

Aldolphus Hailstork (b. 1941): Fanfare on “Amazing Grace” (2011)

Hailstork has said that a principal aim of his music is “to capture or reflect the tribulations and the occasional triumphs of African Americans in this country.” In that spirit, recent works include *America’s Requiem – A Knee on The Neck*, in memory of George Floyd, and *Rise for Freedom*, an opera about the Underground Railroad. Hailstork’s musical training began as a boy soprano singing in the church choirs of his youth and works for voice and choir became a particularly important part of his body of compositions. His teachers included Mark Fax, at Howard University, Nadia Boulanger (who also mentored a young Aaron Copland), David Diamond, at Manhattan School of Music, and H. Owen Reed at Michigan State University, where Hailstork received his doctorate in composition. Hailstork’s music is expressive and accessible. He places himself firmly in the populist camp of classical composers, writing music that he sees as a continuation of a tradition and a service to humanity:

You may remember, 10, 15, 20 years ago, they were saying the symphony orchestra’s dead. I hope that’s not the case, because I love the symphony orchestra. I think it’s a service. I once called music a service art, and that’s probably because growing up as a chorister, I was performing service. I was at the church with my little ruffled collar and my hymnbook and singing and that was part of the service. It’s a ceremonial aspect.

The ceremonial qualities of Hailstork’s music fully resonate in Fanfare on “Amazing Grace.” Initially scored for solo organ, he envisioned the work as a contemporary version of a Bach chorale prelude. Bach’s chorale preludes had reimagined Protestant hymns in complex musical arrangements, in which the familiar strains of a hymn would eventually surface from polyphonic interlocking parts. Hailstork does the same with “Amazing Grace,” with strains of the tune slowly emerging from a glorious texture of instruments. The festive solemnity of the work has made it a popular choice for ceremonial events. Performed in an arrangement written for the United States Marine Band at President Biden’s inauguration, it was only the second time that a work by a living African American composer had been selected for an inaugural ceremony.