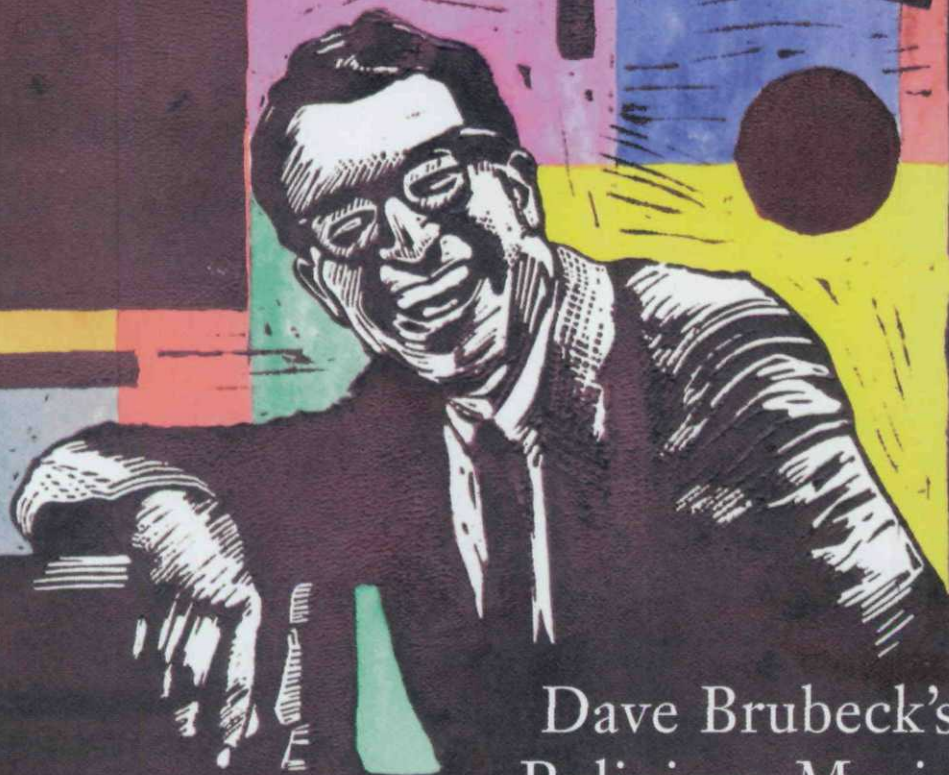


Jazz Goes Back to Church



Dave Brubeck's Religious Music

BY MICHAEL SHERWIN

DAVE BRUBECK IS RECOGNIZED as a gifted jazz pianist and composer. His use of innovative techniques, like the unique time signatures showcased in the breakthrough album, *Time Out* (1959), made him a leading light of West Coast jazz. Indeed, the singular chemistry of his classic quartet established him as an enduring jazz favorite. Over the past 40 years, Brubeck has quietly created a body of orchestral work of such emotional depth and intellectual complexity that he is beginning to be regarded as an American composer of the caliber of Charles Ives or Aaron Copland. Less well known, however, are Brubeck's religious compositions.

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Religious Works

Born on Dec. 6, 1920, Dave Brubeck was raised in a loosely Protestant family, but was himself never baptized. While growing up as a rancher's son in California, Brubeck was already drawn to contemplate creation and to express musically what he felt. His turn toward classical music, however, arose from his experiences as an infantryman during the Second World War. In a recent interview, Brubeck confided that the war instilled in him the conviction that "something should be done musically to strengthen man's knowledge of God."

Brubeck initially considered pursuing themes present in all world religions, but he soon realized that "what he really wanted to do was investigate his own inheritance. It was then that he began to focus more on the Christian message," Dave's wife of more than 60 years, Iola Brubeck, recently explained. The initial result of this study was the oratorio *The Light in the Wilderness* (1968), a meditation on the temptations and teachings of Christ. The work's central pillar is a reflection on the call to love our enemies. Brubeck's response to the madness of war was a musical meditation on Christ's challenging words, "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you." Indeed, his religious compositions can be understood as attempts to express musically God's love and the implications of this love for the Christian life.

In his cantata *Gates of Justice* (1969), Brubeck turned his

ART BY SEAN QUIRK

attention to justice. Brubeck had long been concerned with racial equality. During the 1950's, he and his integrated quartet regularly played throughout the South, refusing to accept segregation. When violence erupted in cities throughout the United States between blacks and Jews, Brubeck offered a meditation on biblical justice. The cantata incorporates the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who had been assassinated several months earlier, and the prophet Isaiah. Brubeck employs Dr. King's words to remind us that "we must live together as brothers, or die together as fools."

