

Where There's a Will There's Weill

By B.L.C. ©2004

'THE MUSIC OF PATRICIA LEONARD AND FRIENDS.' Leonard: *Strangely Close Yet Distant; Prelude for Strings; Longing; Remember Me; The Source; The Picture of Dorian Gray* -- Scott Ethier: *Room Service; Dave the Guesser; December* -- David Homan: *Tied to Another* -- Clint Edwards: *Requiem* -- Tom Cipullo: *Going; Why I Wear My Hair Long; The Pocket Book; Touch Me*. Performances by the composers and others. Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. May 26, 2004

If you can muster the talent and the cash to pay the rental, Weill Recital Hall is where to program your music in Manhattan. It's been a part of the Carnegie complex for decades, expressly designed to offer emerging composers and performers a place to hold their first major events. The admission price is reasonable, so one can expect an audience made up of more than just loyal friends and associates. It holds 270 people.

Obviously Patricia Leonard, a Boston-born and -bred composer in her thirties, felt it was time to make such a move, building her program around works she felt would best represent her current level of accomplishment. She also appears to be thoughtful to her musical friends, as her title suggests, and all of them also served as performers, specifically as pianist in their own songs and small chamber works. Scott Ethier accompanied baritone Patrick Mellen in three songs with words by John Hodgen. The composer was no doubt taken with the poetic texts. Yet *Room Service*, about some "we" (perhaps just the human "we") imagining how two men next door are making love, should be somehow more uplifting in spirit when you read the words themselves. Yet in the end it proves unfulfilling. *Dave the Guesser* also has words that have great potential in its simple rhyming scheme and yet the music is non-committal in its portrayal of the prophetic character. Only *December* genuinely moved us with its nostalgic emotions felt at Yuletide. Mr. Mellen is a competent singer, but his voice needed to soar into heady space to excite us; instead, it just seemed to serve as a vehicle for words. As we have said many times before, great poetry does not a great song make.

David Homan played the piano part with violinist Pauline Kim in his sonata-like *Tied to Another*. We found this music to be overly schmaltzy, certainly plaintively romantic and, with its songlike title helping, longed for a return to the days of Kern and Gershwin. It was written for this performance and will serve as incidental music for a play; in that service it may work a lot better.

Clint Edwards, pianist-arranger-lyricist, has written a lovely, but concise and down to earth *Requiem*, dutifully sung in Latin. Lauren Bradley, a soprano with impressive credentials, did not disappoint. There was but one false moment when, despite her pure, penetrating sound, Mr. Edwards and cellist Peter Sacher overwhelmed her. But after an earlier assignment, before intermission, this reviewer became convinced he could listen to her all night long. In fact, I would drop everything to hear her in a solo concert.

The last "friend" is hardly the least – Tom Cipullo, whose songs continue to intrigue us with their quality and variety. His role as accompanist seemed to assure soprano Melanie Mitrano that her singing would be in good hands. We feel that her performance of *Touch Me* (words by the late distinguished Stanley Kunitz) was (if we may be permitted to engage in the vernacular) as good as it gets. This song is the kind that will grace Mr. Cipullo's repertoire in big fashion and create a legacy for him that will be hard to match. The sincerity and depth of emotion here are quietly emotional and just simply unforgettable. Nonetheless, Ms. Mitrano had other challenges before *Touch Me*: she could be questioning and apprehensive in *Going* (words by Elizabeth Hurwitt); playfully sensual in *Why I Wear My Hair Long* (words by Marilyn Kallett); and outrageously satiric

in *The Pocketbook* (Kallett again). (The reader should be apprised that Ms. Mitrano is an active contributor to this magazine, but we concede there is no reason not to hear Cipullo's songs performed by others.)

So that clears the way for a view of Ms. Leonard's work. She appeared in the debut program of the New York Composers Circle (NMC, v11#2, Summer), but we missed her entry by showing up late. Her work, while hardly what is generally referred to now as "cutting edge," has much to admire. If she has any big thematic conceptions to her credit, they did not appear on this program, though her opening *Strangely Close Yet Distant* and closing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveal musical sophistication and a high level of craftsmanship.

The opener compresses a complex string of thoughts into 12-minutes of shifting music appealing in design. The title is drawn from Alma Mahler's description of the painter Oskar Kokoschka, with whom she had an intense relationship. The piece is inspired by Kokoschka's painting *The Bride of the Wind*, which Leonard felt symbolized their relationship. And it uses music by Gustav Mahler, to whom Alma had been married. An important role is given music from the final movement of Mahler's *Ninth Symphony*. Beginning in somber fashion, Leonard uses that music to bridge original themes representing Alma and Oskar. They all build upon one another until they crash into a frenzied climax. The madness then subsides and ends with tremolos in the strings, perhaps suggesting the mysterious bride and the wind in the painting. We'd like to think that the players, violist Daniel Panner, cellist Alberto Parrini and pianist Adrienne Kim, actually felt the emotions in the piece quite thoroughly and were carefully chosen by the composer. Such is not always the case, but these players impressed.

"Dorian Gray," an even shorter composition, was certainly not so named just to mislead the listener, but it seems to suggest rather than literally parallel the Oscar Wilde novel. We somehow expected more drama in the content and, though Ms. Leonard claims her work has a violent conclusion, we feel not violent enough, in fact somewhat timid. (There may be a reason for that other than compositional direction.) After all, this is about a man who causes death and misery to those around him without the slightest bit of remorse nor sign of aging in his countenance. Only in the climactic moment of self-hate when he destroys his painted image, do the chickens come home to roost. Perhaps Ms. Leonard might consider renaming the work *Portrait of a Wicked Soul* and scoring the work for a large chamber orchestra. We feel this performance could also have been stronger.

Elsewhere, we heard her *Prelude for Strings*, composed in 1995 while still a student. It's an interesting piece, admittedly prompted by Johannes Brahms' development of motives. Ms. Leonard is excellent at scoring and keeping the composition moving. She also understands the nature of the string quartet, and her intention to give each member a voice in a musical conversation came to fruition. The quartet was made up of violinists Pauline Kim and Ana Milosavljevic, violist Panner and cellist Parrini.

The *Source* is a fine work for solo piano, using a single motive as the springboard (the *source*, if you will) of the piece. In its progression through varying contour we hear a bold statement, followed by a fast, toccata-like shift in tempo and then a big climax before returning to the source of all of this "energy," as she puts it.

Ms. Leonard also programmed two songs. Baritone Derrick Ballard with pianist Edwards performed *Longing* (words by Paul Laurence Dunbar). Though intended to be wistful and yearning, that emotion seems to take a backseat to the general musical line, which is sometimes too forthright. On the other hand, *Remember Me*, is a very effective contemplation of death and its consequences for one's loved ones. Again, Ms. Bradley reached the audience with purity of sound and with intense emotion.

Overall, Patricia Leonard, did a serviceable job in this concert, considering all of the usual politics and the debts that have to be paid off. She is a composer who, if not fully mature, is on the right path. Now is a good time for those who adore the great traditions of music – tonal music, music that really sings and reaches the heart. We are in that phase of the cycle. Hello!