



Path of Miracles – Further Reading

The world's most enduring route of Catholic pilgrimage was first formally acknowledged as such by Bishop Diego Gelmirez in the early 12th Century, but it has always belonged to a wider fellowship even than the Catholic church. Long before the body of St James was discovered in Iria Flavia in the early 9th Century, and brought to its final resting place in Santiago; before the Saint even began his life of service, first as an apostle, and later as a preacher in Spain, the 'Camino Frances' was under construction. Part of the route still runs along the sturdy Roman roads which were used to subdue and colonise northern Iberia. To the pre-Christians, this road followed the path of the Milky Way, and took its travellers to the end of the earth. Centuries later, it was used by the Moors to reach Spain's northern outposts, only to be pushed back along it by Charlemagne, and served as an arterial route for the establishment of the Roman Rite and the purging of its Hispanic predecessor. Today it is used by tourists, travellers and explorers, as well as by confirmed Catholics and the spiritually curious.

The musical traditions of the Pilgrimage can be traced to the mid-12th Century, when a compilation of texts attributed to Pope Calixtus II was created, all devoted to the cult of St James. This so-called 'Codex Calixtinus' was specifically designed to serve the needs of worshippers and pilgrims in Santiago, and consisted of five books. The first volume contains liturgical settings, including those for the two feast days devoted to St James: the Feast of the Passion of St James on the 25th of July, and the Feast of Translation of the Apostles remains on the 30th of December. The second and third volumes describe the 22 miracles of St James and the journey of the Saint's body to Santiago. Book Four recounts Charlemagne's defeat of the Moors in Spain, and the final volume leads the would-be pilgrim through the routes, dangers and customs of the pilgrimage. Of comparable importance to all this is an appendix which contains music composed using a technique which was just beginning to gain a foothold in certain parts of Europe at this time. Notwithstanding the fact that it rarely uses more than two voices, this is a highly significant collection of polyphony. And here, within this final section of the Codex, can be found the most famous of Jacobean chants - the Dum Pater Familias. It is this hymn which establishes the universality of the cult of St James, interspersing Latin verses in praise of the Saint with a multilingual refrain representing the many languages heard on the road to his shrine:

*Herr Santiago, Grot Santiago,
Eultreya esuseya, Deus aia nos.*

The 'Camino Frances' is the central axis of a network of pilgrimage routes to Santiago. Its travellers gather in Roncesvalles, a small town at the foot of the Pyrenees which in the spring becomes a veritable Babel as pilgrims from across the world assemble, before setting off in a southwesterly direction. The pilgrims carry a special passport - often this is one of the only possessions not discarded on the journey - and engage in the 850 - year - old tradition of following the yellow arrows and seeking out the images of shells placed over pilgrim - friendly boarding houses. On the way, they stop off at any of a large number of shrines, most important among which are the cathedrals of Burgos and Leon, and at the foot of an iron cross near Astorga they may cast a stone from their homeland. The road takes them across the desert lands between Burgos and Leon and the rainy, hilly terrain of Galicia: and as the landscape transforms, so does the pilgrim. A pilgrim writes:

www.tenebrae-choir.com

You have left behind the life you lived before... Dates become meaningless; a day is merely the passing of the sun from one hand to the other, from behind you to in front... Then you slough off your worries. There is only one thing to worry about now and that is whether you and your feet will last the day.

© Andrea Kirby, 1996

Somewhere between 50 and 200 thousand people arrive at the gates of Santiago's Cathedral each year, at least eighty percent of them on foot. A good number of these continue on to Capo di Finisterre, a further 85 kilometres to the west, to reach what Europeans pre-Columbus considered to be the end of all westward journeys. An item of clothing is placed on a beach-fire to symbolise the old life left behind.

The four movements of *Path of Miracles* are titled with the names of the four main staging posts of the Camino Frances, though the textual themes within the movements extend beyond the mere geographical. Throughout the work, quotations from various mediaeval texts (principally the Codex Calixtinus and a 15th Century work in the Galician language - *Miragres de Santiago*) are woven together with passages from the Roman liturgy, and lines of poetry from Robert Dickinson, the work's librettist. Talbot introduces his work with a vocal effect based on the Bunun aboriginal 'Pasiputput' from Taiwan, in which low voices rise in volume and pitch over an extended period, creating random overtones as the voices move into different pitches at fluctuating rates. After a dramatic exclamation of the pilgrim's hymn from *Dum Pater Familias*, the beheading of St James by the sword of King Herod is briefly described in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Basque, French, English and German, initially sung by a lone countertenor rising above the choir's sustained chord clusters. An account of the discovery of the Saint's body in Compostella follows, some eight hundred years after his death in Jerusalem and the subsequent translation of his body on a rudderless boat made of stone.

The insistent discords of the second movement reflect both the hardships of the road, keenly felt by this time after some initial euphoria in Roncesvalles, and the composer's own sense of discomfort on visiting Burgos.

The music trudges uneasily through this most awkward part of the journey, stopping regularly to recover breath and ease feet. There are stern warnings of human mischief and inhuman devilry, interspersed with musings on the mystical nature of the Saint's translation. Robbery, lynching and illness are the least of a pilgrim's problems; for just as the Saint can take the form of a pilgrim, so can the devil himself take the form of a Saint. As the laments and the warnings subside, the movement concludes with a line from Psalm 61, delivered in desolate, motionless tones from the lower voices: 'A finibus terrae ad te clamavi' - From the end of the earth I cry to you.

Joby Talbot describes the third movement as a 'Lux Aeterna'; and like the interior of the magnificent Cathedral of Leon, it is bathed in light. The journey is more than half complete, the pain barrier has been crossed and the pilgrim's worries have indeed been sloughed off. A mediaeval French refrain, an ode to the sun in the key of C minor, punctuates simple observations of land traversed and hardships overcome. As with the previous movement, there is a steady, almost hypnotic walking pulse, but the steps have lost their heaviness. By the end of the movement the verses have arrived in the relative major, fused with the refrain which retains its original key. Mystical events are again spoken of, but this time with no sense of danger. Even the relentless sun, though it may dazzle, does not burn.

Meanwhile in Galicia the temperature cools, the altitude rises and the rain falls. Towns pass by like shadows as the road seems to climb and climb, though Leon's contented mood lingers. There seems no doubt that the journey will end, and at the first sight of Santiago, miles down from the summit of Monte de Gozo, the music initially draws inward, before bursting out in an explosion of joy. The pilgrim's hymn is heard again, performed with the reverence and reflection of one who has finished such a long journey, and is quickly transformed into a spring revel from the *Carmina Burana*.

Path of Miracles, like so many pilgrimages, does not finish in Santiago. The journey to Finisterre, to where the walls of heaven are thin as a curtain, has a reflective, epilogic tone, a benign hangover from the party in Santiago. Here the pilgrim's hymn is heard for a final time, now in English, endlessly repeating and disappearing over the horizon.

© Gabriel Crouch