

# Lyric Fest presents 'Dear March - Come In!'

A medley of female voices, genus Americana

Tom Purdom for The Broad Street Review - April 03, 2014



Lyric Fest's season finale presented 23 songs based on poems by American women poets. The subjects included family relationships and childhood memories, public matters like the AIDS crisis, and general concerns like our responses to the trials and limitations of our lives. The musical styles included touches of folk and blues, and a rat-a-tat nonsense style that Ned Rorem adapted for his setting of a poem describing a mental ward.

Seven poems were written by Emily Dickinson, the American poet who has attracted the most attention from composers, but the lineup included Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Wharton, Dorothy Parker,

Gertrude Stein, and a number of living poets who labor in the obscure corners reserved for the modern practitioners of their craft.

It was, in short, a typical Lyric Fest variety show. If you weren't happy with the item you were hearing at the moment, you knew you would hear something different in three or four minutes.

Six contemporary composers contributed new works commissioned for this program. Their chosen texts ranged from Daron Hagen's settings for four Emily Dickinson poems to Maurice Wright's setting of a poem that a "young Negro girl" named Virginia Robinson brought into a WPA office sometime in the '30s.

The guest star of the event was Kiera Duffy, a soprano who has been developing an international reputation in the opera world. Opera stars often have trouble adapting to the more understated style required by art song, and there were times when I felt she could have delivered her big notes with more restraint. But overall she proved she could produce the nuances and shadings art song requires. She got everything just right when she sang the premiere of Benjamin C. S. Boyle's setting of Edith Wharton's "Patience" — an autumnal ode to the virtue that fills the void when "one by one life's phantom joys depart."

Motherwit - The other female guest artist, Elizabeth Shammash, has an exceptionally beautiful mezzo voice and a perfectly modulated art song style. One of the high points of the afternoon was her collaboration with one of Lyric Fest's founders, mezzo Suzanne DuPlantis. The text for their collaboration, Charlene Baldridge's poem "Motherwit," was a mature woman's reflections on her conflicts with her mother. Composer Jake Heggie enhanced the poem by turning it into a poignant dialogue, with the two mezzos singing the same words of regret and forgiveness before their voices merged in a long wordless duet.

Another Lyric Fest regular, baritone Randall Scarlata, combined the art song and operatic styles when he sang Irving Berlin's setting of Emma Lazarus's "New Colossus" ("Give me your tired, your poor. . ."). Scarlata sang the famous words twice, first as a tender invitation, then as a grand triumph.

I felt guest tenor Joseph Gaines overacted when he sang the more emotional parts of Daron Hagen's Emily Dickinson settings, but his style made him a perfect fit for wilder items like Ned Rorem's visit to the mental ward.

The concert ended with Gaines singing John Musto's setting of an eight-line dissertation on suicide by Dorothy Parker. "Résumé" runs through the drawbacks of various suicide methods — "Razors pain you; Rivers are damp; Acids stain you; And drugs cause cramp" — and concludes "You might as well live."

It may seem like an odd choice for a finale, but it closed the show with an appropriate final stroke — an affirmation of life wrapped in a wry, wisecracking, very American style. The fact that it was written by a wry, wisecracking American woman added extra complexities to the emotional overtones. One of the promises implied in Emma Lazarus's poem was the emergence of women like Dorothy Parker.