BERND FRANKE

Chagall-Musik für Orchester (1985-86)

Première: 10. März 1988, Gewandhaus Leipzig Orchestra: Gewandhausorchester, Kurt Masur

Duration: 27`

Publisher: Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden, Paris, Leipzig

Instrumentation: 3.3.3.3. - 4.3.3.1. - Tmp.Perc(3) – Hrp - Strings

What is it about Marc Chagall which fascinates the young composer Bernd Franke so much that, inspired by the great artist, he has written three musical works.

The pictures? Their enigmatic and transcendent portrayal of reality? Or the personality of the Witebsk born Russian-Jewish outsider of his time, who created the foundations for surrealism out of less theory and with more simplicity than his contemporaries?

A "Chagall-Musik" can reflect something of all this as well as at the same time conveying a completely personal experience. Such an ideal relationship to Chagall becomes much more striking when it is not sought through a direct transfer of painting into music. For the composer it is not a question of the concrete content of the pictures, rather one of Chagall's specific mode of expression, the tone of his pictures with their light, singing colours. Like Chagall, Bernd Franke layers stylistic differences through the touch of thoughtful instrumentation, bringing about effective, emotionally spontaneous and autonomous expressions.

The composer approaches his Chagall works reverentially and with great calm through the seemingly free-floating of a contrabassoon solo. From the clear monotone and the octave gestures of the violin emerges a diverting violin solo, complete in itself, consisting of the four notes D E G F.

Chagall's well-known "fiddler", now on the roof of a house, now in the air, now over Witebsk? This Prologue finds its associative musical expression in the first exposition. In the driving, pulsing tempo of 4/4 time, horns and trumpets begin a development full of contrasts in which, in phases of tension and release, collaboration and opposition, a new quality of the opening motif emerges in the complete wind and brass section. Once again it is the violin which brings forth ranging motifs and individual gestures from the hymn-like consonances. It is as if the Prologue contains here a multi-layered philosophical interpretation of Chagall's "Birth". An interlude, introduced by the harp and taken up with tonal colouring by its instrumental partners (solo-violin, solo-viola, vibraphone, timpani), leads to the second, similarly coloured exposition. Tones and phrasings seemingly unsuited to one another, as well as different tempos are brought together to good effect: tender dabs of ringing sounds from the timpani, gradual passionate flarings from the strings, lighting-like configurations from the brass, crescendo single tones, harp glissandi. What can be brought out from all the differing spheres is taken up by the clockwork of the snare drum. Three times this dictated order comes apart in aleatoric excerpts – a playing with time. In Interlude II three string solos come together: the violin solo of the "fiddler", the viola solo of Interlude I and a cello solo.

In the third exposition "very tenderly; restrained yet flowing" lies something of Chagall's melancholy found in his most beautiful and amiable pictures – perhaps the two lovers in the mysterious shades of night. An expressive violin threads itself through this movement. From the discolouring of the theme through various diversions in the strings, a quartet of individuals emerges – an additional second solo violin joins the soloists of Interlude II and thus the string quartet is complete. The drama of the last movement results from the unfair struggle between the orchestra and the four soloists.

The Epilogue consists of the strings together with recollections of the original four-note motif taken up by a distant-sounding solo trumpet in dialogue with the solo violin. Solitary thoughts - perhaps not understood, like the young Chagall – cross to a new land and paint an utopian picture of a peaceful world.

The "Chagall-Music for Orchestra" brings the Chagall-related compositions of Bernd Franke to a provisional conclusion. Precursors - musically independent from "Chagall-Music" – are "Chagall-Impressions, 6 pieces for 10 brass instruments" (premiered in 1985 by the brass ensemble of Ludwig Güttler) and "Time is a river without banks – 6 x Chagall for 10 instruments" (premiered 1987 in Boston/USA and recipient of the "Kucyna International Composition Prize 1987").

(Dr. Ulrike Liedtke, from the program for the première on the 10th of March, 1988, in the Leipzig Gewandhaus)

Translation from the German text: W.D. Bengree-Jones, 2001

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