

TOENSING *Evening Prayers*¹. *Whitman Tropes*². *Night Songs*³ • William Drury, cond; ^{1,3}Erica Washburn (mez); ²Bethany Worrell (sop); New England Conservatory Symphonic Winds • ALBANY 1741 (71:42 📖)

The late Colorado-based composer Richard Toensing (1940–2014) wrote in many genres over a long, distinguished career, and here he essays something both different and difficult: setting songs for a solo voice to wind-band accompaniment. The basic obstacle is that a solo voice, male or female, can hold its own much better against orchestral strings than an all-winds ensemble. It's fascinating how well Toensing strategized the three works on the program, to reach not just successful balances between voice and band but musical interactions that feel natural and evocative.

Frequently setting religious texts interwoven with poetry, and writing from an Orthodox perspective, Toensing has the advantage that the music's tone can often be elegiac, peaceful, and reverential. *Evening Prayers* floats an ecstatic vocal line, beautifully rendered by Erica Washburn, above a tapestry of wind colors. To quote the program note, the soloist "sings in a meditative fashion, with words beseeching succor from her Lord and Savior, mixed with words asking that the coming night be a peaceful one." The student musicians of the New England Conservatory Symphonic Winds must obey some very soft dynamics—that a band composed mainly of freshmen and sophomores can play this softly and with real subtlety is very commendable. Conductor William Drury fully provides a classical-music level of interpretation rare among symphonic winds.

I've begun with the voice-and-band issue because this is the first time I've encountered such works, but in fairness I should have started by saying that Toensing had a remarkable ear for sound, and his sense of harmony and melody perfectly suits the elevated nature of these pieces. In *Whitman Tropes* excerpts from the biblical Psalms alternate with Walt Whitman's observations of the luminous sky, stars, snow, and thunderstorms taken from *Specimen Days*. The implication is spiritual—the poet is contemplating transcendence in moments of epiphany, which joins seamlessly with the Psalmist's praise of divine Creation. Soprano Bethany Worrell is asked to sing in a high *tessitura* that she manages with secure technique, sensitive artistry, and beautiful tone (one is irresistibly reminded of the fifth movement of Brahms's *German Requiem*, "Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit").

The greatest variety, both of texts and instrumental effects, comes in the third piece, *Night Songs*, which gives the album its title. *Nachtmusik* has been familiar in classical music at least since Mozart, and by the time it became prominent in Mahler's Seventh Symphony and Bartók's string quartets and concertos, the night conveyed as much mystery and dread as moonlit serenades and nocturnes. Toensing's *Night Songs* are a *tour de force* that evokes a wide range of emotions from insomniac anxiety to religious radiance. The scoring conveys the delicate fragility of night by employing light scoring, favoring instruments like the celesta or soft tapping on woodblocks to create a suspended mood. Washburn returns to give a stunning rendition of the solo part, and Drury's conducting inspires his band to professional-level execution.

As in *Whitman Tropes*, religious texts alternate with secular poetry in *Night Songs*, this time from sources as diverse as D.H. Lawrence, Carl Sandburg, and Wendell Berry. I mean no

slight when I say that the piece transcends the provincialism of bands in their popular image. Toensing is as sophisticated here as Mahler was in a Rückert setting like “Um Mitternacht.” He is fortunate that Washburn, and Worrell too, so intelligently and artistically delivers the poetry. (Both singers have admirably clear English diction, but I only wish that the microphones had been placed closer so that the words emerged more distinctly.) Since I began by considering Toensing’s strategy for combining solo voice with wind band, a final aspect is contrast. He reserves the full sound of the band, or specific sections like massed brasses, for the spaces in between the vocal lines. Altogether, one is never aware that a difficult challenge has been met, so flowing and natural are the results.

I see from the composer’s bio that Toensing devoted a major part of his career to electronica and wrote in contemporary, postmodern harmonies when called for. Here, they mostly aren’t. He gives us some lovely, arching melodies that are accessibly diatonic, in keeping with the spiritual mood being created—*Evening Prayers* evokes cherubim and seraphim praising God in Heaven, which wouldn’t be quite so seraphic in an atonal idiom.

It’s always frustrating trying to describe a composer’s personal voice in prose, especially when a program comprises 24 tracks and a panoramic range of sounds and moods. Suffice to say that Toensing’s voice leaps off the page from the first note, and his musical gift is unmistakable.

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