

Composer Portraits
Luigi Dallapiccola

Continuum
Cheryl Seltzer and Joel Sachs, directors

Miller Theatre at Columbia University
2960 Broadway at 116th Street
New York, N.Y. 10027

Thursday, February 23, 8:00 P.M.

Having only a passing acquaintance with the music of Luigi Dallapiccola, (his opera *Il prigioniero*, and a few shorter pieces) I eagerly anticipated becoming more familiar through the wonderfully challenging and provocative programming of the Miller Theatre. The theme string that runs through many of Dallapiccola's works is human liberty and equality and it's subjection at the hands of totalitarian regimes and individuals. Beautifully expressed with a lyricism that belies the more astringent qualities of most serial or twelve-tone composition, his opera *The Prisoner*, is an emotionally gripping work that shakes an empathetic listener to the core while ravishing the ear with legato lines and linear musical motifs. It's impossible not to be affected by that work in some fashion in performance. This evening's music and performances revealed to me that Dallapiccola's music is of a kind in his combination of lyric lines fused to the most rigorous twelve-toned compositional techniques. This was one of the most satisfying Composer Portrait's I've had the pleasure to sit through.

The evening began with a chamber music arrangement of a full orchestral piece, *Piccola musica notturna*. The work is prefaced by a poem of Antonio Machado, (not recited or printed in the program), *Summer Night*, depicting a gentle evening in a small village. Conductor Joel Sachs elicited gorgeous textures from his small ensemble, drawing a feeling of ethereal sensuousness from the translucent scoring. This is a luminously lush work with slightly apprehensive moments in the music.

Soprano Lucy Shelton performed the Goethe Lieder with accompaniment from three clarinets. Moran Katz, E-flat; David Gresham, B-flat and Benjamin Fingland, bass clarinet. I had learned that Ms. Shelton had been struggling with a cold prior to performance but gamely went on with the show, displaying virtually no ill effects whatsoever. She is a major artist with wealth of experience, who was able to negotiate any discomforts with relative ease. A minor blip here and there on two of the extremely demanding octave or more leaps that Dallapiccola demands in this work, but otherwise her intonation, legato and line were exemplary. Her text readings of these slightly ambiguous lyrics were dramatically excellent and she conveyed the sense of psychological struggle inherent in the text. Both singer and accompanists provided music making and theatricality of the highest order.

Violinist Airi Yoshioka and founding member of Continuum, pianist Cheryl Seltzer, performed *Due Studi*, (two studies) with flair and consummate musicianship bringing out the neo-romantic elements of the Saraband in an expressively chromatic dialogue. The piano part was less rudimentary and more assertive in the Fanfare and Fugue and Ms. Yoshioka was able to convey the dual nature of her violin parts sweetness and acerbity with aplomb.

Joel Sachs conducted a fuller chamber ensemble for "*Sicut umbra dies nostri sunt super terram*", a Latin translation from the Book of Job meaning "As a shadow are our days upon the earth." The grouping of instruments is in ternary format, three flutes, clarinets and strings joined by harp, celesta and vibraphone. Singing the poem settings was a graduate student from Juilliard, mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke. The instrumental ensemble navigated the intricacies of the transparent scoring with descriptive deliciousness. Delicious too was the effulgent tonal quality of Ms. Cooke's singing. It was simply ravishing with gorgeous tone and a rich vibrancy that exquisitely captured all

of the nuances of the text. Ms. Cooke, with the requisite amount of luck and in the right hands could have a major career.

Ms. Seltzer returned after intermission to perform the large-scale work *Sonatina Canonica* in E-flat major (On Caprices of Niccolò Paganini). Franz Liszt most famously had transcribed these paragons of violin technique previously, as well as a handful of other composers. Dallapiccola's "take" was to utilize a healthy dose of canonic form to convey his ideas. Ms. Seltzer brought out the lovely melodic motif of the opening movement to great effect. The second movement enjoys the largest bulk of canon and its finger twisting demands were well met. This movement leads into a beautiful unfolding melody in the third section, which in turn lends its melodic fecundity in a balancing between lyricism and rather stringent harmonics in the fourth movement. The entire piece ended with wonderfully dense chromatic scoring.

Rencesvals (Three Fragments from The Song of Roland) is scored for solo baritone with piano accompaniment. The piano part is highly expressive in not only underscoring the text and singer but in its equal partnership in conveying a sense of urgency and drama. Ms. Seltzer finely conveyed her end of the bargain. Baritone James Martin although giving a highly dramatic reading to this expressive music failed to deliver a tone of utmost vocal assurance. Perhaps he was having an off night or fighting a cold of his own.

The final work of the evening found the entire Continuum contingent on stage under the baton of Mr. Sachs for *Concerto per la notte di Natale dell'anno 1956*. This is an ironic work stemming from Dallapiccola's commission from the Rameau Chamber Music Society of Japan for a Christmas work. The piece is sectional with a Prologue, an Intermezzo and an Epilogue and two Hymns set in between the instrumental movements, with texts by the 13th century religious poet Jacopo da Todi. The irony involved arises from Dallapiccola's setting of these paens to God and brotherly love as a *Cri de Coeur*. The Prologue is spare and canonical, with none of the full ensemble playing all together but answering each other instead with nuance and sparse outpourings. The first Hymn is then sung in homage to God but the writing belies its prayerful quality with wide intervallic leaps and anguished tension. The Intermezzo feels like a whirl of chaos that blushes into effervescence. The second Hymn follows begging for Christ-like redemptive love, in an outpouring of anguish and bitterness. The Epilogue ends the work not with jubilation but with regret. Dallapiccola wrote this work in a year that saw the Suez War and the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution by the Red Army. Soprano Camille Zamora sang the first Hymn with a chirpy tone that didn't navigate the wide octave leaps appealingly. The second Hymn revealed a white quality to her singing with a lack of full body or color. Her commitment to the text was admirable but she appeared rhythmically tense.

John Hammel, Mozart To Motorhead Show Saturday mornings 9 A.M. to 12 Noon

www.homegrownradionj.com