

MACHUNAS: A Performance Oratorio in Four Colors, 2 of 4



Identifier

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Description

The story of “MACHUNAS” is an emblem of the end of twentieth century culture, in all its tragedy, irony, delusions and immense vitality. It’s inspired by and based on four key episodes in the life and death of George Maciunas, an architect, artist, activist and founder of the Fluxus art movement, the last avant-garde utopia of the modern era. His name is misspelled on purpose, both due to phonetic considerations and the desire to separate this story from any accurate description of his life.

The four acts of “MACHUNAS” are divided into Yellow, Green, Red, Blue, and each act has 9 parts.

“MACHUNAS “ begins in Yellow, narrating the days of a young child in the old Lithuania that’s about to be extinguished by the Nazis and Soviets and transitions into Green through the story of a teenager strangely out of place and time in an American-controlled refugee camp in Germany. Representing the 1960’s, Red emerges with Machunas as a revolutionary crusader protesting the Vietnam War, founding Fluxus and igniting the downtown SoHo art community in New York City. The final act, Blue, features Machunas as a forgotten and rejected outcast dying prematurely of cancer in rural Massachusetts.

Throughout the oratorio the protagonist, Machunas, is played by a man singing on one note. All other parts, male and female, are sung by women and are nameless. The score ranges from Lithuanian folkloric songs, Romantic music, twelve-tone compositional structures, a fluxus rock band of electric guitars, sax, synthesizer, shakuhachi, live radio and theremin, to period instruments from the Baroque era. Each act consists of different ensembles, with varying keyboard instruments serving as a continuo. Whereas each of the four acts features a completely

different orchestration and stylistic orientation, they all share melodic and harmonic material. The libretto and music have been written in strict collaboration between composer Frank J. Oteri and visual artist Lucio Pozzi. For this performance their collaborative effort is complemented by eminent conductor Donatas Katkus and the distinguished theatre director Oskaras Korsunovas. The whole museum main floor of the Contemporary Art Center was emptied for this performance. The audience carried their folding chairs and followed the action from room to room.

MACHUNAS – The Music

Inspired by the four color scheme of red, green, yellow and blue that permeates much of the work of Lucio Pozzi, the music for the performance oratorio Machunas was created in four different colors. That is to say, each of the nine-part four acts is named after one of the colors and features a distinct orchestration and references to distinct musical styles although all four acts of the opera share melodic and harmonic material. The voices for the opera are all-women with the exception of the protagonist. Ideally, an untrained singer should be cast as the protagonist who throughout the opera sings only on one note.

Yellow, which is inspired by the protagonist's turbulent childhood years in Lithuania, features music scored for an ensemble of toy instruments. Its structural departure points are children's songs, Lithuanian sutartinės (folkloric canons dating back to pagan times), and late Romantic music.

The music for Green, which takes place in a refugee camp in Germany run by victorious American soldiers at the end of World War II, is played by a swing jazz band but the music they play has very little in common with jazz from a structural standpoint. Rather, it is a very person application of the twelve-tone method of composition, which was born in German-speaking lands and cast off, reaching its apogee in America as a result of émigrés.

Red, which conveys the birth of SoHo and the New York City art scene, is scored for a Fluxus rock band that combines electric guitars, sax, and synthesizer with a shakuhachi, a radio and a theremin, an early 20th century electronic instrument whose eerie, otherworldly sound was a staple of 1950s sci-fi movies. The music is a response to the various conceptual musics of the 1960s (indeterminacy, process music, experiments with unusual meters, etc.) as well as psychedelic rock and the more primal efforts of garage bands that emerged all over the United States at this time.

Finally, Blue uses a Baroque period instrument ensemble to perform a sacred Passion with the dying protagonist in Massachusetts serving as a latter-day Christ figure. In the last act, he does not sing at all. Rather, the other singers from time to time "sing in his name," each on a single pitch, but not on his.

In each act, a different keyboard instrument serves as a concertante instrument (toy piano, upright piano, synthesizer, harpsichord), and in each there are instruments that should not belong, i.e. the swing jazz band features an oboe and the Baroque group features an electric guitar. There are also other formal structures and devices linking the nine parts of each act to each other as well as linking all 36 parts, i.e. the very first part (the birth) and the very last (the funeral) are derived from the same melodic cell and are the only two components featuring indeterminate text which will vary from performance to performance hence altering rhythms, etc.

The texts, melodies, harmonies and orchestration for Machunas were created over a 4-year period by the composer at various keyboards and computers, always in the presence of Lucio Pozzi.

- Frank J. Oteri © March 2004

Note: All program notes copyrighted by Frank J. Oteri and/or Lucio Pozzi, and taken from promotional materials and their web site (<http://www.machunas.com>) where additional information about the story and music can be found.

Musical Selections

MACHUNAS: Act II, Green [libretto by Lucio Pozzi and Frank J. Oteri] (1998-2002) (35:10) / Frank J. Oteri
[world premiere]

Artists

St. Christopher Chamber Orchestra of Lithuania (features)

Šv. Kristoforo kamerinis orkestras (features)

Oteri, Frank, J., 1964- (features)

Pozzi, Lucio, 1935- (features)

Katkus, Donatus, 1942- (features)