

Jonathan Harvey (1939-2012)

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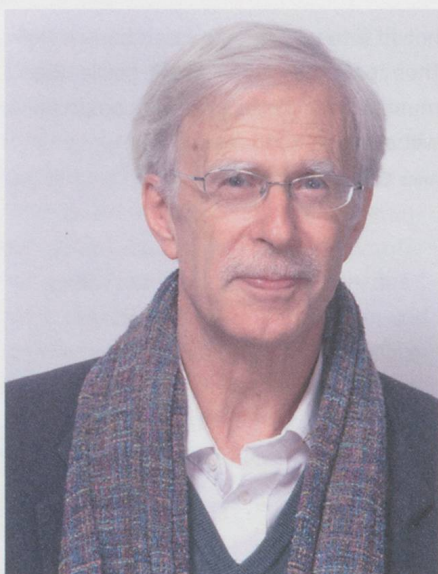
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Jonathan Harvey

(1939–2012)



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I first met Jonathan Harvey in the spring of 1986, when I attended a workshop in London given by Harrison Birtwistle and Barry Anderson. They were discussing the making at IRCAM of the electronic components for Birtwistle's opera *The Mask of Orpheus*, which was to receive its premiere at the London Coliseum on 21 May. Harvey was in the audience and joined in the discussion. He had had no involvement with the opera project at all, but it was typical of him that he was genuinely interested in what other composers around him were doing, and he was generous in sharing his experiences with them. Such generosity characterised the man and his music.

Harvey had, of course, been associated with IRCAM since its early days through his landmark works *Mortuos Plango*, *Vivos Voco* (1980) and *Bhakti* (1982), works which not only cemented his reputation as one of the leading creative voices of the late 20th century but which could also be said to have established the reputation of IRCAM. His contributions to the development of electro-acoustic music cannot be underestimated, and will be one of his lasting legacies. He opened up previously unimagined sound-worlds through his use of elec-

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tronics – for example, in the multiple tolling bells and singing boys (and singing bells and tolling boys) of *Mortuos Plango*, in the dazzling proliferation of melodic material in *Ritual Melodies* (1989–90), and in the transformation and integration of recorded birdsong in *Bird Concerto with Piano Song* (2001) and human speech in *Speakings* (2007–08). But for Harvey electronics were never an end in themselves: technology was always the servant of the music, not the other way round. He once said that it was his concern in *Mortuos Plango* to “make technology human”, and for the most part he used electronics in order to open up new expressive realms. For Harvey music mattered profoundly because it possessed the “ability to communicate to mankind an idea of what lies beyond and above everyday life”. In liberating sound from the body, electronics were able to suggest a transcendent, egoless state beyond anxiety and suffering, a sense of the divine, of the eternal, of a Buddhist “emptiness”. This was nowhere better realised than in *Madonna of Winter and Spring* (1986) for orchestra and electronics, which takes the listener on a journey from the conflict and busy-ness of the mundane towards blissful glimpses of a new, spiritual world.

For Harvey, the purpose of music was “to reveal the nature of suffering and to heal”. Music, he believed, could point towards better worlds. He often suggested that music “is a kind of practice for death”. A resonant phrase borrowed from Stockhausen and in turn referring as far back as Socrates' statement in the *Phaedo*: the “one aim of those who practise philosophy in the proper manner is to practise for dying and death”.

Many of his works are concerned with death, or at least the borderland between life and death, where death is understood as a gateway to new states of consciousness. This theme is central to all his

operas: *Passion and Resurrection* (1981), *Inquest of Love* (1991–92) and *Wagner Dream* (2006). The last-mentioned in particular takes place on the threshold of death, where the dying Wagner in 1883 has a vision of a Buddhist monk called Vairochana who announces that Wagner's “breathing is about to cease. Don't be afraid. If you listen to me you'll experience the clear light, wherein all things become one, and you will know yourself.” The music of Wagner's world remains dense, conflicted, infused with the chromatic sounds of the *Tristan* chord; the music of the Indian characters is pentatonic, slow, meditative, suggesting a unity, the “pure light”. The opera represents a quest after transcendence. The electronics in the work serve to unify its two aspects, to help move beyond dualism.

This, it seems to me, is a perfect illustration of Harvey's generosity. On a personal level he was a wonderfully generous man – as friend, colleague, teacher – but he was equally generous as a composer. “I think I should be useful”, he said in a recent film interview. Not for him the philosophy of one of his teachers, Milton Babbitt, who notoriously advocated the role of composer as specialist, withdrawn from the world. Rather, Harvey adopted a position that resonated with another of his mentors, Benjamin Britten, who asserted that “it is the composer's duty, as a member of society, to speak to or for his fellow human beings”. For Harvey, in his life as in his music, the ego of the composer was a hindrance; the self needed to be overcome in order to help others to find, through his music, the possibility of something better, more harmonious, joyous. His music is full of joy and beauty; the joy of the man continues to echo through the music he has left us. Listen to *Forms of Emptiness* (1986), and you will discover exactly what I mean.

Jonathan Cross