transformative medium for human insight.

From this process comes the term *El Salto*—also the name of a mountain near Taos, New Mexico, where I was born. Spanish for “the leap,” *el salto* here refers to the leap of understanding that takes place in the individual encounter with music. The term describes the vertigo we experience upon suddenly finding ourselves teetering on the verge of a vast inner space. As when we decide suddenly to jump over a gap we fear might be a little too wide, the name evokes the hazards we face when we take the risks necessary to understand ourselves and our world a little better.

Practicalities

I have described the larger issues El Salto hopes to tackle and the ways in which El Salto combines familiar elements from the concert hall and church. All of this leaves many more important questions to talk about. For example, how does El Salto treat the role of the cantor, as compared with historical practice from various traditions? And terminology is a vexing problem: Is El Salto a service or a concert? Is the assembled group an audience or a congregation—or perhaps a little of both? Where does El Salto fit in the larger world of religious and musical institutions and alliances—is it interfaith, or is it too secular? Is it humanist, or is it too religious? All of these questions are important, but I will outline just three specific issues briefly: the way music and readings are chosen, the physical space in which El Salto takes place, and the use of congregational song.

What determines the choice of content—the music and readings—for El Salto? Many people, hearing about it for the first time, seem to assume that it falls somewhere under the New Age umbrella—that the music will be slow and meditative, or that you will hear a lot about non-Western religions. But El Salto includes tense and possibly disturbing music like the *Lacrymosa*, and writers like C. S. Lewis, whose approach is a perhaps little more severe than the stereotypical New Ager might like. El Salto addresses the same real, tough questions of our lives, in the same intellectually meticulous and ethically rigorous way, as the best of organized religion—but tries to do this without the aid of any particular religious doctrine. And it attempts to tackle issues only by raising questions, without proposing answers of its own: solutions, if any are to be found, are left to the individual.

The physical space in which El Salto takes place has a profound effect on the sense of community—strongly, if perhaps subconsciously, influencing listeners’ interpretations of the content that is presented. The first El Salto

was held in Nouwen Chapel, a tiny circular space in the basement of the Yale Divinity School library; we placed chairs in concentric circles around the walls, with the performers in the center of the circle. Such arrangements are nothing new—like Ethiopian Orthodox dance, Byzantine Monastic churches, and Shape-note singing squares, El Salto’s physical setup helped to create an intimate, engrossing experience. In contrast, a rectangular space like Dwight Chapel on Yale’s Old Campus, where the January 2006 El Salto took place, lends itself to a linear arrangement. But we kept a circular arrangement, imposing it on the rectangular space; this setup maintained the nonhierarchical feeling we wanted.

The El Salto song, which I composed specifically for the purpose, is another important way in which El Salto achieves its delicate balance between sacred and secular. If El Salto were a concert or a worship service, we could have used an existing congregational song, perhaps something with a universal, ecumenical theme. But as Brian Wren points out in his book *Praying Twice*, congregational song provides a way for a group to say out loud the reasons they have joined together. El Salto’s only creed is in its method: it does not proclaim a religious doctrine, it only promotes the idea that music can serve as a powerful conduit for understanding, and that each person must draw his or her own conclusions based on a shared experience.

The El Salto Song expresses this delicate balance of individual insight and shared spiritual investigation through a musical process called heterophony, borrowing a unique congregational singing style from Gaelic Scotland. The *Grove Dictionary of Music* defines heterophony as, the “simultaneous variation of a single melody.”⁵ For El Salto’s communal-yet-individualistic method of spiritual insight, what could be more perfect?

Cantor: We cry out in joyful, solemn song the choir resounds in symphony

All: We leap ahead, within, beyond join voice in sympathy

Cantor: Our proud harmony casts a searching light for all those gathered here in unity

All: We leap ahead, within, beyond now we will seek new sounds

Cantor: We with golden sound will reveal the bright worlds hidden close around us

All: We leap ahead, within, beyond now we will hear new songs⁶

Looking Ahead

The project has received an enthusiastic response overall and much remains to be done. In coming months I plan to continue the project in New York City, and I expect that a great deal of further experiment will be necessary along the way. It should be said that the theories underlying the project—particularly the ideas about the way El Salto brings together the sacred and the secular in order to magnify music’s expressive power—are no more than theories. The important question is not whether the theories make sense, but whether the experience itself—the tangible, immediate reality of it—will keep people coming back for more.

Robinson McClellan is a composer who has been commissioned to write liturgical and concert works for a variety of sacred and secular settings. For updates about upcoming events and to contact Robin, visit www.el-salto.org and www.robinsonmclellan.com.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Mellissa Hughes, Matthew Haugen, Patrick Evans, and Siobhan Garrigan, and to many others whose support made El Salto possible.
2. The term refers to the project in general or to one occurrence.
3. Note text written by Robin McClellan.
4. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, between 1982 and 2002 the number of people who attended classical concerts held steady at around twelve percent (2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts. Research Division Report #45. Washington, D. C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2003, p. 2).
5. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. London: Macmillan; Washington, D. C.: *Grove's Dictionaries of Music*; 1980. Vol. 8, p. 537.