

Bruno Coulais: Film Composer with Choral Tendencies

Whereas the name “Coulais” is well-recognized in the international film circle, it is the classical choral community in which the name is less familiar. Originally a symphonist, Bruno Coulais (1954–) developed an interest in film music in the late 1970s gaining soaring success over the last few decades as the composer for over 80 films. In recent years, he is best known for the soundtracks to such films as Anne Fontaine’s *Gemma Bovary* (2014), Henry Selick’s *Coraline* (2009), and Christophe Barratier’s *Les Choristes* (2004). It is the latter work that signifies the composer’s first attempt at choral composition (Lerouge).

Set in a shabby orphanage for troubled boys in France, *Les Choristes* is a feel-good movie about the hopelessness of the human condition without divine inspiration—in this case, choral singing. A somewhat naïve housemaster is hired to supervise an orphanage full of indignant children who are under the leadership of an angry, callous headmaster. Reluctant to accept the “boys will be boys” philosophy as an absolute, the housemaster attempts to unify the community by refocusing the boys’ energy into a new choir.

The result for the film’s viewer is a soundtrack comprising the diegetic choral selections from the film—a short Kyrie setting entitled “In Memoriam;” the Academy Award-nominated anthem “Voir su ton chemin (Look on your Path);” “Lueur d’été (Glimmer of summer);” “Cerf volant (Kites)” reprised later in the film as “Les avions en papier (Paper Airplanes),” and “Nous sommes de fond de l’étang (We are from Fond de l’Etang).” These compositions are augmented by several instrumental tracks as well as two

choral arrangements—“Hymn à la nuit” from Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Hippolyte et Aricie*; and the French children’s song “Compère Guilleri (Fellow Guilleri)” (Les Choristes).

The housemaster character in the film is a failed, amateur composer. This scenario presented a particular challenge for Coulais who needed to demonstrate through his own score that the composer-within-the-film grew in compositional talent through the duration of the story (Mermelstein A4).

Music reviewer Koob writes:

The music, composed and orchestrated by Bruno Coulais, is important, since the life-changing power and appeal of music is what the film is all about. And, for the overtly sentimental purposes of the film, this music works. It is pleasant, even charming, but hardly memorable. Classical choral fans needn’t worry about missing anything if they pass this one by (99).

Contrary to Koob’s opinion that the music is “hardly memorable,” the film and its soundtrack have collected a number of accolades—including a Golden Globe Award for “Best Foreign Film” (Koob), and success on the European music charts, with over one million albums sold (Mermelstein). Pop singer Beyoncé Knowles performed the film’s main theme “Voir su ton chemin” with the American Boychoir at the 2005 Academy Awards, where the song was nominated for the “Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures (Original Song)” Award (Moss). Critic Cécile Mouette Downs identifies Coulais as one of the top 12 French film composers for his work in “inspiring documentaries.” Downs notes that the composer has won three César awards, including one for *Les Choristes*, which the critic calls “his most conventional composition” (25). Jean-Baptiste Murnier, who plays the housemaster in the film, notes: “After the massive success ‘Choristes’ experienced in France, ‘chemin’ has become a staple in most French choirs” (*Hollywood Reporter*). Mermelstein states, “If the public is touched by this music, it is because the film shows that

music belongs to everyone. It is not just there for a social elite or professional performance. It can and must be performed by amateurs whose sole aim is pleasure.”

In an interview with Coulais, Tom Hoover asks, “What is your philosophy about writing music that features, or draws upon, choral elements as part of its fabric”? Coulais replies:

Regarding *Les Choristes*, there was a very close correlation between the choral singing and the music because we see the actors sing in the movie, and the script legitimizes the singing voice in the film music. But I also like very much to use voices as an instrumental aspect in my music. For example, a child’s voice brings a fantastical aspect to the movie’s mood, perhaps because childhood is the age of the first terrors. I like to work with all kinds of voices, lyric voices like in [the films] *Microcosmos* or *Oceans*, pop voices like Nick Cave, Robert, Wyatt in *Winged Migration*, but also traditional singers, Coriscan or Tibetan singers like in *Himalaya*. The voice adds an emotional supplement (30).

Outside the film-music realm, Bruno Coulais has composed, chorally, music for three operas—*L’Oratorio du Pardon*; *Lucio, le rêve de l’âne d’or*; and *Il Gioco di Robin i Marion*. The composer also has one sacred work, a *Stabat Mater*. Released in 2005 (a year after *Les Choristes*) Coulais’ eclectic setting of the text by Renaissance poet Jacopone da Todi is in 21 movements of varying compositional technique. The vocal passages are electronically modified to provide an echo effect one might expect to hear at a Bobby McFerrin concert. Instrumentation ranges from harpsichord to strings to various percussion instruments.

Whereas Coulais’ attempt at setting the sacred text was noble—given the effort he took to work outside his comfort zone—it was not so nobly received. A reviewer from the *American Record Guide* relates:

Modernistic noise-o-philes might find [Coulais’ *Stabat Mater*] worth a listen, though the only prayerful yearnings I experienced were wishing the thing would end . . . Some may admire the jarring violin cadenzas, but, frankly, I’m

not sure what they're doing there . . . Mostly, I kept picturing poor Jacopone spinning in his grave, cringing in embarrassment, and wishing he'd been born later as a Unitarian or Scientologist so as not to have his name appended to anything as noisy, indulgent, disjointed, and plastic as this (Greenfield 109).

Perhaps it is Coulais' unique compositional flair that attributes to his success in the modern film world. His website biographer writes:

Today, after thirty-five years of composing film music, Bruno Coulais has acquired a status that's unique: that of a composer and ferryman between different worlds, and a triple-agent and dynamiter of frontiers combined. Just take a look at his filmography: it has the Marsupilami of *Houba!* next to Volker Schlöndorff, André Gide alongside Lucky Luke, and both Diderot and Isaac Hayes! Listening to the music of Bruno Coulais, whether in a cinema, at a concert or on record, is like being invited to travel through the universe of a creator determined to dream *forwards*, an innovator whose outward calm comes as an astonishing contrast to the intensity of his inner world (Lerouge).

Coulais' *Les Choristes* selections are widely performed by choirs of differing assortment. The film, it's soundtrack, and Coulais' *Stabat Mater* are all available for purchase. The latter two are available on music services such as *Spotify*. Ambitious listeners (and conductors) anxiously anticipate what Coulais will present in the future.

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