

TimeOut

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'Diaries' give voice to Hemings' story

Concert review

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"FROM THE DIARIES of Sally Hemings," the new song cycle by composer William Bolcom and librettist Sandra Seaton, gives voice to an intriguing American figure who never had the opportunity to speak for herself.

Hemings was both slave and mistress to Thomas Jefferson -- as well as the mother, it was recently established through DNA testing, of several of the president's children. She didn't leave the world any actual writings. But in 18 songs composed from her point of view, Bolcom and Seaton create an indelible portrait of her life.

Friday at Herbst Theatre, the cycle made its West Coast debut in a San Francisco Performances vocal recital by mezzo-soprano Florence Quivar, accompanied by pianist J.J. Penna.

The work was commissioned for Quivar by Music Accord, Inc., and in Friday's recital, the singer made a persuasive case for it. (Quivar and Penna also performed the cycle's world premiere last month at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.)

Arranged in four sections, Bolcom's brief settings provide a restrained framework for Seaton's evocative texts, which trace Hemings' relationship with Jefferson from Paris to Monticello over a period of several decades.

Seaton emphasizes the contradictions inherent in Hemings' dual role as servant and lover: a position that elevated her above others of her station ("Alone in his sanctum...No woman goes there but me") yet denied her official status ("No room for me in your graveyard. A servant in my place.")

The portrait that emerges in the roughly 40-minute work (divided in two parts by an intermission in Friday's performance) is of a multi-faceted woman. Intelligent, dignified and fashionable in the Paris of her youth, Hemings endures the slights and insults of white society only to find herself increasingly bereft in later years.

Bolcom, whose opera "A View from the Bridge" premiered in Chicago two years ago, resists the urge to sentimentalize, and in several settings, his restless music aptly reflects

the tentative nature of Hemings' existence. Yet elsewhere, the composer's cerebral approach seems inadequate to the deeper dramatic statements of the texts.

Still, one couldn't ask for a better interpreter than Quivar, a versatile artist who is a favorite at the Metropolitan Opera. Her warm, glowing vocalism and eloquent phrasing, well-supported by Penna's sensitive playing, expressed the "Diaries" in an urgently articulate performance.

Quivar and Penna opened the recital with a set of American songs by Stephen Foster ("Beautiful child of Song" and "Why No One to Love") and Carrie Jacobs-Bond ("Her Greatest Charm" and "Nothing But Love").

They returned for a two-song encore that began with "The Cabin" by Paul Bowles. The evening ended with the American spiritual "I'm Seeking for a City," in a handsome arrangement by James Miller.