

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: DESIREE BRADFORD SCARAMBONE

Engendering Compassion: Mimesis and Metaphor in the Musical Passion

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Abstract

The Passion, the story of the sequence of the events leading up to the crucifixion and death of Jesus, was set to music and sung in the Catholic church as early as the fourth century, but it was not until the late Renaissance era that it became a distinct musical genre of its own. One need not go back very far in history to discover that the generic model of the musical Passion was practically unaltered until near the 21st century. The text of a musical Passion was originally drawn from the four gospels of the Bible, and from the early Baroque era on, Passion text was often interpolated with poetry, later even leaving text from the gospels behind entirely in favor of a newly penned libretto. Though the biblical text was replaced, the traditional narrative and cast of characters is retained and unaltered in almost every work called a “Passion”; however, in some composed in the late 20th century the story is altered—the iconic figure of the innocent and suffering Jesus replaced by a secular figure. These include Daniel Pinkham’s *The Passion of Judas* from 1976, Maurice Kagel’s *Sankt Bach Passion* from 1995, Philip Glass’s *The Passion of Ramakrishna* from 2006, Kaija Saariaho’s *La Passion de Simone* from 2006, David Lang’s *The Little Match Girl Passion* composed in 2007, and Craig Hella Johnson’s *Considering Matthew Shepard (A Passion)* of 2014.

Since its premiere in 2006, the reception of Kaija Saariaho’s *La Passion de Simone* has been mixed. Critics often comment upon the difficulty of reconciling the genre declared by the title with the work itself. Though it has not borne the brunt of the same criticisms, David Lang admitted that he worried about how *the little match girl passion* would be received. These two “substitute passions” are the only two that have replaced the figure of Jesus with a female, and as a result, have boldly challenged us to ask the question, “What makes a ‘passion’ a Passion?”

This document explores the structure and themes of the Passion genre. It begins with a study of the mimetic narrative of the libretto rooted in Medieval meditative tradition, and ends with an analysis of these Passions through the lens of Renée Girard’s mimetic theory. Girard’s theory provides significant explanatory power when contemplating the contagious nature of violence; it logically leads, also, to the contemplation of how violence might be curtailed. It has been applied to literature, anthropology, religion, history, and politics, but is more rarely considered regarding questions arising within the discipline of musicology. When interpreted through the theory of mimetic desire, it is evident that contemporary re-castings of the Passion story question the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, restore the humanity of the victimized, and insist upon the importance of consciously and deliberately reconsidering each individual’s responsibility for the outcast, the innocent, and the Other.