Brubeck pursued similar themes in his 1971 cantata, *Truth Is Fallen*. Written at the height of the Vietnam war, the work is a meditation on the lament in Is 59:4, 14: "None pleadeth for justice, none pleadeth for truth.... Truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter." The piece powerfully expresses the social effects of embracing a culture of deception.

In *La Fiesta de la Posada* (1975), Brubeck shifted to the more joyful theme of Christmas. Based on the Latin American carol tradition of *las posadas*, this choral pageant is a grass-roots favorite performed annually throughout the country.

Joining the Church

Brubeck reached a turning point in his religious development when he accepted a commission from Our Sunday Visitor to compose a Mass. Brubeck did not want to undertake the project. Not being a Catholic, he felt unqualified. Yet, as Brubeck explained, the publisher, Ed Murray, would not take no for an answer. "For two years he bugged me.... I'd kick him away like a dog you don't want nipping at your heels, but he kept coming back." Finally Brubeck agreed, but only conditionally. "I told Ed, 'I'll write three pieces, and I want you to find the best Catholic expert to look at them and say whether they're all right.'" Murray chose Sister Theophane Hytrek. It was an inspired choice. "She got together a group of musicians in Milwaukee. The message came back, 'Tell Dave to continue and don't change a note.'" So Brubeck continued. The final result in 1979, *To Hope! A Celebration*, is stunningly beautiful.

There was, however, one glitch. The "Our Father" was not listed among the parts given to Brubeck to set to music. When the Rev. Ron Brassard heard the completed Mass, he noticed the oversight and pressed Brubeck to write music for it as well. Brubeck's emphatic response was that he was tired and going on vacation with his family. Something, however, stirred in the composer. On the second night of his vacation he dreamed an entire Our Father: "I jumped out of bed and wrote it down, because I knew its simplicity was working and I didn't want it to get away from me...and it's so simple; but I heard the choir and the orchestration, everything." The

experience had such a profound effect on Brubeck, he became a Catholic. That very night he said to himself, "If this is what's happening, I think I'll join the church."

The recording of the Mass (CD, Telarc, 1996) as performed at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., testifies to the arresting beauty of the work. The spiritual power of the Mass, however, is best revealed in Daniel Wilson's film (DVD, Lance, 2002) documenting Brubeck's performance of the Mass in Moscow. The award-winning filmmaker follows Brubeck and Russell Gloyd, the longtime conductor of Brubeck's orchestral works, through the adventure of preparing a Russian orchestra and choir to present the Mass at the Moscow Conservatory of Music. Besides capturing the joy on the faces of those who attended, Wilson documents the spiritual effect of the Mass on the musicians themselves. The words of the Mass seem to empower the singers to express their own spiritual longings, becoming a source of meditation for them. For example, commenting on the biblical refrain, "All my hope is in you, O Lord, you are my rock and my strength," the Russian baritone, Jan Kratov, confided, "This has become lodged in my heart, and I will remember it for a long time."

Wilson's documentary also reveals the importance of Russell Gloyd in making Brubeck's orchestral pieces better known. As Brubeck's factotum, Gloyd both conducts and



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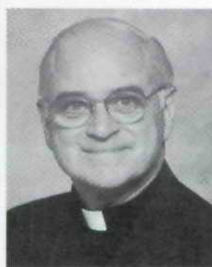


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helps produce the recordings of these more recent works. A case in point are the recent recording sessions that Gloyd organized at the Abbey Road Studios in London. The sessions brought together Brubeck, his quartet, an orchestra and choir to record Brubeck's 1978 Easter oratorio, *Beloved Son*, and his 1983 eucharistic meditation, *Pange Lingua Variations*.

In a recent conversation, Gloyd was especially enthusiastic about the success of the *Pange Lingua*: "We brought the Abbey back to Abbey Road." Commissioned by the diocese of Sacramento, *Pange Lingua Variations* is a dialogue between the chanted Latin verses of St. Thomas Aquinas and English translations of those verses expressed musically by Brubeck. Gloyd explains that "musically what [Brubeck] is doing is representing the spirit of the chant in each of the variations, plus looking at the history of the chant." The result is hauntingly beautiful. Especially effective is the harmony between Brubeck's music and the poetry of the English text, assembled by Iola Brubeck from several different English translations.

