

IN THE REALM OF REDEMPTION **A DEEP CINEMA REVIEW**

By Mary Trainor-Brigham

While choral composer Morten Lauridsen, the cherished focus of SHINING NIGHT, has been celebrated for his “fire chord,” this documentary wisely bookends with ~ and is sustained by ~ the visual, emotional, and spiritual equivalent of “water chords.” These revelatory soul-soundings take place largely at his summer retreat on remote Waldron Island of the San Juan Archipelago, a haven of sea, solitude and spruce ideal for the creative process.

It doesn't hurt matters that the man himself, with his generous windswept head of hair, full beard, and oatmeal-colored sweater, resembles nothing so much as an archetypal Danish sea captain.

This frequency (frequent-sea) drops the audience out of any potentially hyper-cerebral, abstract, mathematical dimension of the musical domain. Although the film richly references conductors, composers, singers, musicologists, and poets, there are no in-depth, professionally exclusive discussions of the likes of phrasing, quartal harmonies, cadences, oratorio, etc. Instead, his contemporaries' assessments of Lauridsen are warmly accessible hymns of praise and gratitude, interwoven with examples of rehearsals, recordings, and performances, both at home and abroad.

Of course SHINING NIGHT celebrates the universal appeal of Lauridsen's music and notes his many accomplishments ~ such as being named an American Choral Master by the National Endowment for the Arts, working for decades as distinguished Professor of Composition at USC's Thornton School of Music, and becoming a National Medal of Arts recipient in 2007. But this documentary also serves up a more intimate profile, especially since the majority of it is narrated by Lauridsen himself, in a voice equal parts gentle yet knowing. And while there are a couple of gaps in the story's telling which left this viewer curious, overall this portrait of the composer as genius/mystic/sea-shaman delivers the same delicious satisfaction as does

reading an artist's compelling autobiography, collection of letters, or coming across a hidden cache of their recordings.

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A Blessed Kinship

Lauridsen and director Michael Stillwater were most fortunate in their finding one another for this collaboration, what with Stillwater being a musician himself and his subject being founder of the Thornton School's "Scoring for Motion Pictures and TV" Advanced Studies Program. But beyond that, Stillwater has also co-developed "Graceful Passages ~ a Companion for Living and Dying." This compilation of readings and music to soothe and enrich both the dying and their loved ones makes Stillwater an ideal documentarian for the man whose LUX AETERNA was composed during his mother's final illness and ultimate passing. And whose O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM has been sung by a choir from Maine who came to 9/11's Ground Zero to soothe those departed souls.

An Indefinable Ingredient

Nick Strimple ~ conductor/composer and author of "Choral Music in the Nineteenth Century" ~ tosses down an irresistible gauntlet when he describes Lauridsen as "the only American composer in history who can be called a mystic, whose probing, serene work contains an elusive and indefinable ingredient which leaves the impression that all questions have been answered."

To ask yourself what that ingredient might be is to expand your consciousness into a fuller embrace of Lauridsen's creative process than would be obtained if you only passively allowed this film's beautiful harmonies, both visual and aural, to wash over you. My guesses as to what it may be include Indigenous Soul, Liminality and Duende.

By Indigenous Soul, I mean a person who participates in life with the sensibilities of Native, tribal peoples. From the very outset of SHINING NIGHT, Lauridsen's neighbors on Waldron compare him to the island's earlier dwellers who measured their wealth not in what they possessed but in

what they could give. Lauridsen's modesty concerning his genius is shown by his depth of appreciation for this life he's living. Such a true artist knows they are gifted and that the best way to insure that gift's longevity is to keep it flowing forth to others, a gesture central to the Indian's Give-Away ceremony.

Another Indigenous Soul element is the composer's pantheistic engagement in Nature, a sensibility which saturates both the choral works O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM and O SHINING NIGHT. The former is stunning and commanding in its brevity:

"O great mystery and wondrous sacrament, that animals should see the newborn Lord lying in their Manger!

Blessed is the Virgin whose womb was worthy to bear the lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia!"

