Cultural Notes

Sacred Music in the Garden of Madison

Lionel Tiger

By 7:15 in the evening the streets surrounding Madison Square Garden are already affected decisively by the people emerging from their personal lives into the ambience of the event. It is all apparently planless, ragtag, a crowding of people in a major piazza in a cathedral town. Saffron-robed young men and women repeat *Hare Krishna* over and over and hawk booklets. A policeman and a horse are both shock-still in the center of a mass of humans; the horse must be mad not to lunge in fury. Everywhere there are queues as uniformed men scan tickets admitting their owners into progressively closer contact with the event to come. The ticket scalpers and proponents of Jews for Jesus fall away. The street crowd is quickly obsolete; its members reconstitute themselves into the assured membership of a huge, sold-out arena. The air is being cooled by machine, lights are dim, ushers briskly allocate places, and with dark partiality policemen scan the faces and bodies of women. More candy-floss than beer is being sold by vendors. Most of the people waiting are relatively young and appear to know what will happen to them.

Unlike classical performances, where a strict formality defines the position of the body and the movements of the limbs and carefully limits the range of sound available to play, this concert, of The Rolling Stones, represents a different absolute certainty—an absolute certainty of the new, not of a tradition, not of an unbroken line. There is even a new stage form, tinselly on display—a lotus shape, the petals of which may be raised up and down (they are now closed before the concert), and will open suddenly, with hot energetic drama, with Michael Philip Jagger gripping like a moth the tip of one petal, bright under a direct spotlight, already screaming into the microphone. The assurance about light, the power of performance, the value of movement—these are almost incalculable; the bravery of the Lead is almost ludicrous, because, quickly, the ridiculous must be established as the norm so that the ceremony and communion quickly proceed. Fully a whole arena of people will be locked in connection, a universe of triumph, celebration, danger—rebellion against the prose outdoors. The only aesthetic mistake, the one discordant note, is that the electric clock high above continues to reveal the implacable structure of outside's reality.

Before the revelation of the coyly closed petals of the lotus stage, a hundred or so steel drummers from the Caribbean introduce the audience to brilliant noise and melody while round and round the ceiling of the arena is projected the logo of the tour, a peculiar bird combining the peace of the dove and the force of the eagle. Already this demand for attention to symbol becomes constraining; quickly the arena becomes a cathedral for the young, contemporary, and inflamed. The road to communion is clear, the devout are present, the power cathedrals could achieve by their size and architecture and the hugeness of their organs is here produced by electricity coursing through amplifiers the size of vans and an array of lights and contrivances more normally appropriate to the secular to-do of circuses. Somehow, this temporary cathedral is created from the imprecise alchemy of private sexuality and communal celebration. The congregation is dressed in celebrant's clothes made, very disproportionately, of denim or light Indian cotton. The soft clothing heightens the sense of temple, and the exposure of bodies somehow defines their bearers' openness to the event (though there are some, perhaps with more money and conceit, perhaps the avant-garde, who appear to wear clothes styled for the 1930's and '40's, thus redolently echoing or mocking the sexuality of their parents).

Like a corps of cool deacons, men with identity tags pinned to them walk inexplicably around and through the crowds, some bearing file folders with papers and some with walkie-talkies, conducting underground conversation about how the web is holding that supports the lyrical order in the place. Since the killing at Altamont there can be nothing casual here about the government of people, and rather frequently a connoisseur of these matters will point a flashlight at a supposedly disruptive figure, who is quickly, surprisingly, noiselessly hustled out and away. Sometimes there is a small fight, but more often a man or woman who overingested alcohol or drugs collapses dangerously into the supporting web. Like the Russian performers who applaud the audience when their performance is done, a row of burly men sits facing the audience, a relatively small shield for the much desired flesh on a lotus petal amid 19,500 people. And yet it is all relatively peaceful (the violence of the songs and the noise and the demand of the drums notwithstanding). Throughout, the managers of electricity maintain the parade of change and stimulus; young men who probably failed high school physics sit in front of astronauts' consoles of electric gear; a small factory of decisive buttons is pushed and prodded, and the machinery of the music's framework is managed according to a schedule in a manila folder.

