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Lyric Fest song cycles at AVA, variation on a Schubert theme

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By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

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New song cycles spinning off the greatest one of all - Schubert's *Winterreise* - might seem like creative futility. Not for Andrea Clearfield and Daron Hagen, the two composers who were commissioned by Lyric Fest to take their own winter journeys Sunday at the Academy of Vocal Arts, on very different paths away from the unflinchingly direct simplicity of Schubert's starting point.

Philadelphia's Clearfield long has exhibited great curiosity about musical worlds beyond those taught in conservatories. Her piece, *The Drift of Things*; *Winter Songs*, employed poets from Robert Frost to the contemporary Mary Kancewick meditating on endings, storms, and loneliness.

Nearly all the songs felt like through-composed ariosos, allowing Clearfield the elbow room to have texts spoken, whispered, and declaimed by mezzo-soprano Katherine Pracht and the wonderful baritone Randall Scarlata. But not until the last three songs did she truly bore deep into the meaning of the text with full-fisted piano writing (well-handled by Laura Ward) and vocal lines of considerable literary sensitivity. Schubert was echoed in the quirky, repeating melodies heard in her setting of the Friedrich Hölderlin poem "Half of Life."

While Clearfield's piece was the more outwardly impressive, Hagen's *After Words* for soprano and tenor was more deeply insinuating, more Italianate in its vocal lines, and with a launch point that hooked you before the piece began: The six songs were dialogues between two angels, happily recalling Hindemith's cycle *Das Marienleben* for its poetic, personal, anti-iconographic contemplation of the sacred.

With their bird's-eye perspectives, the angels observed life and death (such as the hurdy-gurdy man described in *Winterreise*), asking existential questions that humans do when not too busy running around living. Playful at times, each song had inner emotional intensity, creating a world you didn't want to leave.

The laudably text-attentive soprano Justine Aronson had a bright voice that turned a bit brittle when pushed. Joseph Gaines, brought in on short notice when the original singer canceled, completely embodied the music with his light tenor, committing body and soul to the music in ways one rarely sees.

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