

Blue Streak Ensemble at Heights Arts: “Looking Back” (October 13)

by Daniel Hathaway



Composer Margaret Brouwer curated a fascinating playlist for the most recent concert by her Blue Streak Ensemble. At Heights Arts on October 13, the seven musicians wrapped a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Bascom Little Fund and a remembrance of the victims of 9/11 into a single program, “Looking Back.”

The evening began with works by the late Cleveland architect and avocational composer Bascom Little, who was fêted by his own fund earlier this fall. Brouwer introduced two of his songs with a bit of biographical illumination she had unearthed. He originally lived on Murray Hill in a house with eleven different levels, changing that one out for a spacious mansion in Lyndhurst that housed his own private theater.

Tenor Brian Skoog and pianist Shuai Wang did the composer’s memory proud with performances of his 1934 *Harlem Barcarolle* and his “Eggs,” the latter from a 1949 unpublished puppet show titled *Dunder*. The Barcarolle is a gin-sotted reverie of weariness with Harlem as the sun rises. The eggs in the second song form a catalog aria: whether hard-boiled, soft-boiled, scrambled, or in a mushroom omelet, “I like any kind of eggs,” the singer declaims, often with a fierce intensity. The song ended with a brisk, Schumannesque postlude, nicely shaped by Wang.

Brouwer’s *Lament* was written in 2002 for the Cohen family (violinist Diana, clarinetist Franklin, the late bassoonist Lynette, and percussionist Alexander) and premiered by them on the Rocky River Chamber Society Series, who commissioned the work. On Thursday, the performers included violinist Emma Shook, clarinetist Amitai Vardi, cellist Robert Nicholson (taking the bassoon part), and percussionist Luke Rinderknecht.

September 11th tributes are tricky to manage — there are so many traps to fall into in dealing with the emotions following a cataclysmic event that bruises the national soul. Brouwer treats the subject both with understatement and bursts of violence, giving each instrument a cadenza-like solo and an opportunity to converse with the others on a variety of levels. She also includes eloquent passages of silence. As she writes in the composer's notes, "There are lulls where no one can speak, or everyone is lost in thought, then sharing of thoughts and grief continue." It's a moving work that often leaves unfinished subjects hanging in the air.

An excerpt from *Voice of the Lake*, a piece Brouwer is currently composing about her beloved Lake Erie, sets a poem by David Adams. "Those Lovers" casts a tenor (Brian Skoog) in the role of a polluter, who sings about two lovers on a limestone pier under a harvest moon, united with the rest of us by the water of the same lake. It was a lovely preview of a still-to-be-heard piece.

Hornist Richard King joined Shook and Wang for Lennox Berkeley's 1953 *Horn Trio*, written for the great Dennis Brain. Alternating between tonality and Berkeley's edgier, dissonant style, the piece gives the hornist, violinist, and pianist a real workout. The performers sounded splendid, especially in the series of ten variations that ends the work. Playing intelligently to the small gallery space, they brought the evening's interesting collection of pieces to a satisfying conclusion.

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