

Washington Chorus makes splendid theater out of Luna Pearl Woolf's works

By Cecelia H. Porter February 29, 2016

Massachusetts-born composer Luna Pearl Woolf returned to Washington on Sunday for a concert devoted to her music: two chamber works, a semi-operatic piece and excerpts from an upcoming opera. Woolf's stature has been growing significantly in the world of new music.

All four compositions in Sunday's concert pushed the dramatic parameters of soprano and chorus — voices often forced to the extreme. Likewise, cellist Matt Haimovitz, Woolf's husband, had many chances to shine in expressive wizardry as an accompanist to the singing and sometimes even as a protagonist. As part of the series New Music for a New Age, the Washington Chorus was directed by Julian Wachner, whose pungent conducting brought equally pungent results from the performers.

Soprano Marnie Breckenridge has sung everything from soloist in Johannes Brahms's German Requiem to La Princesse in Philip Glass's "Orphée." In Sunday's "Odas de Todo el Mundo," Breckenridge along with cellist Haimovitz and pianist Joel Ayau turned her voluminous voice skillfully this way and that to portray the role of what Woolf calls "a street hawker" in poetry by the noted Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Together with Haimovitz the chorus beautifully navigated itself through Woolf's "Après Moi le Déluge," as blues, jazz and Middle Eastern cantillation utter the bitter ironies of Hurricane Katrina's human devastation in New Orleans. For "Rumi: Quatrains of Love," Breckenridge, Haimovitz and Ayau combined in a moving portrayal of young lovers at dawn, the soprano looming over the piano strings in Sprechstimme (semi-speaking tones).

According to the splendid performance by all the singers and instrumentalists (including the chamber orchestra Novus NY), Woolf's "The Pillar" is off to a great start. The soloists made theater out of the stasis imposed by space limitations. And what wrenching, realistic theater it was — the rise and fall of the Ponzi schemer Bernie Madoff and the resulting human tragedies.

Unfortunately, "The Pillar" and "Après Moi" suffer seriously from inaudible texts. Surtitles and the reduction of the giant chorus, although top-notch, to chamber size would give this music its full due.

