

Frank Martin

(b. Geneva, 15 September 1890; d. Naarden, Netherlands, 21 November 1974)

*Le Mystère de la Nativité* ("The Mystery of the Nativity"), Christmas oratorio after a medieval mystery play by Arnoul Gréban (1420-1471)  
for nine solo voices, three choruses, and large orchestra (1957-9)

Frank Martin and Arthur Honegger are the towering figures among Swiss composers of the twentieth century. Both hailed from Francophone Switzerland, both espoused a seriousness of purposes rooted in their Calvinist surroundings, and both excelled in large-scale works for chorus and orchestra that owed much to the example of Bach. At a time when Schoenberg's dodecahonic method was known only to a few close disciples and initiates, Martin undertook a deep study of the technique in the early 1930s and adapted it to his own compositional needs. The results were triumphantly presented in his oratorio *Le Vin herbé* on the Tristan legend (1938-41), the work which first brought him to international attention. If his fame today mainly resides in this and other large-scale vocal works, especially the oratorio *Golgotha* (1945-8), he nevertheless brought forth a large body of superior instrumental music, of which the *Petite symphonie concertante* (1945), a work commissioned and premièreed by Paul Sacher that has become perhaps his best-known piece altogether, may serve as a supreme example.

Until the end of the Second World War, Martin was an extraordinarily active figure in Geneva's musical scene, teaching rhythmic theory at the Jaques-Dalcroze Institute and composition at the Conservatory, heading his own private music school (*Technicum Moderne de Musique*), serving as president of the Swiss Association of Musicians (1942-6), and performing regularly as a pianist and a harpsichordist. Perhaps sensing a threat to his artistic integrity, he severed these ties in 1946 and moved with his Dutch wife to the Netherlands, which became his permanent home, first in Amsterdam and later, from 1956, in the nearby small town of Naarden. Thereafter, apart from a teaching engagement at the Cologne *Musikhochschule* (1950-57), he devoted himself entirely to the composition and, occasionally, the performance of his own music.

*Le Mystère de la Nativité* was the first large-scale work that Martin composed after his retirement from the Cologne *Musikhochschule*. The choice of material reflects the increasing interest in religious subjects that marked his later years. In this case he drew his text from one of the great mystery plays of the late Middle Ages, Arnoul Gréban's *Le Mystère de la Passion* (c.1450), a huge ambling work consisting of some 35,000 lines of unassuming rhymed couplets that took four days and over two-hundred actors to perform. Gréban's work, divided into a Prologue and four "Days," retraces the history of man's salvation from the Fall of Lucifer to the Resurrection and Glorification of Christ. Although famous in its day (Gréban was organist and choirmaster at Notre Dame in Paris at the time that he wrote *Le Mystère*), it was cast into oblivion by the new classicizing spirit of the Renaissance and had to wait until 1878 for its first appearance in print. Since then, the Nativity section has appeared in two English translations, one published by Oxford University Press (1956) and another by Southern Illinois University Press (1991), which may be usefully consulted by those English-speaking readers not well-versed in Middle French.

Martin felt immediately attracted to Gréban's work by the static, hieratic quality of the scenes, which he likened to the stained-glass windows and ornamental capitals of Gothic cathedrals, and by the sharpness of characterization even in minor roles (each of the shepherds in the annunciation scene has a distinct personality). He limited his selection to the prologue and the First Day, and thus from the Creation to Christ's presentation in the Temple. The selection is grouped into three parts consisting of several "tableaux," each of which may contain two or more

scenes. Part 1 opens with the celestial choir singing in praise of the Creation (Tableau 1), followed by a "prologue proper" delivered to the audience (Tableau 2). It continues with a contrasting scene of infernal choirs rejoicing at the appearance of the first human souls in Hell (Tableau 3) and the dispatching of the Archangel Gabriel to Mary (Tableau 4) and ends with the Annunciation and Visitation (Tableau 5). Part 2 begins with the infernal counterpart to Part 1 as Lucifer dispatches Satan to thwart the appearance of the Redeemer (Tableau 6). God responds by sending Gabriel as his emissary to earth (Tableau 7). The birth of Jesus follows (Tableau 8), after which Gabriel appears to the shepherds (Tableau 9). Part 3 opens with a human touch as the aged Simeon despairs of seeing the Messiah (Tableau 10). The Infant Jesus is then honored by the procession of the Three Wise Men (Tableau 11), and the work ends with his triumphant presentation in the Temple (Tableau 12).

Martin conceived the *Mystère* for very large forces: nine vocal soloists (soprano, alto, three tenors, two baritones, and two basses), a mixed chorus to comment on the action, a small mixed chorus to represent the angels in Heaven, and a small chorus of male voices for the demons in Hell, plus very large orchestra. Just as the scoring underlines the three levels of action in the text, so the musical language differs for the scenes in Heaven, Earth, and Hell. If the earthly music has a folk-like immediacy, Martin deliberately sought "a very bare and entirely diatonic musical language for the celestial world." Hell, in contrast, is depicted as maximum disorder as the music descends into a raucous and at times ribald atonality with frequent use of *Sprechstimme*.

Although *Mystère de la Nativité* is perfectly satisfying in its original form as an "Oratorio de Noël," Martin also envisaged the work in stage performance and even published an elaborate *mise-en-scène* to clarify his vision. As in the score itself, all stagings were to take place on three levels: Paradise, Earth, and Inferno. Paradise was to have no stage décor whatsoever, and the angels were to wear simple robes in bright colors ("white, gold, with some red if desired"). Earth was to be given four architectural structures representing the house of Joseph, the house of Elisabeth, the Manger, and the Temple. Hell, as in the music, was meant to embody maximum disorder: "irregular shapes strewn with highly stylized boulders... from which the devils may emerge and behind which they may disappear." Further instructions meticulously set down the appearance and location of the buildings on earth, the placement of the choirs, the stage blocking, and even the casting of the parts. To reduce the number of performers, all singing roles were doubled, so that the same soprano takes Eve and the Virgin Mary, the same male singer Adam and Joseph, and so forth.

*Le Mystère de la Nativité* received its première in Geneva on 23 December 1959; Ernest Ansermet conducted, and the soprano part was sung by Elly Ameling. The performance was recognized as a major event and immediately issued in a monaural recording. One year later the work was published in full score, vocal score, and libretto (with a self-consciously antiquated German translation) by Universal in Vienna. Since then the work has gradually come to take a place alongside Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and Janáček's *Glagolithic Mass* among the great religious utterances of twentieth-century music.

Bradford Robinson, 2005

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