

**Recording Reviews, February 2010**  
**edited by Lawrence Schenbeck**

***David Lang: the little match girl passion***

Theater of Voices, Ars Nova Copenhagen  
Paul Hillier, conductor  
Harmonia Mundi HMU 807496 (2009; 65' 07")

***Phil Kline: John the Revelator***

Lionheart, Ethel  
Cantaloupe Music (Bang on a Can) CA21047 (2008; 49' 19")

***Kile Smith: Vespers***

Piffaro, The Crossing  
Donald Nally, conductor  
Navona Records NV5809 (2008; 65' 12")  
[pdf of score included on CD]

These three premiere recordings of recent sacred choral works by American composers shine a light on a distinctive area of new vocal music well worth our attention. While each work has its own identity, they share several significant traits. All three are longer works for small vocal ensemble or chamber choir with unorthodox instrumental accompaniment. Each uses a traditional liturgical form as its starting point, around which other texts of varied origins are inserted. Together, these elements create the context for performances that fall somewhere in between a concert experience and a worship service.

This is *concert as church*, because art can, at its best, move the individual and collective imagination into a special place that both connects to and transcends our daily lives. Such music emphasizes the ritual aspect of the concert experience, the sensation that announces itself to us whenever we feel no urgency at the end of a concert to break the silence with applause. This sacralized musical experience was not unknown to nineteenth-century audiences, but it has been renewed in the more recent European spiritualism of Pärt, Tavener, MacMillan, and others. Lang, Kline, and Smith have chosen an American version of that as the nexus of their art.

David Lang's *the little match girl passion* is the most recent of the three recordings, but also the most familiar title, as recipient of a 2008 Pulitzer Prize. Lang is a co-founder of New York's groundbreaking Bang on a Can Festival, which led the way in liberating the new music scene in America from the suffocating grip of academic serialism and classical concert formality. While Bang on a Can is perhaps most often associated (correctly or not) with an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach to instrumentation and form, Lang's own music is quite closely controlled in the tradition of American minimalism, with spare textures much akin to the vocal music of the Estonian Arvo Pärt.

His *the little match girl passion* was written for the mixed quartet of Paul Hillier's Theatre of Voices, with each singer also having responsibility for playing various orchestral percussion instruments at opportune (and wonderfully effective) moments. Each movement is held together by a continuous, regular pulse and built by layering distinctively simple, open-ended musical ideas. Lang sometimes creates rhythmic texture by the rapid repetition of individual syllables, not unlike an early-Baroque goat-trill. Phrases and sections exist suspended in time, free of any of the formal tension of classical melodic periods. Harmony is primarily static, so much so that when the tonal center changes, it is a major event. More frequently, changes of texture mark important points of transition. While the recorded version was intended for solo voices, the composer has recently made a version adapted for chorus, to be published by G. Schirmer in 2010.

What makes *the little match girl passion* such a powerful work is that this spare, transparent sound world is a perfect complement for the poetic sensibility Lang brings to the original text he has compiled from several sources. His overarching theme is the Hans Christian Anderson story of a poor child released from her suffering through the power of her imagination. Lang refers to Bach's *Matthew Passion* as a model in several ways. Movements alternate between recitation of

the match-girl story with movements paraphrasing the text of Bach solo arias and chorales, in which the singers respond to the story on behalf of the audience. The detachment of the music combined with the raw emotionality of the texts has a cumulative impact that creates the context for moments of the sublime, such as the central “Have mercy, my God” (derived from Picander’s “*Erbarme dich*” text for Bach) and the closing “We sit and cry...rest soft” (“*Ruhe sanft*”) accompanied by glistening crotales. Concert space is transformed into sacred space, human space.

The CD is completed with four single-movement works performed by the acclaimed professional chamber choir *Ars Nova Copenhagen*. Every composer faces the challenging conundrum of developing an identifiable compositional voice while avoiding the risk of repeating oneself. The latter concern may arise upon hearing very similar litanies of ascending short phrases over sustained *cantus firmus* lines and other techniques heard in *the little match girl passion* in these stand-alone works (as well as in the first movement of the recent premier of Lang’s *Battle Hymns*). But if anything, this speaks to how effectively these techniques are employed in *the little match girl passion*.

Phil Kline, the composer of *John the Revelator*, also enjoys a long association with Bang on a Can (including this recording, which appears on Bang on a Can’s Canteloupe Music label). Most of Kline’s work has incorporated electronica, rock, and other styles that signify as “edgy” in contemporary music. Here, however, he writes for reduced and homogeneous forces—male vocal sextet (*Lionheart*) and string quartet (the “string band” called *Ethel*).

