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David Garner presents songs in three languages with mixed results

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Last night in the Caroline H. Hume Concert Hall, the [San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#) presented a [Faculty Artist Series](#) recital by composer (and alumnus, Class of '79) David Garner. The first half of the program offered three song cycles, each with texts in a different language and each taking a different approach to instrumentation. The second half involved a preview of a work-in-progress, the full-length [opera](#) *Mary Pleasant at Land's End*.

Garner seemed most comfortable when he was working in the English language, the language of the final cycle in the first half of the program. Entitled *Jump, I will catch you*, the cycle was a setting of five poems by Bay Area resident Judith Masur. This piece was given its first performance last night, and Masur was on hand for the occasion. The vocalist was mezzo Crystal Philippi (class of '08); and she was accompanied by the rather unique trio of cornet (Kevin McLaughlin, switching to trumpet for the final song), harp (Emily Laurance), and bass (Stephen Tramontozzi).

As a wordsmith Masur seems to respect Buckminster Fuller's injunction that we should make more and more with less and less. She knows how to use her words sparingly, but the impressions she



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creates are in no way diminished by her sense of economy. Garner's approach to the music complemented Masur's discipline, using all three instruments sparingly with a rather unique take on a jazzy rhetoric. The one bit of excess required Philippi to supplement the words of "She likes to shimmy" with some of her own dance moves. This was clearly the brassiest moment in the cycle (perhaps explaining McLaughlin's shift to the bolder trumpet sounds); but it also left the listener with the most memorable sense of an ending.

Mein blaues Klavier (my blue piano) was the fourth and last piece that Garner wrote for the Jewish Music and Poetry Project (whose members have now regrouped as the Ensemble for These Times). It sets three poems by the German Jewish poet Else Lasker-Schüler, who was active in the Expressionist movement of the early twentieth century. Garner's music evokes memories of Arnold Schoenberg (who was also active in that movement) without ever suggesting imitation. Nevertheless, the texts of the poems emerge from a convoluted approach to musical rhetoric in such a way that they only really register if one can consult a text sheet. Soprano Nanette McGuinness (accompanied by Dale Tsang on piano and Laura Gaynon on cello) deftly negotiated Garner's convolutions; but there was some sense that she had not yet managed to deliver the words in a manner that reflected what the music was trying to do.

On the other hand the seriousness of *Mein blaues Klavier* registered more clearly than the six text settings of the opening selection, *Vilna Poems*. These were Yiddish verses by Avrom Sutzkever, sung by soprano Krista Wigle with accompaniment by Kevin Korth on piano, Roman Fukshansky on clarinet, and Evan Kahn on cello. As in the Masur settings, instrumentation did much to enhance the relationship between music and words. Indeed, any sense of Yiddishkeit in the performance could be attributed to the phrasings of both Fukshansky and Kahn. The vocal line, on the other hand, offered up the same sorts of embellished twists and turns that served Lasker-Schüler's texts.

One reason why the Sutzkever settings never quite found their impact may be that Wigle never quite took command of the Yiddish language. I have no idea how many good Yiddish vocal coaches there are in this city. However, thanks to the [Music at the Mishkan](#) chamber music series at [Congregation Sha'ar Zahav](#), I have come to appreciate [Sharon Bernstein](#)'s mastery of Yiddish phonemics, making it clear that the language is neither German nor Hebrew but a unique conglomerate unto itself. We may tend to think of Yiddish as a coarse language. However, the poets who wrote in the language clearly appreciated its subtleties; and Wigle never quite grasped the nature of those subtleties.

In all of these cases, however, Garner's command of working with language was best appreciated by following the text sheets he provided. Unfortunately, no such text material was provided for the

excerpts from *Mary Pleasant at Land's End*. This meant that only the interstitial narrations were delivered with comprehensible clarity. Philippi once again brought solid vocal technique to her performance; and her technique was excellently matched by soprano Julie Adams, tenor Michael Jankosky, and bass-baritone Philip Skinner. However, none of them ever managed a degree of diction required to convey the words they sang, leaving considerable uncertainty as to what kind of an opera *Mary Pleasant* was, what kind of story it wanted to tell, or why it wanted to tell it.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [The 2015–16 Faculty Artist series at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#)



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