

VOICES OF THE IMMACULATE

PROGRAM NOTE

Music is the medium through which Kati Agócs engages with the world, the spiritual and the humanitarian world, the world of art and culture. As a composer who sings, and as one concerned with cultural knowledge and its transmission, she has consistently turned to poetry and language as a way of focusing and enhancing her musical goals. Her new “song cycle/cantata” *Voices of the Immaculate* is a major work continuing and expanding upon this significant current of her practice, represented in such earlier pieces as *By the Streams of Babylon* and *The Debrecen Passion*. Co-commissioned by Miller Theatre, the piece was composed especially for mezzo-soprano Lucy Dhegrae and Third Sound, who give the premiere performance this evening. Opening the concert is an earlier work championed by Third Sound, Agócs’s *Immutable Dreams*.

Agócs’s heritage and upbringing provided fertile ground for her wide-ranging interests. Born in Windsor, Canada, and raised in rural Ontario, she was encouraged in her cultural pursuits by her parents; her brother, Lecturer in Classics (Greek and Roman Literature) at University College, London, specializes in ancient Greek poetry and has occasionally consulted with her on texts and translations, as in her multilingual piece *Vessel*. Agócs has lived in the U.S. for more than two decades. She earned her master’s and doctoral degrees at the Juilliard School, where she studied with Milton Babbitt. She also attended the Aspen Music School and was a Fellow of the Tanglewood Music Center of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She studied voice for several years with the venerated soprano Adele Addison and has performed professionally as a singer, including in a recording of her own music by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. Now a committed teacher herself, since 2008 she has been on the composition faculty of the New England Conservatory in Boston. In addition to her notable career in the U.S., Agócs maintains strong ties to Canada, where she has received a number of important commissions and premieres, and, as the daughter of a Hungarian expatriate who left the country during the 1956 uprising, has traveled many times to Hungary, where she studied at the Franz Liszt Academy on a Fulbright Fellowship. She also developed an exchange program between the Academy and Juilliard.

Agócs has been recognized with numerous honors, including the Arts and Letters Award, the Charles Ives Fellowship, and the Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; a Guggenheim Fellowship; the inaugural Brother Thomas Fellowship from the Boston Foundation, and many others. In 2019-2020 she was in residence with the Metropolis Ensemble in New York City, presenting a concert series that featured commissioned works by emerging composers along with her own recent music. Last month her Horn Concerto, a consortium commission for Boston Symphony Orchestra Principal Horn James Sommerville, was premiered in Sioux City, Iowa. A previous work for Sommerville, *Devotion* for horn, harp, and string quintet, was commissioned by the BSO for the fiftieth anniversary of the Boston Symphony Chamber Players. Other commissions have come from Canada’s National Arts Centre for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Fromm Music Foundation, American Composers Orchestra, Boston’s Emmanuel Music, and Orchestra of St. Luke’s, to name a few. She is currently writing a piano concerto for Nicolas Namoradze, commissioned by the Esther Honens International Piano Competition in Calgary.

Immutable Dreams factors significantly in the pre-origin story of *Voices of the Immaculate*. Around 2014, the New York-based composer Patrick Castillo co-founded Third Sound, a group based on the Pierrot ensemble model. The following year Third Sound was chosen by the American Composers Forum to represent the United States at the 28th annual Havana Festival of Contemporary Music to introduce to Cuba a broad range of new music from the U.S. One of the ten works chosen from more than 400 submissions was Agócs’s *Immutable Dreams*. Traveling with the nine other composers and Third Sound to Havana for the festival, Agócs got to know Castillo and the group’s other members and became familiar with their performance styles. In the years following, Castillo maintained a hope of commissioning Agócs for a bigger work for Third Sound, which finally came to fruition in a joint commission from Miller Theatre at Columbia University, Chamber Music America, New Music USA, and Philadelphia Chamber Music Society. Castillo also helped spearhead the present Portrait Concert. Along with working with Third Sound in mind, Agócs consulted

extensively with the dynamic mezzo-soprano Lucy Dhegrae to discover the singer's greatest strengths as a vocalist and performer.

Voices of the Immaculate delivers a powerful social message about the survivors of sexual abuse by the clergy. The composer writes, "The texts of the work's seven movements interweave excerpts from the Book of Revelation and survivor testimony. The survivors...come from diverse cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and gender identities. Their words come from victims' recollections as adults of their prior experience of abuse—in some cases, stories that the victims have waited decades to tell. The tenses have been changed from past to present in some cases to effect a sense of urgency, as the pronouns and tenses have also been changed in some of the biblical texts to grant the singer agency and power."