As with Lang, Kline’s musical style is built by means of layering and repetition of short motifs. But his minimalism is less restrained and more athletic than Lang’s. The opening and closing movements employ rugged early-American shape-note hymns. Vigorous unison ostinati in the strings underlay unison recitation in the voices in movements such as “The man who

knows misery.” The strings give a warmth, vibrancy, and softer edge to the overall sound in sustained movements such as “Hear my Prayer” and “Everywhere.” The voices are closely mic’ed, giving them a somewhat more splintered, less unified sound than usually associated with small early-music vocal ensembles, and at times exposing some patchy intonation, as in the opening of the *Sanctus*.

Surprisingly, the CD booklet provides no texts or program notes, which thankfully can be found on the label’s website ([www.cantaloupemusic.com](http://www.cantaloupemusic.com)). There we learn that the title “John the Revelator” has no connection to the music other than a recording of the gospel song by Willie Johnson having made an indelible impression on the composer as a youth. One particularly remarkable wordless movement for the singers and strings, “Dark was the Night,” was inspired by a song by Johnson about Jesus’s agony in the garden.

Kline’s formal starting point is the Latin Mass. He sets the texts of the Ordinary in their standard version, either for voices alone (Kyrie), or voices chanting over a string drone (Gloria). Kline surrounds these fixed parts of the liturgy with his own choice of texts for the Proper. Here he includes David Shapiro’s haunting post-9/11 reflections “The Snow Fell” and “Everywhere,” Beckett’s “The Unnamable,” and two passages from the biblical Lamentations of Jeremiah. In the liturgical movements with limited text such as the Kyrie, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei, Kline allows his harmonic language to become more lush and generous. The Agnus Dei in particular could stand on its own as a gorgeous, plaintive selection for unaccompanied choir.

Though not tied to a narrative, *John the Revelator*’s varied and dynamic exploration of spiritual struggle and reflection works very well together as a whole. It’s not hard to imagine that *John* could also be quite effective performed by a full men’s choir and string ensemble.

The liturgical form providing the basis for Kile Smith’s *Vespers* is the Lutheran service of evening prayer. The sound palette is again quite unique: chamber choir (The Crossing, directed

by Donald Nally) with another unconventional accompaniment: a Renaissance wind band (Piffaro), complete with full consorts of recorders, shawms, dulcians, sackbuts, and continuo (lute, theorbo, guitar, and harp)—27 different instruments played expertly by seven musicians. In fact, *Vespers* was commissioned by Piffaro, not the choir, for what we might call “chiesa in camera” performance—concert as church, without doctrinal allegiances or exclusions.

As with the other works discussed here, the composer has reshaped a traditional liturgical form to serve the musical design. But rather than invent his own texts, Smith relies on biblical texts in Latin and hymn texts in German along with their original melodies. Thus the musical forms are more conventionally periodic in nature. Smith points to the earliest Lutheran composers such as Praetorius and Schütz as inspirations, writing at a time when wind consorts were in their prime. Plainchant, chorale variations, and complex imitative counterpoint abound. On the other side of Bach, the music also recalls the probing and angular music of Hugo Distler, but with a lighter heart and a natural exuberance. Stravinsky’s neo-baroque fanfares come to mind in several of the instrumental flourishes, such as at the end of the “Gloria” and “Magnificat” movements. The closing of the final movement (“Deo Gratias”) is almost giddy in its exuberance.

Smith also writes music that draws fully on the remarkable talents of his performers. It is no discredit to the performers on the other discs to note that much more is asked of the virtuoso ensembles performing the *Vespers*. Not only are the demands of sonority, range, ensemble, and intonation more extensive, but performers are asked to contribute a more varied palette of inflection, shaping, shading, and rubato. Smith writes idiomatically and inventively for Piffaro, having grown up playing in a family recorder consort himself. Piffaro exhibits technical proficiency well beyond any amateur ensemble, of course. The instruments sound so full on the recording (though still well balanced with the choir) that it makes one wonder if the balance of

these early instruments in the hall would be nearly as favorable. The composer is said to be considering an arrangement for modern instruments as well.

Donald Nally formed the chamber choir The Crossing in 2005 from singers he had worked with closely during his earlier years in Philadelphia. Coming together for brief periods to rehearse intensively for an annual series of concerts, their repertoire is devoted entirely to works written in the last fifteen years. Not only are their voices exceptionally well-matched, their familiarity with each other and with Nally allows for an impressive level of musical flexibility and expressive freedom in very challenging repertoire. They have worked closely with a handful of American composers from the Philadelphia area (e.g., Smith) and beyond, often performing two or three of a composer's works over several concerts. They also feature recent works by British and continental European composers such as Bo Holten, Paul Spicer, and Joby Talbot, whose music is widely known in Europe but rarely heard here.

Along with Smith, Kline, and Lang, those composers are writing new music that is quite accessible on the first hearing but also rewards repeated listening (and, especially in the case of the Smith *Vespers*, repeated singing). This is richly gratifying music to know. As church and school cultural trends place further pressure on us to water down the traditional three-minute anthem or concert piece, we need to create the musical space—a *sacred* space—for this evocative repertoire. It should be reaching, and benefiting, audiences beyond the urban cloisters where it currently flourishes.

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