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Descents Into Sounds Of Dementia and War

American Composers Orchestra Offers Premieres at Zankel Hall

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER FEB. 21, 2014

Discerning the correlation between a composer's description of a new piece and its actual sound is not always easy. But there was no such ambiguity in "Vera's Ghosts" by Lisa Renée Coons, which received its premiere on Thursday evening at Zankel Hall by the American Composers Orchestra, conducted by George Manahan.

Billed as a work about mental illness and dementia, the visceral and highly effective score evoked a descent into madness. The strings were arranged in a semicircle onstage, with shared gestures that began in the upper strings and quickly spiraled among the players, ending with grumbling outbursts by the double basses.

The piece was part of the program "Lines on a Point," celebrating the 10th anniversary of the ensemble's Orchestra Underground program, which presents premieres.

Ted Hearne's inventive "Ripple" for a cappella choir also left a strong impression in an alluring performance by the Crossing, an excellent choir conducted by Donald Nally that has made a name for itself in recent years as a champion of new music. Mr. Hearne used an excerpt from the Iraq war logs — secret military field reports — that were released to the public in 2010 by WikiLeaks. One was, "The Marine that engaged from Post 7 was unable to determine the occupants of the vehicle due to the reflection of the sun coming off the windshield," refers to an incident in 2005, when an American soldier opened fire on a vehicle carrying Iraqi civilians.

That sentence was sung in its entirety at the work's beginning and end, with

phrase fragments and single words woven into a texturally rich and varied score in the middle sections. At one point the fragment “of the sun” was repeated with whispered urgency, creating a multilayered sonic tapestry above which the word “sun” rang out with startling clarity.

David Lang’s “statement to the court,” set to a text by the American Socialist Eugene Debs, made less of an impression, largely because of the unimaginative scoring for strings and choir, punctuated by a relentless drumbeat.

Amy Beth Kirsten set her “strange pilgrims” for choir and orchestra, given its premiere here, to one of her poems, using material she discarded while writing other scores. The work featured a film by Mark DeChiazza, with images of a woman and outdoor scenes. Both film and score felt disjointed, however, with visuals and sounds that didn’t mesh into a cohesive whole.

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