In Agócs's 2011 work *Vessel*, the composer taps into medieval music practice in writing a macaronic work, a piece that features simultaneous musical settings of words from two or more languages. Combined with the musical setting, the piece becomes a kind of hyper-concentrated stream of meaning that transcends, even while it obfuscates, the meaning of its individual elements. Even when setting a more conventional single-language text, Agócs still strives to combine the elements of a work into a powerfully rich essence. Like a macaronic setting, *Voices of the Immaculate* blends multiple voices to create a richly meaningful but abstract character; the singer is "an 'angel of the apocalypse' who moves between roles, integrating the roles of child and deity." The juxtaposition of the Biblical and survivor texts creates a timeless quality that's enhanced and made more universal by the contrasting musical qualities from movement to movement. The subdued choreography of the singer's passage through the stage space creates a further ritualistic, abstracted atmosphere. The varieties of voice within the text, carefully crafted by the composer, serve the useful musical purpose of providing contrast and dramatic shape for the piece as a whole.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth..." opens with a fanfare-like "summons" in the clarinet that activates the rest of the ensemble, some echoing, some in contrasting gestures. The mezzo-soprano responds with her own summons, joining the ensemble wordlessly. The music builds in intensity up to the start of the text. The vocal line is written such that it seems slightly unmoored from the surroundings, almost as though entranced. The ensemble seems to wait for what she has to say, supporting with ethereal chords but occasionally responding with greater intensity. Throughout the piece, Agócs treats each player within the ensemble as an equal to the voice, a soloist who might suddenly be thrust into the foreground. This allows for a wonderfully varied approach to ensemble texture, ranging from the rare surge of the full group playing powerfully together down to complete silence and featuring many a passage of solo brilliance.

The first of the survivor texts, "I was thinking, I have to keep this secret" is a more "human" utterance than the opening movement, rhythmically driven and anxious. The voice part is tightly restrained, its staccato delivery and the ensemble's matching gestures adding to the atmosphere of anxiety. When words ultimately fail, the narrator relies on scat singing to express the rest, a remarkable shift of tone suggested by Lucy Dhegrae's stylistic range. The third movement, "When you pass through the waters," has an almost hymnlike quality in its simple, syllabic setting of the words, though spaces between phrases create a sense of hesitancy and fragility. An extended cello solo at the end of the movement is a new voice, bearing witness to the primary narrator, letting her know she is heard. This solo is just one example of Agócs's writing with specific Third Sound players' personalities and strengths in mind. At the conclusion of this movement the mezzo-soprano ritualistically strikes the gong positioned at the center of the stage, representing "a portal between two worlds."

"I will wipe every tear from your eyes" replaces piano with celesta for a stark change in sound quality; Agócs asks the player to avoid the overly pretty, bell-like character of the celesta by intensely attacking each note. The overlapping rhythmic patterns throughout the ensemble suggest a cortège. The flowing fifth movement, "I was a child and I did nothing wrong," has the quality of a Bach cantata aria with countermelodies and brief obbligato excursions throughout the ensemble. In VI, "Come up here and I will show you," we initially encounter a violence suggesting the immediate aftermath of trauma, veering into vulnerability and pain. The soloist's unaccompanied phrase near the end of the movement is raw and poignant. The movement has an archaic, ancient quality.

The final movement, “To those who thirst,” is marked “As a benediction,” and features fluid, sustained melodic lines in most of the instruments as well as a constant fast pulsing that begins in the piano before being taken up by the other instruments. This rhythmic activation undermines the lyrical, lamentoso vocal part. The text announces the beginnings of a new emotional clarity and empowerment that go beyond the individual: “I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.” The vocal line gradually loses words and aerates, rising into a state of transcendence. The ending suggests a further stage of the sonic and spiritual journey marked by the striking of the gong earlier in the piece. Reflecting an interpretation of the book of Revelation, the journey of naming and confronting trauma enables a transition to a new and higher plane of understanding and existence.

- Program note by Robert Kirzinger for Kati Agócs portrait concert, Miller Theatre at Columbia University, New York, 9 December 2021

Composer and writer Robert Kirzinger is Director of Program Publications of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.