TWO PIETÀS: William-Adolphe Bouguereau & Lisa Streich

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Abstract

Two Pietàs in different media, the first by French painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905) and the second by Swedish composer Lisa Streich (1985-), permit an examination of the Pietà trope itself by laying open a range of its symbolic aspects. Bouguereau's Pietà (1876) is discussed in terms of the grief and joy that are both present in the theological and mythological Virgin Mary at the crucifixion and allows us to touch on a potential functioning of the painting, while Streich's Pietà (2012), for cello, motors and electronics, takes this apparent dichotomy and combines it with a more active reflection on Christ's crucified body. This latter also allows us to ask: what is depicted in a piece of music? And suggests that the visual & physical dimensions – the instrument as canvas or stage – are as vital as the sonic dimensions in the apprehension of this work.

1. Mater Dolorosa – Joyous Mother?

In William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Pietà* of 1876, the Virgin Mary's eyes brim with tears, ringed with the shadows of mourning, while Christ's limp body droops in her arms, mirroring the swoon of Michelangelo's San Pietro *Pietà*. At her feet lies a bloodied crown of thorns, staining a white sheet, and a throng of sorrowing angels surrounds her. Painted in the year following the premature death of Bouguereau's son Georges, the canvas's depiction of the individualised grief of mother and attendant angels have been seen as an expression of his "private feelings of loss and anguish" (Wissman, 1996, p. 74)

and as "a tribute to passionate parental love overwhelmed by despair" (Christie's, 2010).

Ever since the early elevation of Mary from her rather scant presence in the canonical Gospels to the key position she now holds in Christian theology, she has been a multifaceted figure, but her motherhood to Christ, and by extension to all Christians, is probably her most persistent aspect in worship and art (Warner, 2000, p. 286). As early as the fourth century, Ephrem of Syria imagined a lullaby from the Virgin to her child, having her sing "with my nursery rhymes will I soothe thee" (Palmer, 1953, p.19), and less than a century later, when the council of Ephesus met and declared the doctrine of Christ's divinity and humanity, they proclaimed the title of *Theotokos* for the Virgin Mary, the "one who bore god" (Fortounatto and Cunningham, 2008, p. 143). The strong attraction of the faithful to being mothered led Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century, and Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth, to transfer this attribute to God and Christ respectively (Warner, 2000, pp. 196–7).

Bouguereau's portrayals of the Virgin overlap significantly with his depictions of more generic mother figures, so a reading of his *Pietà* as expressive of his personal, parental grief with the Virgin as allegory for a universal mourning parent is plausible. Earlier paintings such as *L'amour fraternel* (1851) and the *Sainte Famille* (1863) appear to be of the same subject: the Virgin, clad at least partially in her traditional blue, caring for Jesus and John the Baptist as infants. As her plump charges exchange kisses symbolic of fraternal love, she is demure and turns her tender gaze towards them. In the later painting, Mary is portrayed with spindles of wool, allegory for her role as mother, having spun the body of Christ (Mencej, 2011, p. 67). However, the similarity with the

mothers of Bouguereau's genre paintings of the same period is striking: his 1859 portrayal of *La Charité* adopts many of the same symbolisms; the peasant mother in *Berceuse* (1875) is also shown with wool spindles; while the mother of *Le baiser* (1863) sits in the same pastoral setting that is imagined to be the home of a modest, peasant Virgin in Bouguereau religious paintings.

In her wide-ranging analysis of Mariology, Marina Warner argues that general conceptions of the Virgin have, somewhat unimaginatively, always been "assumed from prevailing social conditions" (Warner, 2000, p. 288) and indeed that it is the 'very cult of the Virgin's "femininity" expressed by her sweetness, submissiveness, and passivity that permits her to survive, a goddess in a patriarchal society' (ibid., p. 191). Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether also notes the continued existence of a "Mary of the people", a kind of "earth mother" (1975, p. 50) different from the Mary of theologians and churchmen, and it is this Mary that seems to simultaneously resonate with and form populist visions of motherhood. In his earlier canvases, Bouguereau aligns his Virgins with these ideals of motherhood, but there is a clear shift discernible from 1875 onwards. In *La Vierge, L'Enfant Jésus et Saint Jean-Baptiste* (1875), the gentleness of the children is a direct recreation of the brotherly embrace of the *Sainte Famille* of twelve years earlier, but the scene transposes the holy trio to a far more formal setting, with a pensive Mary seated on a marble throne and ringed by a solid gold halo. This became Bouguereau's standard composition for paintings of the Virgin, including the sombre *Vièrge et Enfant* of 1888, in which the Christ Child's intense gaze penetrates the viewer almost fiercely, and, a decade later still, in *La Vièrge au Lys* (1899). However, his *Pietà* stands out as the most dramatic of all these Virgins.

