Silent Spring- A Symphonic Homage to Rachel Carson

A new symphonic work comes to life for the first time in the vibrating space between the musicians and the audience as the composer’s ideas rise from the pages of the score to create a shared experience of mutual participation in the birth of the piece. Under the baton of Manfred Honeck, The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra performance of Steven Stucky’s commissioned symphonic work, *Silent Spring*, gave homage to Rachel Carson in the fiftieth year after the publication of her seminal book. Her message urging precaution to protect the natural world comes through the music as a visceral feeling, transcending the barriers of language, culture and opinions. Rachel Carson wrote that “…it is not half so important to know as to feel.” I listened to this tribute to her work, with my eyes closed, through my heart more than through my ears, and I felt the message of Rachel Carson resonate through this piece.

The symphony, designed in four parts The Sea Around Us, Lost Woods, Rivers of Death and Silent Spring captures the intimate complexities of the sea and the forest, the devilish flow of contaminants into rivers and waters and the consequences in the stilling of bird voices. Steven Stucky describes the piece as “a one-movement orchestral tone poem in four sections that tries to create its own dramatic and emotional journey from beginning to end, without referring specifically to any scientific details.”

It opens with a sense of creatures in motion through the depths of the ocean. We have images of scuttling across the bottom sands, chasing and hiding. Bright schools of fishes swoop through the water beneath a pulse of the waves overhead. Eventually waves crash and intersect with the shore, evoking an image of the rocks of Maine with tall forest coming to the edge of the shore and rising to dense heights. The lost woods come to life in thrusting chords giving the sense of the dense trees pressing to the light, with a few motes of sunlight filled with bright insects filtering through the canopy. There is a sense of a clearing in the trees, perhaps cut, perhaps burned, surrounded by the somber closeness of the deep forest. Then come the rivers of death. A trickle at first, experimentally flowing through the woods, then growing in intensity, parallel to real life as toxic materials proliferate, to run rampant through the Earth. The scherzo treatment offers frightening images of devilish mischief run amok in the woods and streams until you feel that the Earth screams. Then the full chorus of morning bird songs, not quite specifically melodic, emerges from the tension. You have the feeling of the exuberant singing voices of birds at dawn in summer. Then, one by one, the instruments fall silent, until only the base clarinet and soft tympani cadence ends the piece.

It was not a happy piece, but really conveyed the message that our actions and careless disregard of the natural world would have catastrophic consequences. You feel the emotional impact of a spring without bird songs in a most visceral way. I cried.

It is a striking selection of themes from Rachel Carson’s work, and would be incomplete without any one segment. Without her work of long years on the oceans and the ecology of the edges of the sea as they intersect with the land, Rachel Carson would not have understood so well the complexity of our human relationship to the natural systems we are part of. It was her vast public writings in popular press from Fish and Wildlife Service circulars to Readers’ Digest essays and more scholarly pieces in the Atlantic and New Yorker that had already endeared Rachel Carson to many by the time Silent Spring was published. Her book *The Sea Around Us* propelled her to popular fame, with all three of her ocean

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books, *Under Sea Wind* and *The Edge of the Sea*, on best seller lists for months. She had the voice and the authority to make a statement in defense of the natural world. *Silent Spring* came as her last plea to people as creatures who share the living earth with millions of species whose survival is intertwined with ours. Her voice of caution in polluting our natural systems and her plea for preserving the wonder of nature for future generations resonates today, with even greater urgency than was true for her time. We face the continuing challenge of making space in our world for the diversity of life that in the end supports our existence.

If there is one omission I would observe in the *Silent Spring* symphony, it would be that the sense of wonder in the beauty and complexity of the natural world had too soft a voice. It is there, especially in “The Sea Around Us” opening movement, and in parts of the “Lost Woods”, and a little bit in the opening of the “Silent Spring” movement, but I would have enjoyed a natural scene of beauty and peace as a whole segment of its own. But Steven Stucky’s music is not a romantic fantasy. Knowing that we have contaminated creatures, even our own bodies, from Aukland to the Arctic with persistent toxic chemicals like DDT and Bis-Phenyl-A perhaps is an admission of today’s harsh reality that *Silent Spring* is closer than we think.

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2 Steven Stucky. Program Notes. Lincoln Center Play Bill. February 26, 2012

Rachel Carson’s writing from the Fish and Wildlife Service including field notes, Conservation In Action Papers, and other work are available for study through the Fish and Wildlife Service archives. The Lear Carson Collection can be studied at the Connecticut College in New London, and letters, papers and manuscripts are available in the Yale Beinecke Library.