

Lyric Fest's 'American Poets in Song'

Tom Purdom

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Made in America

TOM PURDOM

Langston Hughes's poem *Silhouette* is addressed to a "gentle, Southern lady." She shouldn't swoon, Hughes advises the distressed woman, even though "They've just hung a black man by the light of the moon." She should remember, instead, that they've shown the world how Dixie protects its white womanhood.

The poem is a

powerful 50-word exercise in irony, and composer John Musto doubled the effect when he set it to music and gave Hughes's words a gentle, crooning melody.

Lyric Fest devoted its latest Sunday afternoon program to poems by American poets set by American composers. The program packed 31 items into a standard two-hour concert, and every selection met my primary test for song settings: The music always added something extra to the words. Sometimes the composers just added a simple melody. In other cases, they placed the words in a new light.

The setting for one of my favorite poems was a good example of the second approach. When I read Edna St. Vincent Millay's "We were very happy, we were very merry, we had gone back and forth all night on the ferry," I hear a quiet, level voice nostalgically recalling a type of urban experience most of us enjoy at some point. John Musto composed the setting for this one, too, and he approached the text from a completely different angle. His setting turned the poem into a swingy 1930s nightclub number that soprano Leslie Johnson sang with just the right suggestion of a hip toss. Musto's music fit the period the poem was written in, and it gave me a new take on Millay's words.

An unappreciated genre

Poetry settings are one of the favorite pastimes of contemporary composers, but I suspect most concertgoers are unaware of the sheer volume of the song settings American composers have produced. I didn't appreciate the scope of the genre until I became a critic 18 years ago and began attending most of the new music, chamber music and song programs held in the city. The Lyric Fest program was the most comprehensive sampling that a knowledgeable program designer could crowd into a single concert. The poets represented on the program included Walt Whitman, James Agee, Robert Frost, E.E. Cummings, Tennessee Williams, Frank O'Hara, Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gertrude

Stein, and Bob Dylan. Emily Dickinson—the American poet who has attracted the most composers—received a separate section, with five items. The composers included Charles Ives, Samuel Barber, Andre Previn, William Bolcom, Elliot Carter, Ned Rorem, Kurt Weil and John Corigliano.

Lyrics Fest's organizers can assemble this kind of encyclopedia because they can call on a roster of local vocalists. Most art song programs feature one singer with an accompanist. Lyric Fest fielded seven for this session, so each singer only had to master about four songs.

One of the vocalists was special guest Paul Sperry, a personable tenor who has become a champion of American music while pursuing a career that includes CDs of standard European composers, such as Schubert and Poulenc. Sperry has premiered more than 30 works by American composers, including two lengthy pieces he unveiled with the New York Philharmonic in collaboration with Maestros Bernstein and Mehta.

Beethoven's barking dog

Lyric Fest's programs always include some comedy turns, as a good art song event should. My favorite this time around was a Paul Sperry routine called *Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in My House*, with words by poet Billy Collins and music by Tom Cipullo. The poet's theme is a dog that starts barking every time his neighbors leave their house. He tries to drown it out by playing a Beethoven symphony, and the song ends with the piano playing snatches of the *Ode to Joy* theme while the tenor celebrates Beethoven's "famous barking dog solo, / the endless coda that first established/Beethoven as an innovative genius."

It was a great piece of American zaniness and it wouldn't have been half as funny if Sperry had sung it in a foreign language and I had followed a translation

printed in the program. We Americans may not have produced an art song genius equal to Franz Schubert, but our composers have given us shelves of songs, written in our own language, that capture our distinctive experiences and express our eternal irrepressible quirkiness.



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ARTICLE OVERVIEW

The Lyric Fest song series surveys the huge library of songs based on American poetry created by American composers. Every selection met my primary test for song settings: The music always added something extra to the words.

Lyric Fest: American Poets in Song. Timothy Bentch, Suzanne DuPlantis, Leslie Johnson, Randi Marrasso, Randall Scarlata, Elizabeth Weigle, Paul Sperry, vocalists; Laura Ward, piano. April 15, 2007 at First Presbyterian Church, 21st and Walnut.

ABOUT TOM PURDOM



Tom Purdom (tompurdom@verizon.net) is a science fiction writer and general freelance writer who has been writing about music since 1988.