In *La Vierge Consolatrice* (inscribed at the foot of the canvas with "Mater Afflictorum"), painted a year before the *Pietà*, a stern Virgin Mary raises her hands and eyes to heaven as mourning mother lays herself across the Virgin's lap and prays for intercession. The Virgin's black robes form an inky void at the centre of the canvas, and where both earlier and later Marys are infused with light, here – as in the *Pietà* – clouds seem to have gathered. Sympathy between grieving mothers links these two paintings. Implicit in the mother's prayer for intercession is an understanding of shared experience: that despite the gulf in holiness, Virgin and mother are unified in grief.

An assumption about the Virgin Mary's grief is, however, complex. Despite scant scriptural evidence that she was present at all (Warner, 2000, pp. 344–5), Christian tradition does most often present Mary as a grieving mother at the time of the crucifixion, as evidenced in just one example by the enduring popularity of settings of the Stabat Mater. However, when one considers the creeds of the resurrection of the body, and of life everlasting, there is a certain paradox in mourning, above all mourning the death of Christ – indeed rejoicing might be the more apt reaction. Warner writes, "with her gift of knowledge and her perfect sympathy with Christ, Mary could not have grieved, as she knew he would rise from the dead" (ibid., p. 218).

Far from being a necessarily problematic paradox, this divergence of imagined reactions in fact lends the image of the *Mater Dolorosa* its consolatory power. The Virgin exhibits all the traits of the grieving mother, or is attributed a universal parental grief – in Bouguereau's *Pietà*, she wears a cloak of black and her eyes are wet with tears – emphasizing her closeness to mothers everywhere and her motherly compassion for Christ and mankind, but she is also assured in

the knowledge of Christ's resurrection. She is simultaneously steadfast and sorrowing. This sleight of hand is a reassurance and a comfort to the grieving parent. In her exhibition of familiar grief, the Virgin is placed close to them, and then with her leap to embrace the joyous resurrection, she is able to pull a parent's grief towards contemplation of the life everlasting that is guaranteed by Christ's dominion.

In this sense, a painting such as Bouguereau's *Pietà* can be read as functioning like an Orthodox Christian icon. The icon is seen as permitting communion with profound truths concerning scripture and in fact Bouguereau's Virgins of this period show some striking resemblances with Orthodox iconography, not least in their solid gold, circular haloes (Fortounatto and Cunningham, 2008, p. 136). Though the similarity of the *Pietà*'s Christ with that of Michelangelo is likely deliberate (Wissman, 1996, p. 74), the Virgin is notably different from Michelangelo's girlish figure. Rather than the gentle, inclined face of the Michelangelo, Bouguereau's Mary faces firmly outwards, her dark eyes gazing out past the viewer. Fortounatto and Cunningham note that "the figures depicted in icons always face the beholder, making spiritual communion possible" (2008, p. 137) and that in depictions of Mary with the Christ Child, "never do they exchange intimate regards that would exclude the beholder" (ibid., p. 145). While the *Pietà* is the only canvas that aligns fully with this tenet (though *La Mère Patrie* of 1883 shows another symbolic mother with a similarly penetrating gaze), the series of Virgins from 1875 onwards display nods towards Orthodox iconography. Art historian Gerald Ackerman notes that both the *Pietà* and *La Vierge Consolatrice* mix "Byzantine and renaissance traditions as if to insist upon the venerable age of Christianity" (1984, p. 248).

It may seem a stretch to bring a nineteenth-century French academic painter into a relationship with ancient iconography from a church and theology distant from his own, but despite the divergence in practice, the Catholic Church's own stance, defined by a meeting of the Council of Trent in 1563, that

> Images of Christ, and of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other Saints, are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and that due honour and veneration are to be given to them; not that any divinity, or virtue is believed to be in them; … but because the honour which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent… (Waterworth, 1848, pp. 234–5)

is in fact not so far from that of the Orthodox Church as expressed in John Damascene's eighth-century response to iconoclast antagonists, which states that the veneration of images "is not veneration offered to matter, but to those who are portrayed through matter in the images. Any honour given to an image is transferred to its prototype" (1980, p. 89).

