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The Washington Post

June 20, 2006

Sunday night's concert of Renaissance music at the National Gallery of Art was designed to complement the new exhibit of Venetian Renaissance painting that opened there this weekend. Unfortunately for Titian and the gang, though, the music was so fresh, powerful and compelling in every way that it pretty much stole the show.

Credit for that feat goes to the remarkable Rosa Lamoreaux, music director of the National Gallery Vocal Arts Ensemble and lyric soprano extraordinaire. She assembled a program of works by eight Italian composers from the 16th to early 17th centuries that showcased the explosive creativity of the time -- not just the stylistic innovations but also the remarkable new depths of emotion and dramatic expressiveness.

Chief among the Italians, of course, was Claudio Monteverdi, and Lamoreaux and mezzo Barbara Hollinshead delivered a breathtaking performance of his "Cantate Domino," a virtuosic motet for two voices with viol, theorbo and harp. Much ink has been spilled trying to describe the beauty of Lamoreaux's voice; let's just call it "angelic" and leave it at that. Both she and Hollinshead negotiated this intricate, lavishly ornamented work with ease.

The rest of the program was equally a treat to the ears, from Rossino Mantovano's meltingly sweet "Lirum bililirum," to the sensuous "Il bianco e dolce cigno" of Jacob Arcadelt, to the Monteverdi duet "Zefiro, torna," sung with poignant delicacy by tenors Tony Boutte and Philip Cave. The entire ensemble sang with great elegance, closing the program with a stunning reading of Monteverdi's "Beatus vir," whose surging power and complex drama rang in the ears long after the standing ovation stopped.

- Stephen Brookes

"... this octet of singers did wonders with such contemporary fare as Ned Rorem's seven songs "From and Unknown Past".... To cap the concert off, the singers and pianists, upholstered John Gardner's "Seven Songs," Op. 36, with a colorful fabric of sound."

The Washington Post

June 28, 2005

To make a living, artists must often yield to commercial realities. Johannes Brahms bowed in that direction with his "Liebeslieder Waltzes," Op. 52, a set of 18 little songs that the composer hoped would sell to the waltz-thirsty amateur musicians of the day.

On Sunday evening at the West Garden Court, the National Gallery Vocal Arts Ensemble gave a glowing account of the songs that revealed an underlying richness and intelligence. The ensemble, including altos Barbara Hollinshead and Roger Isaacs and sopranos Gisele Becker and Rosa Lamoreaux, warmly brought out the texts of Georg Daumer. Lamoreaux displayed a resplendent top range, giving greater definition and brilliance to the sound. Tenor Robert Petillo artfully mingled feelings of bliss and melancholy in "Love Is a Dark Shaft", while basses Bobb Robinson and K.C. Armstrong and tenor Gary Glick carefully blended their voices. Bradford and Maribeth Gowen provided sensitive piano accompaniment.

Etched in similarly flowing tones, the ensemble's reading of Brahms's "Four Songs", Op. 17, rose on the fine playing of harpist Dotian Levalier and horn players Laurel Ohlson and Kristen Davidson, who provided a pulsing foundation for the soaring top-end vocals.

In the second half, which merged the spiritual simplicity of a Gregorian Chant with shifting modern rhythms. Judith Wier's whimsical song "Don't let that Hors" balanced plangent melodies with glistening chords, and James Quitman Mulholland's "How Do I Love Thee" overflowed with emotion. To cap the concert off, the singers and pianists, upholstered John Gardner's "Seven Songs," Op. 36, with a colorful fabric of sound.

- Daniel Ginsberg