

Quince Contemporary Vocal Ensemble at Transformer Station (March 22)

by Daniel Hathaway



There may be more vocal techniques to explore in addition to the sighs, slides, hums, whistles, heterodyning, Spanish tongue-twisters, and keening that the four women of Quince Contemporary Vocal Ensemble produced with larynxes, mouths, lips, and teeth on Wednesday, March 22 at Transformer Station.

But selections from works by eleven composers gave an ear-opening introduction to state-of-the-art vocal chamber music, a field that's still evolving.

Celebrating eight years together, Amanda DeBoer Bartlett, Kayleigh Butcher, Liz Pearce, and Carrie Henneman Shaw used the large gallery to fine advantage, whether singing together, or splitting up to sing from its four corners or antiphonally from back to front. The concert, part of the Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Series, was further enlivened by chatty, upbeat commentary from all four singers, drawing the audience even more intimately into the proceedings.

Warren Enström's *Hushers* (2014), the title track of Quince's latest CD, is aptly named, its initial shushing sounds eventually turning into closely juxtaposed pitches that vibrated in the space. Joe Clark's *not merely bad or broken* (2016) made use of those aforementioned slides, sighs, and hums before becoming melodic and almost jazzy.

Two selections from Laura Steenberge's *The Four Winds* (2015) invoked jackals and the sun as the singers traded wails and high pitches from the corners of the gallery. Punk composer Dave Reminick's *Shoshana* (2013) featured Pearce in a

striking solo. For her *Three Erasures* (2016), Cara Haxo collected amusing fragments from beauty magazines.

At the center of the program were works by more widely-known composers. An excerpt from Kaija Saariaho's *From the Grammar of Dreams* (1988) for two singers draws on texts by Sylvia Plath, while a single movement from David Lang's *love fail* (2013), based on 12th-century troubadour poems, was intense but its words were unintelligible.

Gilda Lyons' *Bone Needles* (2016) was inspired by women singing on a beach while sewing fishing nets. During this call-and-response episode, three singers on the second-floor balcony answered a soloist at the front. The piece ends with a dramatic downward glissando.

Two excerpts from Jennifer Jolley's *Prisoner of Conscience* (2015) drew on court records from the trial of the Russian feminist punk group Pussy Riot. Jolley's settings would have sounded right at home in a traditional a cappella group.

In one of the more arresting moments of the evening, Carrie Henneman Shaw sang two selections from Andrés Carrizo's *Trance Formations II: Vociferations* (2016). Reading from an iPad, she conjured up an astonishing range of vocal effects using scrambled words from a famous Spanish tongue-twister.

The evening ended with a comparatively ancient work from 1973, Giacinto Scelsi's *Sauh IV*, a microtonal piece less composed than compiled from recordings made at informal happenings. Putting this piece at the end was a nice touch. It was fascinating to read things backward and imagine how the experiments of Scelsi and others led in a direct line to the works of the other ten composers so stunningly performed on this evening's program.

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