

## Peter Jonatan | Psalms Symphony

It must be quite a feeling as a composer, getting handed the keys to one of Europe's finest large ensembles, the Metropole Orkest, founded in 1945, with project credits ranging from Dizzy Gillespie to Bono to Louis Cole. For Jakarta-born, Boston-based Peter Jonatan, who's long been drawn to hybrid forms of jazz and classical music, the Metropole is the gold standard (and Vince Mendoza, its former director, a major artistic influence). Composing a full-length symphony for a group so highly regarded was no doubt like a dream. In more practical terms, it was also the culmination of years of study at Berklee and an MM and DMA from New England Conservatory (both these famed institutions now employ Dr. Jonatan on faculty).

This powerful and extraordinary work takes as its subject matter the biblical Book of Psalms — or rather four psalms, carefully chosen by Jonatan for their expressive and musical potential. For the most part, Psalms Symphony parallels the classical symphonic form, with a big opening theme and variations ("God, the Magnificent King," Psalm 29), an adagio ("God, the Merciful," Psalm 136), a scherzo ("God, the Protector," Psalm 121) and an even bigger finish ("God, the Savior and Holy Judge," Psalm 96, with full choir and soloists). The jazz element is strong, with pianist Jasper Soffers, bassist Aram Kersbergen and drummer Martijn Vink functioning as a band within the band — improvising, swinging hard, but also holding down major parts of the written orchestration.

"Each movement describes God's character as portrayed by the Psalmist," says Jonatan. "There is a singular recurring motive, depicting God, appearing in different variations throughout all four movements. Stylistically, the symphony merges classical and jazz with influences from different genres such as gospel, film and video game scores. These are all musical styles that have shaped me as a composer."

Jonatan, a capable pianist, left the playing as well as the conducting of Psalms Symphony to others so he could maintain the perspective of a listener. And what a pleasure as we join him in that role. Movement 1 resounds with cinematic strings and brass, a blast of concentrated power before the trio enters, establishing a relaxed rhythmic feel, a mood within a mood.

Right away that calibrated balance of trio and orchestra is achieved, owing to superb performances of course, but also an exceptionally clear and satisfying recording. Kersbergen's pizzicato bass, an element that could easily get buried, speaks loud and clear, giving the trio its own robust presence in the mix. One never strains to hear anything.

Soffers begins Movement 2 with solo piano, and soon the orchestra's softer sonorities (flute, oboe, harp) start to come to light. The movement eases into a jazz ballad with the trio front and center, Kersbergen's on-the-money bass solo and Jonatan's finely wrought orchestral parts framing the narrative as it takes shape. Movement 3 opens with strings as in Movement 1, but in a more homophonic texture. Horns crest and sustain and the trio is back with a hip, modern, impressionistic bossa nova. The busier contrapuntal middle section highlights the orchestra, followed by a trio reentrance and the most virtuosic piano solo of the set. When the counterpoint section returns, it becomes a stop-time trading device with Vink on brushes, the very heart of jazz and classical symbiosis.

Movement 4 incorporates choir, bringing Psalms Symphony to a thunderous end in the manner of Beethoven, Berlioz and Mahler. "I looked at the arc, the structure of the symphony," Jonatan recalls, "and the final movement needed to be something that brings a feeling of conclusion. In the progression of the work it made sense to put it there, to give a weight to the final movement, to create some sort of different level from everything that comes before."

This is boundary-crossing music, imaginable in either a major hall or a jazz venue, much like the work of Claus Ogerman, Billy Childs, Alan Broadent, Maria Schneider and other contemporary role models — all of whom, in turn, stand on the shoulders of cross-disciplinary musicians going back to the very origins of jazz. Jonatan approaches this field of endeavor with a strong sense of what he wants to convey. "Psalm 121 is something my dad would recite for me when I was little," he remembers, "so I knew I wanted to include that. And the others related in some way to the theme I envisioned. The psalms are songs, that is their history, and I went through all of them. I read commentaries and scholarship as well, which is heavy stuff, and that only added to my inspiration."

— David R. Adler, West Yorkshire, UK