

Douglas J. Cuomo

Black Diamond Express Train to Hell

concerto for cello and sampled sermon (2010)

Co-Commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra
and Orchestra of the Swan (UK)

World Premiere: December 3, 2010
New York, NY; Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall
Maya Beiser, cello; Douglas J. Cuomo, sampler
American Composers Orchestra; George Manahan, conductor

Instrumentation: 1(pic).1.1.1-1.1.1.1-4timp.2perc-hp-sampler-str

Duration: 18'

Composer's note:

Black Diamond Express Train to Hell, a double concerto for orchestra, cello and sampled sermon, is a fantasia based on folk sources, à la Bartók or Kodály, but from an American perspective. The source material is the hymn *All My Sins Been Taken Away*, and a recording of a fiery sermon by the Chicago-based Reverend A. W. Nix, that was released as a 78 rpm record in 1927.

Inspired by the hymn and sermon, this piece evokes the early 20th-century African-American experience, the role of early commercial recordings in the culture of the time, religion and its link to the blues, and the ecstatic in music. The use of a sampled text borrows from the swagger and techniques of hip-hop, and the sampled sermon itself, which Nix delivers with thrilling intensity, calls to mind African-American spirituals, rural blues shouting and even R&B singing of the 1950's and 60's -- prefiguring the vocal styles of singers from Son House to Otis Redding.

The original recording of Nix's sermon has been sampled, edited and reordered to form a new "vocal part" that is performed on an electronic keyboard, each key triggering a different phrase of the sermon. The solo cello variously prods, leads, follows, intertwines with and comments upon the re-contextualized sermon. The orchestra presents its own themes, urging on both soloists, and often interrupts the general proceedings by asserting itself with short, loud chordal outbursts. Elements of the hymn act as thematic signposts, appearing in short bursts throughout the piece, finally coming together at the end of the cello cadenza, when the entire hymn is played in a ghostly rendition in the highest register of the instrument. The piece ends with the orchestra quietly returning, supporting an electronically slowed-down version of that same hymn, performed by Rev. Nix and his congregation on the 1927 recording.

In the Press:

With its richly metaphorical language (warning of a hellbound train making stops at Deceiversville and Drunkardsville), the sermon is a musical mix of speech and song. Mr. Cuomo chops up and repeats words and phrases to create a vocal part around which the orchestra plays fractured marches, bursting chords and spans of astringent harmonies.

– *New York Times*, Anthony Tommasini

The effect, in one word, was ecstatic. Eighteen minutes of velocity and ecstasy, a music which plunged and shouted, which filled Zankel Hall with lauds, antiphonies and resonating allelujahs! Mr. Cuomo's work was mesmerizing... fiercely American in the American sense of Whitman, Hart Crane and Ives.

– *concertonet.com*, Harry Rolnick