Iola Brubeck's labors for *Pange Lingua* point to her key role in the genesis of Brubeck's religious works. Brubeck calls her "the brains of the operation." Concretely, she is Brubeck's lyrical voice. Trained in literature and drama, Iola is a sure-footed lyricist. Her first major collaboration was Brubeck's

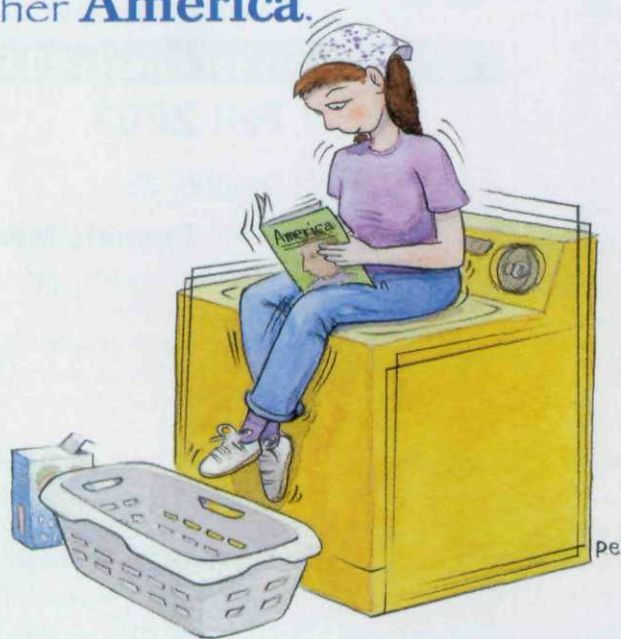
1962 musical, *The Real Ambassadors*, which tackled racial injustice in creative and courageous ways. Iola wrote the libretto and the lyrics to Brubeck's score. The idea was to give Louis Armstrong a musical platform for broaching issues Americans found difficult to face. A simple concept, it was far from simple to execute. Iola Brubeck's lyrics gave the production the voice it needed. In an interview with Hedrick Smith included in last December's PBS documentary on Brubeck, Iola described her subsequent collaboration with her husband on the explicitly religious piece, *Light in the Wilderness*. "I don't know how I got into the mix but I started looking for portions of the Bible that I thought said what he wanted to say."

Improvisation and Baroque Forms

Some critics have difficulty understanding Brubeck's use of improvisation in a classical setting. Improvisation, however, which baroque composers called "ornamentation," has a long history in Western music. As Russell Gloyd explained, improvisation was an integral part of baroque performance, especially for Bach, who used it liberally. Gloyd concludes that with respect to improvisation in liturgical settings, "there is nothing new here. It's just that unlike Bach we have the chance to record it." Brubeck's mentor, the French composer Darius Milhaud,

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with whom Brubeck studied at Mills College in the 1940's, was also deeply aware of the affinities between baroque forms and jazz. "Milhaud gave us Bach chorales over and over and the study of Bach counterpoint and fugues. And then when you came to composition you were absolutely free." Indeed, as Brubeck explained to Marian McPartland on her NPR program, recorded as *Piano Jazz* (CD, The Jazz Alliance, 1993), Milhaud would invite the jazz musicians in his composition classes to write their fugues and counterpoint for jazz instruments. It was therefore natural for Brubeck to develop an eye for the affinities between jazz performance and orchestral composition.

Neri and Disciplined Freedom

Brubeck's penchant for the oratorio form, a child of St. Philip Neri and his Oratory, points to a curious affinity between Brubeck's understanding of improvisation and the spirituality of the Oratory. Philip Neri was known by his contemporaries for his unpredictability. The Holy Spirit seemed to empower him with the freedom to act in wild and unexpected ways. Yet Neri lived this freedom from within a formidable discipline of prayer and self-denial. Brubeck notes that freedom's relationship to discipline is also present in jazz. Indeed, he regards this relationship as the source of jazz's universal appeal. In an interview with Vladimir Posner (included in Wilson's DVD documentary), Brubeck contends that jazz has "something you must

have to succeed: freedom within tremendous discipline."

The disciplined freedom of improvisation is perhaps the closest musical expression of the love Brubeck has tried to share. In a recent interview, Brubeck four times drew the conversation back to the Christian call to love our enemies. When he expresses this theme musically, Brubeck is tapping the Christian roots of both jazz and classical music. Indeed, he is infusing them with the vitality of these roots. In Brubeck, jazz is going back to church.

More Recent Religious Works

Other religious pieces worthy of note are the feisty *Voice of the Holy Spirit: Tongues of Fire* (1985); the Marian reflection *In Praise of Mary*; a psalm reflection on Brubeck's experience of heart surgery, *Joy in the Morning* (1990), and a chorale/fugue combination in honor of Pope John Paul II, *Upon This Rock* (1987). This last piece is especially interesting, because it too came to Brubeck in a dream. In preparation for the visit of Pope John Paul II to San Francisco, he was asked to write a nine-minute reflection on the Lord's words to Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Brubeck at first refused. Once again, however, something stirred within him: "I dreamt the fugue subject. I won't say I dreamt the whole fugue, but once I had the subject, then I could hear the answer and the counter-subject, and I knew I could do it." Brubeck describes it as "the best thing I have ever written." **A**

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