

## 3 engaging new works for voice and string quartet



Temple University's Maurice Wright offered "To Kiss the Earth," an 11-song cycle powerfully sung by baritone William Stone. (RYAN S. BRANDENBERG)

### Lyric Fest premieres compositions by Allen Krantz, Curt Cacioppo, and Maurice Wright.

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

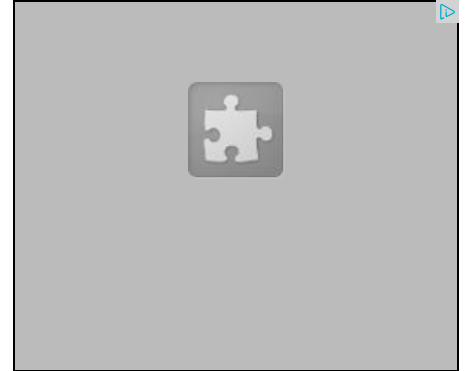
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Most music lovers can count the number of works they know for voice and string quartet on one hand, but are likely to know each one by heart, whether Vaughan Williams' *On Wenlock's Edge* or Barber's *Dover Beach*. To this under-explored medium, the compulsively enterprising Lyric Fest brought into being three new works that could be taken to heart immediately at their Saturday premieres at Philadelphia University.

All three composers took similar approaches. Piano accompaniments to vocal works tend to be extremely active in externalizing the meaning of the verses at hand. But Allen Krantz, Curt Cacioppo, and Maurice Wright, all composers with well-defined personalities, tended to create poetically atmospheric backdrops with the Ravenhill String Quartet and leave much of the expressive specificity to the vocal lines.

Cacioppo's *Volgi, Beatrice* inevitably felt truncated - it's part of a larger work - but stood apart from the others by presenting text from Dante's *Inferno* in beautifully arched vocal lines with some harmonic dissonances appropriate to the subject, reminiscent of the mid-20th century Italian composer Luigi Dallapiccola.

The other two works took a more declamatory approach to the vocal lines, allowing maximum flexibility to explore the expressive specificity of the texts. Krantz's *Little Elegy With Books and Beasts* had words by Nancy Willard, written in memory of the children's book illustrator Martin Provensen, and employing the directness and clarity of metaphor that one sees in that genre of literature.



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It worked like a charm. The verses created an immediate visceral connection with the listener. Cats and geese were characterized with little musical upheavals acknowledging their chaotic nature. The winter landscapes had spare pizzicato writing and lots of little figures that led nowhere, like trees that suddenly make less poetic sense when left without their leaves. Soprano Elizabeth Weigle was a charming, articulate presence in both works.

Wright's *To Kiss the Earth* is an 11-song cycle based on the diaries of the late Bauhaus artist Marguerite Wildenhain, written in her 20s upon the death of master potter Max Krehan. It prompted complex reactions: Should any diary be so enshrined? Wright's music gave a kind of dignity to the emotional rawness. The seventh song, "I went to hear Mozart," had Mozartean instrumental lines, but given the circumstances of the grieving protagonist, the lines didn't mesh with anything resembling Mozartean grace.

Between songs, more diary entries were read. They tended to compete with the music, with words that were less filtered, less mature, a bit grandiose, and attempted something futile: Framing unruly emotions with mere words. One hopes that future performances will have only music.

Veteran baritone William Stone (now on the Academy of Vocal Arts faculty) spearheaded the project, and he still commands plenty of vocal resources, giving a powerful account of Wright's music. It's a Cadillac voice: Not the easiest thing to maneuver, but luxurious, enveloping, solid, and secure.

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