

The musical performances were preceded by an informal panel discussion. Several composers assembled in a semi-circle on the stage; Rosenbaum asked general questions about the composers' experiences of writing choral music and about the challenges of their craft. A conversation unfolded about early influences, text choice and musical standards; the exchange was thoughtful and relaxed.

Steven Stucky remarked on what he described as the essential conservatism of much choral music and chose for his text a conservatively structured sonnet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Say Thou Dost Love Me." Stucky's music captured the lyricism and sway of Browning's poem in a melody that began delicately and ended with strong peacefulness. Though at one level Browning's sonnet is a love poem, Stucky chose to read it as an homage to musical friendship and collegiality. The poem's thematic consideration of sound and silence as part of the rhythm of love was echoed in the mood and tone shifts in the music. The work's last line, its most musically dense resolution, praised silence as part of love's conversation; it was an elegant conclusion to the piece.

Shulamit Ran's remarks in the pre-concert conversation had included an account of her very first piece of choral writing: after composing extensively in a variety of genres during most of her career, she found herself, ten years ago, required to compose a manageable, acceptable and worthy choral piece for her son's bar mitzvah. In the decade of prolific choral composition since, Ran has returned over and over again to sacred texts for inspiration and material. The piece she composed for this 25th anniversary celebration was adapted from Psalm 37 of the Hebrew Bible. Building on the same themes that have characterized other works she's written, including her Credo/Ani Ma'amin, performed by The New York Virtuoso Singers last spring, this new work, *The Humble Shall Inherit the Earth*, presented Ran's familiar examinations of music on a continuum between conservative liturgical tradition and experimental modernity. The solo male voices tended to carry a more traditional cantorial sonority and pace, while the blended women's passages contained more innovative harmonies. The work's emotionally

intense conclusion, asserting that the meek's inheritance of the earth will be imbued with “the abundance of peace,” was joyful.

During the pre-concert discussion, Yehudi Wyner had discussed some of his musical influences. He noted, with unostentatious modesty about his heritage, that he had grown up in a musical household with a father who was “a choral conductor.” He then indicated that Paul Hindemith's requirement that his Yale students sing in his Collegium Musicum had provided him with a different and complementary perspective on choral music: it was here that he learned more about shared pitch of voice and instruments and about techniques for making words flow within music. It was Wyner's work, *Save me, O God*, based on Psalm 69 that concluded the concert. Like the psalm chosen by Ran for her piece, this psalm is a personal plea to God, but unlike Ran's, this one explores anxiety and anguish in the face of peril. It is a wail of fear that is acute but unashamed, founded in certainty that God will listen and save. Wyner's music skillfully captured nuances of fear in complex, taut melodic and rhythmic turns. Within the rigorous discipline of the writing, each voice maintained its individual integrity, contributing uniquely to the choral whole.

The final topic of the pre-concert conversation concerned some of the problems that contemporary choral composers face. Of the hundreds and hundreds of amateur, semi-professional and professional choruses in the United States, there aren't very many that can handle complex scores. It's not easy to find publishers. It's not easy to find audiences. The consequent dumbing-down of choral texts – Rosenbaum's phrase – is pernicious and meretricious.

The composers who work with Rosenbaum have the happy knowledge that there is little they might compose that The New York Virtuoso Singers can't perform: contemporary composers can count absolutely on these singers' stunning musicianship and superb technique.

This mutual trust among composer, conductor and chorus proved to be the program's sole unifying element. Some works had something in common with

other works, but the commonalities were divergent. Because the works were all relatively short and rather different each from the other, the concert had no unifying conceptual theme other than the fact of shared musicianship.

In some respects, David Del Tredici's work, the first one on the program, served as a fitting introduction to the concert as a whole. The 1727 New England Primer poem, "Alphabet II," is an idiosyncratic colonial pedagogical text, a poem presenting the characters of sacred Christian narrative – Adam, Job, Esther, Rachel, Peter and Zaccheus – with more local and domestic figures, like cats and dogs, and examining in terse couplets a complete human narrative, "Youth ... slips./Death ... nips." Del Tredici's music was deft, dance-like, alternately delicate and acrobatic, briefly lyrical, and then, quite suddenly and crisply, done.