Any tribal person knows to look to Nature for revelation, and the practice of reverence for totem animals, sometimes to the extent of honoring them as ancestral, would make the nesting of a Divine Son among sheep and cows a most comfortable, elemental welcoming. Lauridsen apprehended in the Virgin's life not only the singularity of parthenogenesis but the extraordinary anguish of having to endure her son's death on the cross. Few can bear with such loss in a manner which results in "a quiet song of profound inner joy," but Lauridsen can. I believe this stems from his Sea~Shaman's capacity to abide with Liminality until it reveals a Beloved's essential nature, or its new life.

All Along the Watchtower

Liminality is that amorphous, watery state between stages of life, cycles of death and rebirth. Natural sites which lend themselves to this state of consciousness are seashores and mountaintops, both of which Lauridsen knows intimately. As a young man he spent months alone above the clouds in a Ranger's outlook rung round with the venerable mountain peaks of Washington State. That period of isolation increased his longing for musical expression and enkindled something in him that would later be able to suffuse souls with solace after other towers on the far eastern side of the

country, Twin Towers, fell. There is something all-embracing about such altitudes and such fathoms that contains all else smaller and more fleeting. That liminal, nurturing embrace seems a measure of this man and his music.

The nights Lauridsen must recall from his times in the sky and on the shore! It is so wonderful that the title of this documentary derives from O SHINING NIGHT, as it contains both the travails and rewards addressed throughout. This film may include themes of death and suffering (What a necropolis the human heart is!" ~ Flaubert) but doesn't linger in such states. Instead, in the words of poet Adrienne Rich, it shows us both "the damage that was done and the treasures which prevail" with an emphasis on the latter. And I believe Lauridsen is capable of this due to his natural predilection for Duende.

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Ghosts, Goblins and Gods

Duende is a tricky term to define. In the Spanish arts of music and dance it is sometimes translated as having "Soul," although in a decidedly Latin sense of the word, all heightened emotion and heat. Think "flamenco." Its original, mythic origins point to fairies and goblins ~ creatures from a realm of enchantment and tricksterism. (When something tickles Lauridsen's fancy, his expression can shape-shift from pensive to mischievous in a nano-second). It's a dappled term, dark & light, grace-filled but with a hint of the demonic. In this it reminds me of the Hawaiian word for creativity, which is comprised of elements of heavenly outreach as well as deepest darkness.

Often duende is used to describe those times when art evokes a physical response of such emotional intensity that you have chills, are stunned, would swoon. Once when he shared the private loss of his mother as source of LUX AETERNA, the audience was so moved by the subsequent performance that they didn't clap at the end, just paused, arose, and exited. It's been said that "the awed silence that followed Mozart's music included his own," and we know that at such times this composer experiences duende too.

The fractal beauty of this film is that Lauridsen knows such moments when a poem by Rilke or Graves or Neruda so sets his heart aflame that he won't rest until he's composed music that is its match and mate. The spirit of those

poems set the bar for his creativity which in turn inspired Stillwater to do his best work, and in the final analysis we are all the beneficiaries.

Toward the end of this documentary, Lauridsen reveals that finding and excavating the light, that deep inner spot, takes a lot of digging, digging which he does so we don't have to. In this I feel us moving into the realm of redemption. I imagine the making of LUX AETERNA again. The fact that he composed this wondrous piece on the island of his childhood says that he could spiral back to embrace the child within who also grieved the loss of his mother and weave all their hearts together.

What he expressed was so sublime that an L.A. radio station interrupted programming on 9/11 to play it. So instead of imagining a loved one losing all mortal hope, crushed beneath a crumbled building, the bereaved could be restored to finer memories, the greater splendor of their spirit.

How did this beauty emerge from such anguish? Because, when most would be reduced to unconsciousness, to sleepwalkers halted at a sea-side home's moist and salty windowsill, Morten Lauridsen could move forth out the door, more fully aware, into that realm of riptide, seismic distortions, underworld reverberations. Where most would be too blind with grief to know whether they bumped up against ghosts or gods or demons, one senses that his filigree of golden vision would weave through and beyond the turmoil to the site where souls find grace notes of true peace. And, from shining nights of great mystery ~ in his true element ~ he could return with the enormity of what he encountered pulsating from his heart through his fingers, to be translated into universal music on a century-old piano.