


# A Tsunami of Text for a Striking Vision of the Hereafter

July 6, 2012

 **United States Lewis Spratlan, "Hesperus is Phosphorus"**: The Crossing, Donald Nally (conductor), Network for New Music, Park Avenue Christian Church, New York City. 5.6.2012 (BH)

Franz Schubert, one of the world's greatest song creators, wedded text to music with a simplicity and inevitability coveted by composers ever since. At the other end of the spectrum might be a work like Gerald Barry's *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit* (1995), which takes what seems to be hundreds of pages of dialogue and compresses it into an hour.

Somewhere in between (but closer to the latter) is Lewis Spratlan's *Hesperus is Phosphorus*, a cantata that received its New York premiere at Park Avenue Christian Church by The Crossing and Network for New Music (both based in Philadelphia), led by conductor Donald Nally. Spratlan, who won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for a concert version of Act II of his opera, *Life is a Dream*, has chosen some provocative words from Wallace Stevens, Richard Feynman, A.R. Ammons, The Bible, Wallace Shawn, Adrienne Rich and most prominently, large chunks of *Sum* by David Eagleman. Here is an excerpt from "Search," in which Eagleman describes what happens to our cells immediately after death:

*"At that moment, the atoms begin to drift apart, no longer enslaved to the goals of keeping up a human form. The interacting pieces that once constructed your body begin to unravel like a sweater, each thread spiraling off in a different direction. Following your last breath, those thousand trillion trillion atoms begin to blend into the earth around you. As you degrade, your atoms become incorporated into new constellations: the leaf of a staghorn fern, a speckled snail shell, a kernel of maize, a beetle's mandible, a waxen bloodroot, a ptarmigan's tail feather."*

This is not an afterlife of radiant light and serenity, but rather one of uncompromising, matter-of-fact frankness—we really *are* going to be dust, or eventually, part of another organism entirely.

To illuminate the enormous tide (and to be fair, sometimes one senses his Sisyphean task), Spratlan's palette is as varied as his literary sources. Stevens's line, "Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air," inspires repetitions of an expansive, powerful chord, stacking up intervals like granite formations. Ammons's "'You cannot come to unity and remain material" is joined to some rock-solid clusters. Another Eagleman passage inspires what sounds like a hoedown (for those outside the U.S., a type of American folk dance) with maracas entering soon after. And later, jazz and blues creep in with passages for clarinet and piano.

Faced with such complexity, The Crossing and Network for New Music gave a heroic performance, filled with nuance and drawing on an endless supply of superb soloists. (After the choir's dazzling 2011 appearance at Miller Theatre in James Dillon's *Nine Rivers*, there is little

doubt that they are one of the world's most expert vocal ensembles.) In page after page of Spratlan's tapestry Nally meticulously sculpted texture and balance, with the singers maintaining accurate pitch during even the most extravagantly built chords. And the superb sextet of musicians in *Network for New Music*, led by Jan Krzywicki, dealt with often-formidable passages with focused, colorful playing: sometimes potent and aggressive, sometimes breathier, more languid. For many reasons—including its density and complexity—this is a work that would benefit from a second hearing, and let's hope we get the opportunity.

***Bruce Hodges***