Fred Lerdahl and John Harbison both chose poems by contemporary American poets for their pieces. Lerdahl's setting of Richard Wilbur's "Cornstalks" evoked the poem's tercets in small, self-contained bursts of music, each containing brief discordances almost resolved, and ended with a resolution into harmonious possibilities, "the sole thing breathing." Harbison explored Michael Fried's "The Pool," a poem about movement and pause, preparing and forgetting, with music that alternated smoothness with sudden breaks and harmonies that moved in loops and swells.

Sacred texts set to music were not limited to psalms in this concert. Stephen Hartke set selected verses of Matthew 5: 38-59 – Jesus's exhortation "to turn the other cheek" – to music that moved from attempted harmonies to beauty itself. Jennifer Higdon's The Prayer – the "Our Father" – began with an American sureness that managed to be both contemplative and sensible and then ended in a triumphant arc of joy and glory.

The Canticum Novum Youth Choir sang Richard Rice's setting of the fifteenth century anonymous folk-hymn "Adam lay y-Bounden" with skill and sweetness; the final "Deo gratias!" was sturdy and confident.

Three works proved richly evocative of particular times and places. Chen Yi's brief *Let's Reach a New Height* embodied a fully realized fusion of formal Western and Asian influences but retained enough echoes of folk music to locate the text in the tradition of central Tang Dynasty nature poetry. George Tsontakis's setting of "A Dream within a Dream," written by Edgar Allen Poe in 1849, presented layers of harmony and sound that conjured both Poe's fluid spookiness and his deeply serious confrontation with mortality: the singers' only moment of absolute unison arrived in the very last line, the certain confirmation of all the preceding uncertainties.

John Corigliano's piece *Upon Julia's Clothes*, based on a poem by Cavalier poet Robert Herrick was a true song – like songs plopped into Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas – and was as gently sultry as a cottage rose. The marvel of *Upon Julia's Clothes* is that Corigliano, such an American composer, has written a very intimate England praise-song, a virtual obeisance to Ralph Vaughan Williams. In its ephemeral, gauzy lushness, this little song was as evocative of English aesthetic history as Frederick Ashton's four-minute *Salut d'Amour* choreographed to music by Elgar in 1979 for Dame Margot Fonteyn on the occasion of her 60th birthday.

The most surprising text of all the pieces performed in this concert was Bruce Adolphe's *Obedient Choir of Emotions*, based on a passage from *Self Comes to Mind* by contemporary neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, co-founder and now co-director of the ground-breaking Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California. Adolphe has collaborated with Damasio on a number of research projects on music, creativity and perception within the context of neurobiology and has, since 2008, been Composer-in-Residence at BCI.

Adolphe's *Obedient Choir of Emotions* called for The New York Virtuoso Singers' full complement of sixteen singers accompanied by a pianist. The music of the piano supplied a context of warmth, something like an embrace, for the singers' voices whether individual or in small groups, whether offering one melody or a blend of melodies. Damasio's prose focuses on a single

moment of perception – “I am looking at the Pacific Ocean” – and allows it to unfold into a discourse on consciousness. Adolphe's music in turn had its own architecture and development: voices carried lines that took chords apart, considered individual strands and then reweave them. The most mysterious of internal processes – awareness, consciousness – was translated into external accessibility not just by Damasio's prose but by Damasio's and Adolphe's conjoined gifts.

The contemporary composers with whom Rosenbaum works routinely challenge themselves and their audiences with texts that vary from the most familiar and traditional to the unexpected and unusual to the genuinely obscure and esoteric. Each kind of text presents its own musical challenges. How can new music make familiar texts feel fresh? How can new music make the arcane more intelligible? Underlying these questions is an even more fundamental one: how do composers make their music serve texts even while words themselves are vehicles of musical sound?

These questions aren't ever actually answered. They are simply explored, with the works of each composer providing particular insights.

During the course of the concert, the choral pieces were interspersed with piano pieces. Brent Funderburk played a piece by William Bolcom in the first half and Donald Isler played a piece by Louis Pelosi in the second. Both pianists played well and the works they presented were interesting, but the presence of these piano “interludes” did not contribute helpfully to a program that, by its very nature, had no overarching thematic unity. The informal conversation with composers before the concert could have been extended longer in place of the time consumed by the piano works.

The idea of celebrating 25 years of music-making with 25 new commissions is a lovely one. The concert was like an afternoon of present-opening shared with many friends.