It is possible then to read Bouguereau's *Pietà* as functioning as an icon, providing solace not only to the painter himself faced with the death of his own son, but also to a modern viewer seeking to reflect on the dual sorrow and joy inherent in the Easter rituals. Though it has been seen as "less successful because of the exaggerated grief of the Madonna" (Ackerman, 1984, p. 248), and potential accusations of mawkishness are not helped by the fact that two recent owners include Mel Gibson and Sylvester Stallone (Vogel, 2010), it is clear that the relatively unusual presentation of the Virgin in particular provides a fruitful departure point for contemplation of her role as the mother of Christ.

2. The Body of the Crucified

On the eve of Easter Sunday 2012, Lisa Streich's *Pietà*, for cello, motors, and electronics, was given its première in a concert closing the 'Cursus 1' programme at IRCAM in Paris. A product of the intensive seven-month computer music course, *Pietà* is mostly quiet, combining held harmonics and thin rhythmic scrapes and taps, with occasional sharp, trilling interjections to build a still and meditative atmosphere, the limited range of materials placing the listener into a narrow and focused band of experience. New Yorker critic Alex Ross described it as "creating a mood of prayerful intensity" (2012).

While Bouguereau had a print of Michelangelo's San Pietro Pietà pinned up in his studio (Christie's, 2010), Streich had the modern equivalent while writing her *Pietà*: Bouguereau's *Pietà* formed the background of her studio iMac during much of her time at IRCAM. Writing about her work, she states that it turns "around that moment of thinking when the thought about life's earnestness collides with the joy of everyday existence" (n.d.), which can be read as mirroring the unification of sorrow and joy that is present in the trope of the *Mater Dolorosa*.

Over the course of 2011–13, Streich wrote a series of religiously inspired works: *Grata*, for cello soloist and ensemble, which sets the text of the Gloria silently (2011); the *Pietà* for cello, motors, and electronics, written at IRCAM (2012); a second *Pietà*, this time for ensemble (2012); and *Asche*, a duo for clarinet and cello (2013). The first *Pietà*'s quietude can be read as "prayerful" or meditative, which – tied to the title of the work – gives us some traction with the idea of a piece addressing the iconography of the Pietà or at least a vague mystical connotation; but more than these, it is the performer's instrument which plays

the most significant role in communicating the image of the Pietà – and the fact that this instrument is the cello, which plays such vital roles in both *Grata* and *Asche* is not to be overlooked.

In the first part of 2011, with the assistance of a friend in Cologne, Streich adapted a cello to be used in a performance of a piece entitled *Joie*. Cutting holes in the body of the cello and placing microphones inside the instrument and motors onto its surface, they created a mechanical instrument, a machine whose music was rhythmic and which turned the cello inside-out, projecting the sounds of the instrument's insides outwards to the listener (Streich, n.d.). In *Joie* – barring the title, which given the series of works that follows it, might be read as referencing some kind of spiritual joy – the instrument is yet to take on any clear symbolism, its motors moving across its surface in a seemingly abstract game of geometry. However in *Pietà*, where the instrument is combined with a cellist and a far more explicit title, this instrument takes on a new quality: that of the human body, most specifically the crucified body of Christ – the motions of the motors are "the turning of the screws into the flesh" (Streich, n.d.) – and the hands of performer who embraces this instrument become the hands of Mary cradling his corpse.

Despite the belief in a life everlasting impervious to the dissolution of the flesh (compare, for example, John 5:24), the body is in fact crucial in Christian theology. Warner writes, "Christian heritage … accords the body a very high place in the definition of human personality", and notes that Thomas Aquinas "demonstrated that the soul's personality is expressed by and through the body" (2000, p. 97). "The order of divine creation in fact depends on bodies … It is insofar as it is brought back to its body that the mind acquires immortality,

the resurrection of bodies being the condition of the survival of the mind"
(Deleuze, 2004, p. 332). The attachment to the body that Christian eschatology
fosters reinforces the power of Christ's sacrifice and indeed of the sacrifices of
the numerous martyrs of the Catholic Church. The crucifixes hanging in
churches around the world remind the faithful that Christ's suffering was borne
also so as to safeguard their own precious corporeal form, and not only their
metaphysical state.

