

MUSIC REVIEW

Cantata Singers lend an ear to women composers

By Zoë Madonna

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CAMBRIDGE — In January of last year, the composer and singer Patricia Wallinga made an impassioned plea on Twitter to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which went viral. “Play music by women,” she implored her hometown ensemble, which had just announced its new season programming, including only works by men. “Your daughters in the gallery seats will remember that you did.”

Watching the Cantata Singers’ chamber series concert on Friday at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, my thoughts drifted toward the young girls seated in the row in front of me, and what it could mean for them to hear such an evening of music by women from across centuries. “It is with great sadness and regret that the need to present such programs still exists,” wrote series music director Allison Voth in the program notes, echoing a common sentiment: why isn’t it normal to hear music by women already?

With Austrian, German, and French composers of a more distant past in the first half, then British composers of more recent years after intermission, the program seemed designed to spark curiosity. A curious crowd duly turned out; the pre-concert talk by musicologist Elizabeth Seitz was so full that additional chairs had to be brought in halfway through.

Voth, recovering from an injury, was unable to participate. No fewer than three people were needed to fill her role, including two pianists and a conductor. At the piano, Douglas Sumi and Brian Moll proved stylistically intelligent partners for the program’s eight singers, creating finely rendered backdrops and commentary on the songs.

With soprano Felicity Salmon in charge of Emily Hall's "Stillborn," the lyrics floated through the simple melody as if grief-dazed. Soprano Karyl Ryczek imbued each word of Lili Boulanger's "Parfois, je suis triste" with gravitas, and she gave Régine Wieniawski's "Colombine" a saucy, worldly treatment. Her fellow Longy School of Music faculty member mezzo Lynn Torgove illuminated songs in both joyous and pensive modes by Cécile Cheminade. (Oddly enough, the Pauline Viardot duet between Ryczek and Torgove was one of the program's shakier moments.)

Mezzo Molly McGuire, a recent arrival in Boston, showed awesome promise as a singing actor, in songs by Schumann and Nadia Boulanger. Another young singer, Tevan Goldberg, did well by Mendelssohn-Hensel and Welsh composer Rhian Samuel in an oaky, dark baritone voice that will only improve with age and experience.

Most of the singers performed from memory when singing alone; and when one used a score, the connection to the audience felt fainter. The room did them no favors, it being designed for lectures more than concerts; quieter notes were often blunted. After intermission, the audience was requested to hold applause until the final piece, when all the singers came together for a whippy run through Thea Musgrave's harmonically and textually dense "Hate whom ye list." However, after choice selections, it was tough to refrain from clapping.

The concert never felt like a museum piece or anything but an evening of stylistically diverse and compelling songs. Perhaps a day will come when concerts consisting mostly or entirely of music by women will be seen as just that. Still, we're not there yet.

The series continues in April with a program of songs by American women.

CANTATA SINGERS

At American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge. Friday.

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