

***Having Seen Afar Off* – Todd Stewart Coleman**

*Program notes for **Having Seen Afar Off** by Michael Hicks who is a Professor Emeritus of Music at Brigham Young University, author of five books in University of Illinois Press' *Music in American Life* series, and three-time winner of the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for his writing about music.*

*I've heard an organ talk, sometimes
In a cathedral aisle,
And understood no word it said –
Yet held my breath, the while . . .
- Emily Dickinson •*

Those lines by one of Sara Teasdale's poetic mentors foretell what you are about to experience: Todd Coleman's oceanic setting of Teasdale texts, in which long-breathed, organ-like tones are a constant undertow. However far-flung the influences on those texts—from ancient Egypt to modern New York—they converge in a poetic language Teasdale hoped had both the music and depth of Dickinson's, jewel-like in its precision yet hallucinatory in its effect. Just so, Coleman's musical enthronement of this set of Teasdale poems on the soul's migration draws the listener from that soul's first moments to its paradoxical fulfillment as, in her words, "a wave that never finds the shore."

Coleman's music stylistically mirrors Teasdale's words in their balance of modernity and classicism. Her poem "The Voice," for example, opens by brooding on creation itself—the first word "atoms"

plunges us into Lucretian meditation. In turn, the music swells like magma, yet with the sturdy harmonic undergirding of (our western branch of) musical civilization. As the text progressively invokes the myriad sources from which one's identity emerges, the music leads the listener through a series of tableaux that merge at last, fittingly, in unisons and octaves—the oneness of self itself.

Consonant with the work's title—borrowed from the Book of Hebrews' chapter on faith—successive poems in the cycle navigate between inner and outer worlds of perception and belief, with their angles of vision changing almost cinematically—high wide shots, for example, cut to tight close-ups, some almost microscopic. Both choir and orchestra respond in kind to these juxtapositions.

Moods emerge, then recede throughout the work, yet, as with the underscoring of great films, Coleman's music often distills the details of a poem into a *consistent* mood for a whole movement. Consider, for instance, the melancholy that saturates the second movement, "The Unchanging." Or the tuneful ariosos—and quasi-birdcalls—of the pastoral third movement, "Places," a kind of fantasy on imaginary folk tunes. Or the sudden harmonic splashes that permeate the brief, angst-ridden fourth movement, "The Broken Field." Perhaps only one movement (the fifth, "The Unseen") strolls through its own gallery of diverse episodes that seem to illustrate different versions of *awe*.

The word “gallery,” in fact, actually suggests how one might approach the music of this work overall. The texts present a narrative, a biography of the soul. And in turn, the music illuminates that narrative via a meticulous orchestration of thought, or what I sometimes call “music as philosophy”—the ineffable intelligence unique to organized sound. But Coleman’s careful construction of sonic materials also takes us through a *gallery* of art objects in themselves. Think of them in three different media—sculpture, oils, and watercolors—asking yourself continually, when and how does the music move from one to another?

The sense of sculpture comes when the choir asserts itself in block chords, synchronous declamations of syllables that rise from the texture like bas relief images from a wall—see especially the sixth movement, “The Silent Battle.” The sense of oil painting, brushes stroking smoothly across a canvas, comes in lyrical lines played as instrumental solos or sung by individual choral sections. Sometimes sonic *portraits* emerge from these lines, sometimes *still lives* or even *landscapes*. But more than the others, a sense of watercolors permeates the music, those moments when the pitches spread and seem to soak into one another. Harmony blurs. That trait appears most vividly in the piece’s final movement.

After seven movements of this gallery-like display of mass, volume, and color, that final movement presents an epiphany that is both surprising and inevitable. As foreshadowed in “The Silent Battle,” the orchestra now drops out completely, as if the instruments had been struck speechless—or holding their breath, to borrow from Dickinson’s poem. Then, recurring to a long tradition of cantatas, Coleman sets the final text, “Immortal,” as a chorale. Slow, brooding, the voices moving in and out of alignment, singers evoke nothing so much as the world of spirits, finally adding—as a brief epilogue to Teasdale’s “A wave that never finds the shore” the cycle’s first line—“Atoms as old as stars”—delivered in a ghostly rustling of voices. That is, we return to the waves of atoms that Lucretius had painted in words millennia ago and which Teasdale took for granted in the age of Max Planck and Niels Bohr.

In her meditation on the organ, Dickinson nears her conclusion with the lines “and risen up—and gone away . . . [I] know not what was done to me.” I can’t think of a more apt way of describing not only the sense of mystery that all music bequeaths to us, but particularly what one will feel at the close of *Having Seen Afar Off*.