

Psalm 139 (1997)

The Dutchman Jan Rokus van Rosendael (1960) adds himself to this illustrious company [Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and Arnold Schonberg] with his new **Psalm 139** (1997) for triple choir. Van Rosendael, who until now was busier with exotic tunings and heterophony, concentrates in this work on a pure choric style and classical counterpoint. The Easter Psalm 139, with its appealing thematic of day and night and the plumbing of ones' own self was extremely attractive to him. The six parts of his composition show a great economy of means and a strong technical mastery.

Binding elements of part I are the glissando sung minor third ('calling third') to which a second is added, the imitating entries and the two rhythmically active tutti, of which the second one leads to homophonically sung fifths ('Omnes vias meas').

Part II begins with a short intro wherein the second and third once again form the basic intervals. After this comes a passacaglia with a basic theme of four measures sung by the basses. Against this the composer first sets imitating triplet figures and then afterwards block-like entries of, once again, second-third motives.

Part III begins with a Gregorian line of his own creation, wherein the fourth and third are used. In a dancing 12/8 time the second choir then sings the melody in fifths as a cantus firmus, against which the other choirs place a counterpoint based on the same fifth interval.

Part IV begins with a repetition of the introduction of part II, now a whole tone lower. Tenor and Bass lay down the night theme in a powerful, syncopatic canon with retrograde (whereby the second voice reverses the intervals of the first voice). The female voices repeat this work of art with the more cheerful day theme. Sometimes the voices come together in loud, chanted homophony. The psalm-like melody with which part V begins has a modal character. This part is full of mirroring; the tutti sung melodies are repeated in the solo sections.

Part VI looks back at part I but the end offers a different perspective, that of the 'eternal way'.

In Psalm 139 Jan Rokus van Rosendael continues his search for a natural type of tonality. To this end he makes use of his own twelve tone modes which, in a different way than with Messiaen, give expression to a 'new modality'. With Psalm 139 he takes a new direction, that of polyphony. In a recent percussion piece he explored the area of rhythmic polyphony. Psalm 139, with its well thought-out counterpoint and pure vocal style, combines an "old" tonal image with modern harmonies