Why are they standing? Why is the audience standing? Why is Mick Jagger (like the famous chimpanzee described by Jane Goodall that gained political status by attracting everyone's attention) jumping his small body up and down, up and down, his hands above his head like a demented politician at the moment of victory? Why does the light follow everywhere he goes, and

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the focus of everyone follow so that with deadly accuracy and an apparently effortless and nonnegotiable demand Jagger owns the crowd, the music being his pledge and license, the words so loud and imprecisely shouted they could as well be in the ancient Latin of a more venerable church? Yet despite the lack of clarity and despite the physically punishing excess of the sound, the communication from the stage is lucid and committed. In the demanding authority of the music one begins to see the principle of infallibility being established; the crisis of disbelief is solved as the 19,500 yield to the power of a statement phrased in the astonishing tones of total personal conviction (I was never at a Nazi rally and hope they were different).

The sounds have all been heard before; the songs are familiar ones of the repertory of this group. When a favorite one is begun, a cry of recognition and a cheer add to the rapid sound; sporadically, even, the words are clear: "You can't always get what you want." The words are stated explicitly, and this escalating convulsion of a song is controlled with austere hostile force by the drummer, Charles Robert Watts, who, having shaved his head for this occasion of tourism, looks on the stage like a book jacket photo of Gertrude Stein. He sits punctilious and wicked, allocating time to the words of the song, holding it together as Jagger seeks to drive it apart with his body and his jumps.

At the end the service takes a more programmatic form. It is an uncanny surprise to see rituals act themselves out with a certain magnetism for clichés. Relatively early on we are treated to an episode of worship of such phallic gods as remain in the Western hemisphere, when a great penis-shaped balloon is emitted from the stage and puffed up by wind, carefully contrived to permit the hero to mock the god for its inevitable failure and retirement. As the evening draws to its formal end, the music becomes of maniac intensity; Jagger jumps, turns, twists, shouts, issues notices of his cravings, and then slays gallantly a rubber dragon that sprays confetti on the front row communicants. By now nearly everyone who has paid for a seat is standing. During the classics—Revolution, Street Fighting Man, for example—there is a committed rhythmic stamping in the arena that must give pause to the laborers who constructed the bleachers for the occasion. The central nervous systems of all these people appear to be in total synchrony, coerced by the music, the infallible leader and his cardinals, the lights, the knowledge that this moment is the Jerusalem of rock, and there can be no better moment, no harder ticket, in the town. Two full hours have passed of the screaming, ferocious motion of Jagger and the headlong sprint of the musicians. These are now coming to a close, and it is almost hard to believe that having become a papal force in a system of commitment, confused as to ends but certain about the need for action, Michael Philip Jagger does his prance (always exquisitely planned, legendary for a decade) toward a portion of the lotus stage for a yellow plastic pail of water with which he blesses the devout in front with his lavish splash. Then another pail is threateningly poised for Keith Richard. Will this holy water electrocute him as it catches the electricity from his guitar and wires? No, there is no sacrifice. More benediction for the people, another pail for us. And then, with surgical understanding of the mysterious politic of his own primacy, the third pail is devoted to Michael Philip Jagger himself, who, Napoleonically, blesses himself and wets his hair and body. The music races to a catastrophe of sound for its conclusion. Everyone with seats is still standing and dancing. The lights dim, the lotus folds, the crowd replaces the band's notes with its own, and then (happily for the preservation of archetype in the world) to signal their need for another song, the people in the audience light their lighters—votive candles to the event, to themselves, to just the idea of light. After a prudent time (the men with file folders still have them open, and the managers of the astronauts' consoles are still on duty) the lotus opens, and a hundred steel drummers assemble on the back of the stage to begin playing and playing, which becomes suddenly, for its first performance since the killing at Altamont, *Sympathy for the Devil*, of all things, of all things, which becomes a circle dance with Jagger in the circle, screaming, imploring, managing to be the focus of a circle while on its perimeter. Then, after some amazing noise, the steel drummers single-file off the stage, and Jagger, who has been lost to sight for some precarious seconds, suddenly erupts through a hole in the floor of the stage to draw the music to its purging point. When it stops he returns to the tip of the lotus petal to kneel, head down, crown on tinsel. The petals are cranked up, the band is hidden. To break the structure of the evening Jagger brandishes his head above the intersection of the petals several times in several places, saying to the spotlight and people, "goodnight, goodnight, goodnight."