

Two Gems for Soprano



Sharon Mabry

Contemporary composers continue to make significant contributions to the repertoire for soprano, as evidenced by the two works discussed here. Each showcases the soprano voice in an individualized, creative, and challenging manner. Both are pieces designed for an artist-performer who is technically advanced, aurally secure, rhythmically confident, enjoys a challenge, and is willing to do a bit of experimentation. Each composer has managed to create interesting opportunities for vocal coloration, contrasting dramatic expression, and varying degrees of vocal declamation within a relatively short time frame. Either of these two little gems would provide a striking contrast for a program containing traditional song repertoire built on tonal harmonic progressions. They would also work well on a program of twentieth century song that contains several musical styles from that era.

Works by Welsh composer Rhian Samuel have been listed in previous

“New Directions” articles. She continues to produce pieces that show her keen understanding of the voice and how it can best be displayed through creative text settings. Her works are published by Stainer and Bell. One of the most recent pieces to become available in a published version is “The Hare in the Moon,” a Japanese folk tale for soprano and piano. The work also exists in a version for soprano, vibraphone, marimba, and double bass. The fanciful text is by Ryokan (1759–1831) and has been translated by Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite.

The composer calls this piece “a narrative.” It is the telling of a story, a most fascinating tale about the friendship of a monkey, a hare, and a fox. Their friendship comes to the attention of the “god who lives in eternal heaven,” who decides to test their loyalty. Unfortunately, all does not end well. Samuel has invented a magical atmosphere through angular vocal lines that switch from singing to speaking. She also incorporates sprechstimme, both pitched and unpitched vocal declamation, and a few sparingly used vocal effects, such as glissandi and sobbing.

Tempo and mood change frequently, according to the progression of the story or the character speaking at the moment. The piano punctuates mood changes with similar angularity, appropriate dissonant chords, or whimsical flashes of chromatism, using the whole keyboard as a palette. Both the singer and pianist are required to ad lib or improvise at times, giving each the freedom to

develop a unique realization of the germinal ideas presented in the score.

Samuel gives numerous directions in the score, never leaving the singer to wonder what might be a desirable outcome. In addition, she never uses the voice in a destructive or stressful manner. Enjoy singing this short work (around six minutes) while having fun telling the story. The audience will be mesmerized if the singer is totally immersed in the telling of the tale.

American pianist and composer Ann Silsbee has written numerous works in several mediums, including a large number of frequently performed pieces for solo voice and choral groups. Her piano pieces are also well known. She received her DMA in composition from Cornell University where she studied with Karel Husa. Silsbee has given us a beautifully atmospheric, short song cycle (approximately seven minutes) using texts by William Carlos Williams. The poems were taken from “Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems.” The cycle, simply called “Four Songs,” was written in 1983. It includes four poems titled: *A Formal Design*; *Iris*; *The Snow Begins*; and *The Children*. The settings depict the delicacy, impetuosity, serenity, simple beauty, and solemnity of the various poems.

The ambiance created by Silsbee for each poem is superbly framed by both the voice and piano. The performers are given colorful, inventive musical and dramatic ideas to develop. Each instrument

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seems to rely on a reciprocal expressive response from the other, making the pieces a must for two performers who enjoy an eloquent "conversation" through a built-in freedom in the dramatic import. Two of the songs are unmeasured and rely on flexibility and an improvisatory approach toward movement and tempo.

The vocal line is angular at times and uses a traditional cantabile approach to declamation. The score is well marked with dramatic indicators and numerous tempo changes. There are no extended vocal techniques employed. Rather, it is the emotional, coloristic, improvisatory, and dramatic elements of vocal production that are stressed in these pieces. These are a must for two

experienced performers who love drama, beautiful poetry, and finely crafted songs. The music can be obtained from the composer. Contact: Ann Silsbee, 915 Coddington Rd., Ithaca, NY 14850 or by e-mail: RHS1@cornell.edu.

Mezzo-soprano Sharon Mabry first received national recognition in the 1980 National Public Radio "Art of Song" series, when she was a featured recitalist. She has performed at international music festivals and is in demand as a recitalist and master teacher of vocal techniques. Her recordings have received outstanding critical acclaim and international air play. Her latest CDs feature music by American composers Persis Vohar, Christina

Kuzmych, Kenton Coe, Jeffrey Wood, and Michael Rose.

In 1986 she made her critically acclaimed New York recital debut in Merkin Concert Hall, Abraham Goodman House. She was awarded both a Solo Recitalist Fellowship and a recording grant by the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition to her concert career, Dr. Mabry is professor of music at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN. She received the Bachelor of Music degree from Florida State University, studying with Elena Nikolaidi, and the Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from George Peabody College for Teachers, studying with Louis Nicholas. As a scholarship recipient to the Franz-Schubert-Institut in Austria, she studied with Walter Moore, Erik Werba, Hans Hotter, Norman Shetler, and Brigitte Fassbaender.



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