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New York

Zankel Auditorium, Carnegie Hall

11/02/2008 -

Michael Ward-Bergeman: *Treny (Laments) (World Premiere)*

John Dowland: *Come Again, Sweet Love – Can She Excuse my Wrongs – Weep You No More, Sad Fountains – Now I Needs Must Part*

Oswaldo Golijov: *Lua Descolorid*

David Bruce: *Piosenki*

Dawn Upshaw (Soprano), Evan Hughes (Bass-baritone), Stephen Prutsman (Conductor and Piano), Michael Ward-Bergeman (Hyper-Accordion), Ensemble ACJW: Elizabeth Janzen (Flute), Carol McGonnell (Clarinet), Eric Reed (Horn), Nathan Botts (Trumpet), Anna Elashvili, Owen Dalby (Violins), Meena Bhasin, (Viola) Claire Bryant (Cello), Kristoffer Saebo (Bass), Jared Soldiviero (Percussion)



(© Richard Termine)

In the final Polish song of this ecstatic recital, the stolid bass-baritone Evan Hughes picked up a four-foot-long thick stick decorated with bells, and stomped it repeatedly on the floor or dangled it with the bells jingling. And as he and Dawn Upshaw sung, the untranslatable words (*Trumf, Trumf! Misia Bela!!*) and the entire chamber orchestra wailed and trilled and the klezmer clarinet warbled and the drums drummed, not only this scrivener but everybody in the packed Zankel Auditorium wanted to thump and jingle along with Mr. Hughes and the now foot-stamping orchestra.

This was the end of the concert. But far far more had gone on before, thanks to a program which encompassed four centuries of song, the ageless talent of its performers, and of course Dawn Upshaw herself.

There is little doubt that the audience had filled Zankel to hear Ms. Upshaw, since every concert she gives is an adventure in sound. It can be (as here), the most touching 17th Century singing of John Dowland songs or Susanna in *Figaro* or (as she will show later in the week) György Kurtág in *Fragments of Kafka*. But whatever she does, her voice, her body, her entire persona *becomes* the music she

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sings. Nor is it simply the glory of her soprano voice. Rather, it is a singular versatility.

Last night, that unique voice got a workout, but we never felt the work involved. She could squall like a fishwife in one of the Polish songs, her voice could become a vocal lute in the Elizabethan songs, or be as soft and delicate as the title of Osvaldo Golijov's *Moon Colorless*, a work written for her a decade ago.

But perhaps most impressive, because it was unknown, was the world premiere of Michael Ward-Bergeman's *Treny*, one of the laments of the 16th Century Polish poet Jan Kochanowski. Mr. Ward-Bergeman is the inventor of the "hyper-accordion", an acoustic instrument with far more stops than the usual reed monstrosity (See Coda below). But this composition, for soprano, piano, hyper-accordion, flute and cello was dark, lyrical, mysterious and the most woeful lament for the death of a daughter. With the exception of four explosive measures, the work had an almost frightening calm. Ms. Upshaw sung the lines with telling severity, but Mr. Ward-Bergeman matched this with the most beautiful interplay of flute and piano, while his own instrument, rarely prominent, played a kind of organ pedal point with the cello.

It had a mesmerizing effect, but in another way, so had the opening Dowland. Stephen Prutsman, a conductor, composer and pianist who studied under Leon Fleischer, had arranged the music for string quartet and soprano. Dowland, himself a lutenist of note (or many notes) might have been pleased by this modern consort of viols, which took a few moderate riffs, but nothing to destroy Dowland's lines or the poetry.

Mr. Prutsman showed the same sensitivity in his piano accompaniment for Ms. Upshaw, and proved a fine and jolly conductor for the outrageous poems and compositions of British-born David Bruce at the finale. And for this, we turn to the musicians of the ACJW (the post-graduate students of Carnegie Hall, Juilliard and the Weill Institute).

While I imagine that Ms. Upshaw's presence would inspire any musical group to play better, this ensemble played not only with facility but with all the fun, the maddening sounds (including three instruments imitating very realistic *flatulence* in a poem called "Mr. Smelly") and elegies to ghosts, snow, and the four miseries (the seasons).

Many are the composers, like Mahler, Mozart and Goldmark, who try to imitate country bands. Yet composer Bruce made this "Polish band" make bad music sound very good indeed.

Inevitably, one thought of Luciano Berio's *Folk Songs*, but

Berio took a half-dozen different styles. Mr. Bruce worked with the Polish countryside, forming an eccentric view of some silly yet affecting poems with an equally eccentric orchestra. While nobody can imitate Ms. Upshaw's movements, Mr. Hughes stiffly tried his best, and redeemed himself with the thumping "lagerphone".

So that final poem, *Trumf, Trumf!*, with aforesaid jingly stick was simply a clangorous benediction. A happily noisy hail and temporary farewell to another Dawn Upshaw trip into her limitless lyrical cosmos.

CODA: Having been a professional accordionist myself in the most unlikely places (a day in North Korea, a week in a teahouse on the Afghani-Iranian no-man's-land, and a month in a Damascus dancehall), I once had the privilege of interviewing the late Dick Contino, then known as the world's greatest accordionist.

"How," I asked him, "can you play the world's ugliest instrument?"

Contino simply laughed. "That's easy," he said, "I make it sound like anything *but* an accordion."

Mr. Ward-Bergeman obviously is a devout subscriber to that *modus operandi*.

Harry Rolnick

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