



Sharon Mabry

Music By Contemporary Women Composers For Soprano

Festivals of music by women composers have become more prevalent in recent years, providing an arena for the composers' works to become known. These festivals also present performers with new repertoire and new ideas about programming music for themselves or their students. Some readers of this column have expressed a desire to create such a festival of music by contemporary women composers or at least to add a large number of works by women to their repertoire. Several works by women have already been discussed in this column within the context of chamber music or monodramas. In the next few columns, shorter works more suitable for a typical art song recital, will be discussed.

A recital of works by women should present various moods, styles, and vocal techniques, as any other twentieth-century music program would offer. The audience should be allowed to experience the depth and variety of compositional styles used by women in the twentieth century. It might also be more interesting to the audience to include works using instruments other than the piano, as well as music by composers of several nationalities.

The Belgian composer Jacqueline Fontyn, whose works are well-

known in Europe, has written a number of pieces for soprano. Many of them are large chamber works, too complex for a solo recital. However, she has a most interesting work written in 1984 called *Pro and Antiverbes* for soprano and cello, which would provide vocal and color variety within a traditional voice and piano recital context. This twelve-minute piece is in seven short sections, some quite serious, others humorous. Using both English and French, the sections are titled: (1) After a calm comes a storm; (2) Better a hen today than an egg tomorrow; (3) *Rein ne sert de partir a point: il faut toujours courir*; (4) It's better to rust out than to wear out; (5) Adam's ale is the worst brew; (6) *Force et rage font plus que patience ni que longueur de temps*; (7) The best of friends must part.

The singer is required to play several small percussion instruments in some of the movements. Fontyn is careful to describe the numerous vocal effects, extended techniques, and notational devices used in the score. This is a demanding, experimental work for both performers, but filled with unusual, often hypnotic sounds. Flexibility for voice and personality is essential for both players. The singer needs to have an excellent sense of pitch, since there are moments when pitch references are scarce. Fontyn's use of seminal rhythmic patterns brings cohesion to this work, which contains a great deal of overall metric freedom and

spontaneity. Jacqueline Fontyn may be contacted at: rue Leon Dekaise 6, B-1342 Limelette, Belgium.

The *Songs of Here and Forever*, by American composer Elizabeth Bell, would be a fine contrast to the Fontyn set and would also serve as the substantive cycle or central focus of a recital. This cycle, approximately twenty minutes long, was premiered at Cornell University in 1973. Bell sets her own poems in six sections called: (1) Cache Lake; (2) Communication; (3) Harlem Bridge; (4) Light; (5) Song of Worship; and (6) Storm. Bell's compositional style is dissonant, but not atonal. It is directional writing, rhythmically supple, and uses the voice in a very traditional way. There are long beautiful vocal lines with dramatic climaxes contrasted with conversational sections using a bit of staccato here and there. The sections are sometimes connected, while there are breaks between others. The piano writing is quite independent of the voice. It is supportive of the vocal line, but has a great deal of melodic and dramatic interest of its own. This is a substantial work, suited for a soprano capable of expressive diction, large dynamic contrasts, and a lovely legato. The score is available from the American Composers' Alliance, 170 West 74th St. New York, New York 10023. The telephone number is (212) 362-8900. Or you may contact the composer for this and other scores at 114 Kelbourne Avenue, North Tarrytown, New York 10591.