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Composer David Garner presents art song in four languages at the Conservatory

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Last night's concert in the Faculty Artist Series at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM) featured the work of composer David Garner. Garner has been composing for over 30 years and has been teaching at SFCM since 1979. He has a particular interest in the theatrical, and many of his compositions are cycles or collections of songs.

The program he prepared for last night focused almost entirely in the vocal side of his portfolio. Furthermore, each of the four vocal selections was in a different language. This included one set in Persian, alongside the more familiar languages of German, Spanish, and English.

Of these works the most compelling was probably the set in German entitled *Phönix* (phoenix). These were settings of four poems by Rose Ausländer, born in Czernivtsi (a major Ukrainian city on the Romanian border, known as "Czernowitz" in both German and Yiddish) in 1901. Ausländer was part of a community of 60,000 Jews in this city and was one of only 5000 to survive the Holocaust. She became an American citizen, during which time she wrote only in English, and moved to Germany in the Sixties.

Phönix was composed on a commission by the Jewish Music and Poetry Project and was given its



courtesy of Chamber Music America

first performance at the beginning of this month in a recital in the Old First Concerts series at Old First Church. It was presented last night by the same performers, soprano Nanette McGuinness and pianist Dale Tsang-Hall. As might be guessed, the phoenix of the title refers to the Jewish people who survived the Holocaust; but all four poems in the set have a decidedly dark quality. Garner served this quality well with a rhetoric highly reminiscent of expressionist practices in Vienna, particularly in the period between the two World Wars; and McGuinness captured that rhetoric effectively in her delivery of the texts.

In addition, by way of an “overture,” Tsang-Hall performed three solo piano etudes that Garner composed between 1991 and 1993 (revising the third, “Dodecahedron” in 2012). These were technically demanding compositions, distinguished particularly by the diversity of approaches to rhythm. Garner was particularly imaginative in weaving eccentric rhythms around straightforward metric patterns. Tsang-Hall displayed a solid command of these eccentricities, even when they were deployed across the full breadth of the keyboard.

Spanish was represented in a setting of the six *Viñetas Flamencas* (flamenco vignettes) poems by Federico Garcia Lorca. Three of the poems evoke the chanting qualities of musicians that Lorca knew, Silverio Franconetti, Juan Breva, and La Parrala; and all six are predominantly melancholic. This made for a particularly fascinating complement to the *Ausländer* cycle, since the mournful chant-like style of flamenco vocalization is but one example of how **the “nigun” form of Hasidic chant can be found in other cultures**, both European and Asian.

The music was set for tenor (Mark Hernandez), piano (Kristin Pankonin), and wind quintet (Esther Landau on flute, Laura Reynolds on oboe, Roy Zajac on clarinet, Zachary Limacher on horn, and Carla Wilson on bassoon). This was a somewhat odd approach to instrumentation, although the sonorities of the wind quintet always seemed to match the spirit of the texts. Less fortunate was Hernandez’ performance, which tended to lack the lighter qualities one associates with the Spanish tenor voice and ended up sounding more forced than passionate.

To some extent Hernandez’ weakness may have involved uncertainty in pitch. Garner tends to work with bold interval contours that are not always particularly conducive to conventional vocal practices. Thus, uncertainty of pitch was also a problem for soprano Raeeka Shehabi-Yaghmai in her performance of Garner’s arrangements of six traditional Persian songs. Shehabi-Yaghmai clearly caught the spirit of these songs and may have known many of them in their original form. However, the accompaniment of piano (Pankonin) and cello (Adaiha Macadam-Somer) added a layer of textural complexity above which Shehabi-Yaghmai’s voice did not always prevail. More support came from the drumming by Shahab Paranj, which definitely added rhythmic energy to the

music but could not take on matters of intonation.

The greatest disappointment was the performance of three songs in English from a rock opera work-in-progress by Garner and mezzo Crystal Philippi. Philippi performed these songs in flamboyant costume, backed by Garner on keyboards, Brian Jones on electric guitar, Ted Gould on electric bass, John Hollis on drums, and Paranj providing additional percussion. As might be guessed, things got loud, but never aggravatingly so. Unfortunately, Philippi's diction left much to be desired. With all of her dramatic histrionics, even with the assistance of her microphone, she could not muster the diction to make more than a few of her words coherent. If these songs were intended to support a narrative, one hopes that, by the time the entire project has completed, that narrative will get a bit more attention.



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