Addressing the discourse that surrounds the public execution, of which the
crucifixion of Christ is of course an example, Michel Foucault argues that "it is
to be understood not only as a judicial, but also as a political ritual. It belongs,
even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested"
(1977/1995, p. 47). Indeed it is the public exhibition of the criminal and their
tortured, mutilated and eventually lifeless body that demonstrates not only
power over the criminal, but implicitly power over the spectator were they ever
to be seen to have transgressed themselves. However, the spectator, by being
given the power to create the spectacle of condemnation, also possesses the
power to reverse perceived guilt – if not necessarily to commute sentences –
and to turn the condemned into a hero or martyr (cf. ibid., pp. 57–65). Such is
the case with Christ, whose exposed body, bloodied on the Cross, was
intended to assert the power of the Roman law, but instead was taken up as a
symbol of his dominion, an act of revolutionary defiance reiterated down the
centuries in the mutilation of martyrs from the severed breasts of Saint Agatha
to the arrow-pierced body of Saint Sebastian.

The discussion of Bouguereau's *Pietà* above focused on the aspects of the
Virgin that are legible in the painting: she is protective, hugging her son's pale

corpse close, and so it is the Virgin, more than the body of Christ that reaches out to the viewer. However, in Streich's *Pietà* it is – at least initially – the crucified body of Christ, represented by the mutilated body of the cello, that is placed in the foreground. When the tortured body is presented publicly, the spectator of course sympathizes by mapping the traces of torture onto their own bodies, and with the gesture they pass through a space of universalized bodies – the idea of the body that allows them to see in bodies of others, allegories of their own bodies. This idealization is also in play, if less dramatically, in approaching the socialized conceptions of what an instrument is. The cello in Streich's *Pietà* is still a cello. Despite its apparent mutilation through incision, addition and subtraction, it remains the body of a cello, and the viewer is able to sense the tension introduced by the metaphorical torture that the instrument body has undergone.

Writing of his own cello work, *Pression*, Helmut Lachenmann underscored that the "beautiful" sound of the instrument as fetishized by a bourgeois society is the product of a repression of effort and resistance as categories of sound production (1996, p. 381). He sees the array of playing techniques employed in that work as ways of foregrounding instead the performer's effort, by introducing sounds where the sounding result is minimal in relation to the effort – a reversal of the traditional ideal of a warm, rich tone produced effortlessly. This reversal is therefore a redistribution of the power balance in play in the spectacle of performance, liberating the work of the performer from the bourgeois desire to repress its importance. However, Lachenmann's instrument remains unaltered: while the player's actions actualize previously unexplored potentialities, the space delimited by the traditional body of the cello can be said to have contained these potentialities since its inception. Streich's violent intervention in this space on the other hand preserves these potentialities to a

great extent, but also opens a new series of potentialities tied to the action of motors and amplification.

In his work on the painting of Francis Bacon, Deleuze posits an understanding of the creative process in which a formal violence he terms the 'catastrophe' engenders the opening of new potentialities "like the emergence of another world", citing Bacon himself who describes how this "unlocks areas of sensation" (2005, pp. 71–2). Deleuze stresses that while catastrophe suggests unbridled violence and upheaval, "the violent methods must not be given free reign, and the necessary catastrophe must not submerge the whole," because it "is a possibility of fact – it is not the fact itself" (ibid., p. 77). Given this, we might understand the reconfiguration of the potentialities in Streich's cello in precisely these terms: the symbolic torture (catastrophe) that is applied to the instrument body generates a field of possibilities whose tension derives both from their catastrophic relationship with the instrument's original potentialities, and from the fact that this catastrophe involves the public exhibition of a bodily violence. Given the subject matter at hand, it is important to note that the Deleuze's proposal of the catastrophe as a creative force forms an elegant parallel with the critical catastrophe of Christianity. Christ is said to have died for the sins of mankind (1 Cor 15:3), so just as the Deleuzian catastrophe is the site of creation, the messiah's crucifixion is the site of salvation, marking again "the emergence of another world".

