

Saturday, June 18, 2011. Afternoon in Saint-Denis. (Ernie Malamud)

Saint Denis (sometimes spelled Dennis) in the third century was Bishop of Paris. He is venerated in the Roman Catholic Church as the patron saint of Paris. I left my apartment at 1500 and returned before midnight. Used line 13. Even though the Saint-Denis stop is in Zone 3, my Navigo card valid for Zones 1 and 2 worked fine both going and returning.

The Basilica.

The Cathedral Basilica of Saint Denis (*Cathédrale royale de Saint-Denis*, or simply *Basilique Saint-Denis*) is a large abbey church and is a spectacular 13th century gothic structure. It is the burial place of the French Kings, nearly every king from the 10th to the 18th centuries is buried there, as well as many from previous centuries. According to one of the signs there are 70 monarchs (and only 3 elsewhere). So it includes Louis XIV (of l'Observatoire de Paris fame), Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, both beheaded, and of course many more. The Basilica plays a similar role as Westminster Abbey in London and is therefore often referred to as the "royal necropolis of France." There are marble statues of all these monarchs, lying down, of course, on top of what one supposes are their actual graves, although I think most of the graves were dug up during the French revolution and the bodies thrown into a pit. This beautiful structure also provided an architectural model for cathedrals and abbeys of northern France, England and other countries, and is prominently featured in the Ken Follett novel "Pillars of the Earth." One can see some of the cathedral for free, but to see the necropolis and the crypt, and get a real sense for the grandeur of the place, there is a modest 7€ admission fee.

Killing time before the concert began.

Well by 1630 or so I felt I had "seen" the basilica and the concert didn't begin until 2030. So I had time to kill. The concert was part of the Festival of Saint-Denis, a couple of weeks of classical music played either in the Basilica or in the large Legion of Honor hall next to it. So I wandered around the town. In the large town square outside the Basilica were groups of drummers, and also it seemed to be a place for weddings. There was a horse drawn carriage with the bride and groom seated inside, waiting for the car caravan to begin. There was a shopping mall, and further away many busy streets with throngs of people. The weather was changeable – nice blue sky, and then pouring rain and heavy wind, and then blue sky again. But I had my umbrella so was OK. I found a kiosk, bought a magazine and a newspaper, found a rather mediocre restaurant just outside the Basilica where I had a calamari snack and a couple of glasses of red wine. Finally it was 1930 and the ticket office opened. When I first got there I asked first at the Basilica, and then at the Tourist Office where I was directed, where to buy tickets for that night's concert. No one seemed to know, although the ticket office could be seen across the town square from the Tourist Office. For 30€ I got a ticket, in the middle of about the 15th row of probably a 30 row auditorium (not tiered but with a balcony) that seated about 500 people. I like to sit closer, especially for chamber music, but this was the best they had. The performance was nearly sold out!

The Concert.

The title of this concert was "Quatuor Pour La Fin du Temps" and there were two pieces on the program. The first, *Le Quintette pour clarinette et cordes* opus 115 de Johannes Brahms, was performed by soloists from l'Orchestra Philharmonique de Radio France. The artists: Svetlin Roussev, violin, Ayako Tanaka, violin, Jerome Voisin, clarinet, Christophe Gague, viola, and Eric Levionnois, cello.

After the break (and there were spacious grounds outside the building where one could walk around), they performed *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, (Quartet for the End of Time) by the French composer Olivier Messiaen. For this piece, the pianist was Myung-When Chung (evidently a well known conductor;

several of the other concerts were led by him), and joined by the violin, clarinet and cello. I had heard excerpts from it at one of the Petite Panache concerts (in Nevada City) and still remembered how impressed I was with the music. I'm usually not that fond of very modern music. But this is quite different. Here they perfumed the whole thing; it's quite long and lasts nearly an hour.

I found the following interesting background on the web page of the Conservatory of Music at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin:

Messiaen's most significant composition, the Quartet for the End of Time, received its premiere performance on January 15, 1941 under extraordinary and unusual circumstances. Messiaen wrote the work while a captive in a German prisoner of war camp during World War Two. That camp was the Stalag VIII A, located near the town of Görlitz-Moys in Silesia, Germany. During the course of his captivity, Messiaen met three fellow prisoners who were also accomplished musicians: Etienne Pasquier, a world-class cellist who had already secured an international reputation as a member of the Pasquier Trio; Jean Le Boulaire, a violinist who had studied at the Paris Conservatory; and Henri Akoka, a clarinetist who was a member of the Paris-based Orchestre National de la Radio. Accordingly, Messiaen scored his quartet for violin, cello, clarinet, and piano, and these four prisoners gave the piece that first performance in 1941 before an audience largely consisting of other prisoners of war. The performance took place in one of the prison barracks that had been converted into a makeshift theater, and with Messiaen playing on an old upright piano. The quartet exemplifies all of the principal characteristics mentioned above, drawing upon plainchant, imitating birdsongs, using irregular rhythmic patterns, and above all serving as a profound expression of Messiaen's Catholic faith: the title refers to a passage in the book of Revelation, where an angel announces "there will be no more time."

The concert notes in the program added that the cello at the initial performance only had 3 strings and several of the keys on the upright piano were broken.

An interesting observation. The majority of the people on the streets in Saint-Denis are black. And there are lots of head scarves too. Some on really lovely young beauties. What compels them to cover their hair? But anyway, in this full auditorium in the center of Saint-Denis I saw only one black couple and one head scarf. Perhaps the 30€ is off-putting?

The audience gave the Messiaen a very enthusiastic response – many “curtain” calls. But no encores. Actually with this unusual combination of instruments (and also with two artists who performed in the Brahms but not in the Messiaen, and may have gone home by them) it would be difficult to have an encore with this unusual combination of instruments. How much music has been composed for these combinations? So if they had played an encore(s) it would have had to be with only some of the musicians, not the full ensemble.