

The Boston Musical Intelligen

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

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Cantata Singers' Confections Delight

by SUSAN MIRON

Friday night Cantata Singers' "Les Six," unfolded in ultra-comfortable digs at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge. Allison Voth, the Chamber Series Music Director, assembled a fascinating of four-hand piano works and songs, all of which were surprisingly (and delightfully) unfamiliar to both me and the Cantata Singers Music Director, David Hoose.

The French critic Henri Collet bestowed the "Les Six" moniker upon six young French composers active in Paris in the early 1920s: Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), Arthur Honegger (1892-1955), Francis Poulenc (1898-1963), Louis Durey (1888-1979), Georges Auric (1900-1983), and Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1982). Milhaud considered Eric Satie their mascot. Poulenc thought of Jean Cocteau as "our manager of genius, our poetic chronicler, our brilliant spokesman." As Anna Winestein explained in her program notes, the Six were

connected to each other by friendship and proximity but not a strongly aesthetically coherent movement. They were loosely mentored by Erik Satie and promoted by Collet and especially by the poet and art influencer Jean Cocteau as the Bright Young things of French music. Their compositional styles generally represented a reaction against the Romanticism of pre-War German music and a departure from the Impressionist composers. They also responded to and incorporated elements from vernacular forms such as jazz and folk music. The name was an allusion to the five late 19th-century Russian composers known as "the Mighty Handful."

Elika Akahori and Allison played one of Erik Satie's "Trois Morceau en form de Poire" for piano four hands with zest and elegance by Elika Akahori and Allison Both. The other parts of the "Pear" were delicious palate-cleansers between songs. Sopranos Karyl Ryzcek and Alexandra Whitfield, mezzo-sopranos Majie Zeller and Kimberly Leeds, tenor Daniel Rosensweig, and baritone mark Andrew Cleveland all proved quite effective. In the second half, the four-hand duo gave Poulenc's "Sonate pour piano, 4 mains," in segments; the delightful work sparkled with wonderful collaborative glee.

Replete with superb introductions came 38 songs with texts, quite often, by such luminaries as Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918); they would seriously reward re-hearing. Of the short gems by Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, and Poulenc on decidedly avant-garde texts by Jean Cocteau, my favorite was Honegger's "Locutions," beautifully sung by Mark Andrew Cleveland. Its text gives one a taste of Cocteau: "Fresh as a rose/Good as gold/Your heart in the form of a heart/That's very rare! Frank as gold Rosa the rose. All the roses lose their cheeks. On the carpet, how many masks? I am pale as death." Cleveland also imparted beauty to Poulenc's "Carte-postale" from "Quatre Poèmes de Guillaume Apollinaire," two of Poulenc's Chansons Gaillardes" and "L'adieu" from Honegger's "Six Poèmes d'Apollinaire."

Mezzo soprano Majie Zeller found a particularly charming manner in Poulenc's "Miel de Narbonne" and Darius Milhaud's "Fumée." Poulenc famously said, "Above all, do not analyze my music. Love it." The many Poulenc selections were easy to love.

Kimberly Leeds communicated deftly in Milhaud's "Trois Chansons de Nègresse" Op. 148b. Poulenc remarked about Milhaud, "How appealing he was, this hearty Mediterranean, dressed in pale grey, with his rhinoceros-skin cane and his strawberry pink and lemon ties." Born into a Jewish family, Milhaud is most famous for his "Le Boeuf sur le toit" and "La Creation du Monde," two surrealist compositions for dance. He taught after the war at Mills College in Oakland, where two of his students included Dave Brubeck and Burt Bacharach.

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I knew of Germaine Tailleferre, whom Satie dubbed his “musical daughter,” mostly as the composer of several important harp pieces. Here she was represented by “*Six Chansons Françaises*” dispatched with elan and glowing tone by Zeller, Whitfield, and Ryczek.

In the second half, George



Virginia Zeani as sister Blance was not present, but the music of Poulenc certainly was in evidence.

Auric’s “*Alphabet: 7 Quatrains de Raymond Radiguet*” featured six singers holding red papers with the letter they represented, and seven delightful selections were chosen from Louis Durey’s “*Le Bestiaire*.” Soprano Karyl Ryczek dazzled in the Auric, and tenor Daniel Rosensweig and soprano Alexandra Whitfield were very compelling throughout as well. Pianist/director/interlocutor Allison Voth brought wit, sensitivity, taste and beauty all evening.

Susan Miron is a book critic, essayist, and harpist. Her last two CDs featured her transcriptions of keyboard music of Domenico Scarlatti.

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