Much of this reflection has been a fairly visual assessment of the instrument as a carrier of symbolic content and it is interesting to turn to what happens in Streich's *Pietà* with the possibilities of "fact" established in the instrument. In the discussion above of Bouguereau's *Pietà*, we touched upon the strange

entanglement of sorrow and joy present in the Pietà trope, and it is this entanglement in particular that seems to provide an insight into how some kind of representation of the Pietà in a musical work is able to take shape. The entanglement of mourning and rejoicing in Mary at the crucifixion is directly tied to issues of matter and metaphysics – the mourning is for the tortured flesh; the rejoicing is for the liberated spirit – and it is this separation of worlds we find mirrored in the functioning of Streich's *Pietà*. As we have seen, the modified cello can be read as a site of violence, as the body of Christ, but this is above all legible in the visual and the possible rather than in the sounding result itself. Just like the catastrophe in Bacon's canvases, the catastrophe is generative but not of a representation of a catastrophe, it instead generates a new plane of possibilities. Here we can return to perception of the sonic expression in this work as "prayerful" or meditative.

Pietà is, for the most part, pervaded by a sense of calm. The gestures of both the cellist and the motors on the instrument body are measured and deliberate, taking time between events and rarely rushing. Repetition and iteration play a large part in maintaining this calm. Indeed repetition and small, local variation of this type can be seen as a performance of reflection or meditation – the slight change of an object in its restatement denoting small shifts in perspective as contemplation progresses. This calm series of iterations is most obvious in the held notes of the cello (whether high as in bb. 8, 21, 24–6 and 32, or lower as in bb. 11, 15, 17 and 24–5, as well as elsewhere). The holding of these and the reoccurrence of specific pitches, permit a movement towards a closer contemplation, transforming them from flat surfaces into detailed topographies. This pervading calm is interrupted, fairly abruptly, in the middle of the work by sharply accented, distorted gestures that seem to rend holes in the fine fabric of the piece (bb. 33–70), but even these sonic eruptions

are made to become objects of contemplation in their repetition, and this contemplation leads us back to the quietude of the work's opening.

bb.7–22 (cello part) from Lisa Streich's *Pietà*.
(Reproduced by permission of the composer)

The work's calm is also present in the mostly percussive material performed on the body of the cello by the four motors. Where in *Pietà*'s antecedent, *Joie*, the mechanical nature of the motors was exploited to build towards a machine-like vigour and volume, here it is restrained. There is a certain neatness to their markings on the instrument body. Although these are "the turning of the screws into the flesh", the violence that that image suggests, and that as we have seen is in some senses realized in the insertion of the motor as a foreign object into the body of the cello, is not translated into an acoustic phenomenon. Rather, the resultant sounds of the violation of the cello's body are in fact in direct opposition to that violence in the same way that the joy inherent in Mary's certainty of Christ's bodily resurrection is in opposition to her sorrow at his bodily death.

By way of conclusion, let us tie together how the entanglements that the Pietà trope brings with it when used as a referent could be understood as functioning in this specific Pietà. It seems fruitful to posit that this

entanglement of sorrow and joy is manifested in Streich's *Pietà* by dividing the work's multidimensional space into sectors differently aligned with these attitudes. One sector, enfolding relationships between the visual, the physical, and socialized conceptions of these, displays aspects of violence and sorrow in its treatment of the body of the cello and in the Pietà trope is most closely aligned with the body of Christ in its public exhibition of these violences. Another sector, formed mostly by the performed gesture and auditory phenomena, displays an abiding and a calm acceptance of the salvation precipitated in the crucifixion and this is aligned with Mary, whose role is not simply that of the weeping *Mater Dolorosa*, but as the individual whose privileged role as *Theotokos* permits her, and perhaps her alone, to access a certainty of and assurance in the resurrection and therefore the joyous aspect of the Pietà. These sectors are inseparable and in fact their complex of relationships continuously redefines the whole when subjected to contemplation, which is perhaps why it remains a rich vein for exploration.

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Bouguereau, W.-A. (1863) *Le baiser*, oil on canvas.

Bouguereau, W.-A. (1875) *Berceuse*, oil on canvas.

Bouguereau, W.-A. (1875) *La Vierge, L'Enfant Jésus et Saint Jean-Baptiste*, oil on canvas.

Bouguereau, W.-A. (1875) *La Vierge Consolatrice*, oil on canvas.

Bouguereau, W.-A. (1876) *Pietà*, oil on canvas.

Bouguereau, W.-A. (1888) *Vièrge et Enfant*, oil on canvas.

Bouguereau, W.-A. (1899) *Vièrge au Lys*, oil on canvas.