

The Boston Musical Intelligen

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

Lee Eiseman, publisher; Robert Levin, advisor; David Moran, assisting editor; Bettina A. Norton, emerita editor

NEWS & FEATURES REVIEWS UPCOMING EVENTS

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IN: REVIEWS

FEBRUARY 5, 2018

Cantata Singers Burst Academic Chamber

by SUSAN MIRON



Alison Voth (file photo)

The classy, capacious, and comfy American Academy for Arts and Sciences hosted the Cantata Singers Chamber Series Friday in music for mostly little-known but intensely engaging vocal music from South America and Spain.

Alison Voth curates a terrific series. With the help of a friend in the audience, she managed to out of print and rare scores. The back stories of the composers fascinated, and their music proved well worth hearing in performances that sparkled. Karyl Ryczek and Alexandra Whitfield, sopranos, and Elizabeth Eschen and Lynn Torgove, mezzo-sopranos each wore black with accents of red; each also summoned up attitude and humor, as well as flamenco-type arm movements. Watching these gifted performers proved as rewarding as hearing them.

Six of the composers were familiar to me from their transcriptions for harp. But I was intrigued to hear them through a different lens. What distinguishes many of these composers is the fraught political climate in which they lived. In her program note, Diane Sokal points out, many of the songs are set to poetry from the Generación del '27, Spanish poets born around the turn of the previous century whose works achieved prominence around the year 1927, the most famous being Federico Garcia Lorca. The

Generation del '27 poets enjoyed close contacts with avant-garde painters, sculptors, filmmakers and musicians of the era. Another prominent group was Grupo de los Ochos (Group of the 8) included three of the composers on this concert, Jesús Bal y Gay, Ernesto Halffter and Julián Bautista. The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the rise of Franco and his Nationalist forces over the elected Republican government brought his extraordinary cultural flowering to an abrupt end, as the Franco government executed, jailed, exiled, or simply silenced many artists and intellectuals.

Enrique Granados, two of whose songs opened this program, suffered a strange and awful demise. After the success of his *Goyescas* at the Metropolitan Opera in 1916, Granados was invited by the President Wilson to play a recital at the White House. As a result, the composer missed the liner on which he was due to return to Spain. After honoring his commitments, he preferred to travel to England rather than wait for another Spanish boat to depart. At Folkestone he boarded the SS *Sussex* to Dieppe, which shortly after setting off, was torpedoed by a German submarine. Granados managed to get into a life raft but dove into the sea to save his wife. Both drowned. The concert opened with his "Canco de Gener" and "El Majo Discreto" sung by Elizabeth Eschen and Alexandra Whitfield.

Lynn Torgove stirringly rendered "Polo" by Manuel de Falla (1876-1946) the famed composer who left Spain in 1939, dying seven years later. Federico Mompou, whose piano music is full of charm, was represented by Torgove in "D'alt d'un cortex" and by Whitfield in "Margot la pie" (Margot the magpie). Fernando Obradors (1897-1945) was a pleasant discovery. Karyl Ryczek intoned his melismatic "Chiquitita la Novia" (Tiny is the bride) beguilingly. Torgove delivered the lovely, romantic "Del cabello más sutil" ("Of the softest hair

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Which you have in your braid I would make a chain So that I may bring you to my side.”) The excellent Elizabeth Eschen, who joined cantata Singers two years ago, interpreted Obradors’s “El Vito,” one of the first half’s highlights, with lots of arm action, and two red flowers in her hair.

Xavier Montsalvatge (1912-2002) is perhaps best known for developing the musical style of *antillanismo*, which combined Spanish, Catalan and Afro-Cuban traditions. I knew of him from recordings by Montserrat Caballé. Elizabeth Eschen spun out his beautiful “Cancion de sun para dormer a un negrito” with tenderness, and Lynn Torgove had fun with his “Canto negro.” There wasn’t a song on this program that I wouldn’t want to hear again, and again. The four singers made for brilliant saleswomen.

Jesús Bal Y Gay (1905-1993), who studied composition with Manuel de Falla, and who was a member of both the Generation of ’27 and the Group of 8, went into exile in Mexico in 1938, and didn’t return to Spain for 30 years. He was (posthumously) particularly lucky that the two singers gave such beautiful performances. Karel Ryzcek sang his luscious “Canción” and Alexandra Whitfield, in exquisite voice, sang “La Luna Feliz.”

Elizabeth sang Ernesto Halffter’s (1905-1989) charming “Ai que linda moca.” A member of the Group de los Ochos in Madrid, Halffter studied composition with Manuel de Falla, and stayed friends for life. When Falla died in 1946, Halffter was asked to complete the unfinished opera *Altántida* (Atlantis), which premiered in 1962. YouTube lists none of his songs, but many of examples of his “Habanera.”

Julián Bautista (1901-1961), a member of the Group de los Ochos, went to Brussels when Franco came to power, and then went into exile in Buenos Aires for 20 years. His chief renown comes from 40 film scores. Karyl Ryzcek along with the evening’s marvelous pianist, Allison Voth, gave a spirited take on this song, reminiscent of Victoria de los Angeles.

The second half featured the well-known Villa-Lobos, Piazzola, and Ginestera, as well as others who had escaped my radar: Carlos Guastavino (1912-2000), “The Schubert of the Pampas,” Waldemar Henrique (1905-1995), Joaquin Nin (1879-1949), Cuban pianist and composer, whose biggest claim to fame might be that he fathered Anaís Nin.

Among his over 2,000 works, Rio de Janeiro-born Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1958) wrote for pianist Arthur Rubinstein and guitarist Andrés Segovia. He was represented by four charming songs. Lynn Torgove sang “Joao Cambuete” piquancy and tenderness. Carlos Guastavino’s (1912-2000) gorgeous “La Rosa y el sauce,” sung by Elizabeth Whitfield, reminded me of Rachmaninoff’s “Vocalise,” while in his “Pampamapa” Karyl Ryzcek showed off both her haunting voice and her acting chops.

The highlight of Waldemar Henrique’s (1905-1995) three songs came in “Abaluaie,” as Lynn Torgove channeled her inner chanteuse. Alexandra Whitfield and Karel Ryzcek brought us wonderous pleasures in Nin’s “Montañesa” and “Villancico Murciano.”

Alberto Ginestera (1916-1983), beloved by harpists like me for his concerto for my favorite instrument, contributed three charming pieces, “Chacarera” “Zamba,” and “Gato.” A rousing four-voice version of Astor Piazzolla’s (1921-1992) famous “Libertango” closed the festive evening. I daresay the audience would happily have sat through much more of this stuff.

Susan Miron is a book critic, essayist, and harpist. She writes about classical music and books for The Arts Fuse. Her last two CDs featured her transcriptions of keyboard music of Domenico Scarlatti.

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Sounds like a rich and wonderful line up of songs-but given Susan’s knowledge, and she’s a musician herself, who played piano? why are “accompanists” thrown under the bus.....or the piano?

Comment by [virginia eskin](#) — February 6, 2018 at 7:54 am

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