



The determination to move forward: CMNW makes serious and hopeful music with a poetic vibe

Oregon poet S. Renee Mitchell opened a concert of Schubert and Bolcom songs performed by Susanna Phillips alongside instrumental works by Schumann and Brahms.

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Chamber Music Northwest opened the second week of its summer festival on July 2nd at Lincoln Performance Hall (a program repeated at Kaul Auditorium the following night) with music that touched on themes that were serious but not without hope. The program began with Dr. S. Renee Mitchell reading her poem, *I Write, I Write, I Write*, in honor of Maya Angelou, expressing the determination to move forward with gratitude. Her strong and melodious voice segued perfectly into the music of Robert Schumann, Franz Schubert, William Bolcom, and Johannes Brahms, giving depth to the festival's theme of Poetry in Music.

Soprano Susanna Phillips, a mainstay at The Metropolitan Opera for the past 12 seasons, made her CMNW debut in the concert, singing Bolcom's evocative song cycle *Let Evening Come*. Her collaborators in the piece were violist Paul Neubauer (now in his 39th season with the CMNW festival) and pianist Jeewon Park, whose appearance also marked her CMNW debut.

In *Let Evening Come*, Bolcom shaped three poems by Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson, and Jane Kenyon into a powerful statement about death. Phillips sang with a sense of immediacy that resonated with listeners, starting with Angelou's poem entitled "Ailey,

Baldwin, Floyd, Killens, and Mayfield” – a tribute to dancer Alvin Ailey, writer James Baldwin, music educator Samuel A. Floyd Jr., writer John Oliver Killens and actor Julian Mayfield – all of whom inspired her. Delving into Bolcom’s descriptive word painting, Phillips wonderfully decayed the words “fall away,” elongated “peace blooms,” and stage whispered “They existed” – all of which gave a depth-charge to the poem. In contrast, Dickinson’s “Tis not that Dying hurts us so” offered an introspective look, which Bolcom painted with a twinkling piano underlayment. After a meditative instrumental interlude that allowed the viola more presence, Phillips and her colleagues delivered a sense of closure and a feeling of hopefulness with Kenyon’s “Let Evening Come.”

Schubert’s *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* (*The Shepherd on the Rock*) received an impeccable performance by Phillips, clarinetist David Shifrin (CMNW Artistic Director Emeritus – 46th summer), and pianist Park. Outstanding breath control by Phillips and Shifrin created a soothing and smooth echoing exchange. They altered the mood as the shepherd expressed his loneliness and then freed up his emotions with the bubbly expectation of spring. Park supported it all with a beautiful, nuanced tone.

Neubauer and Park used a well-nuanced palate to paint Schumann’s *Märchenbilder* (*Fairy Tale Pictures*). Neubauer elicited a singing tone and Park deftly matched it on the keyboard. They also changed tempos together as if in a mind-meld. That was especially effective in the very fast third movement in which the two artists raced about but never tripped over each other. For the last movement, they created a dreamy lullaby. It was oddly satisfying that Schumann ended the piece on a relaxing, balmy note.

After intermission, Shifrin, cellist Zlatomir Fung (second CMNW summer), and pianist Zitong Wang (2023 CMNW Protégé Project artist), gave a stirring account of the Brahms *Clarinet Trio*. It started with a tender movement that was dominated at times by the bold cello. Wang played the first two movements beautifully but perhaps with too much sensitivity. Some dynamic variation would have made the piano part more interesting. But that turned out to be the only quibble that this reviewer could find. That’s because the third movement changed things up with its playful lightheartedness, and the fourth movement shifted everything into a higher gear with volleys of fortés. In the end, the ensemble wrapped up the piece with a virtuosic flair that caught fire and caused a stampede of applause and cheers.

PS: It should be noted that Schubert wrote *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* for Anna Milder-Hauptman, one of the great sopranos of that era. In this song, the main character is a male shepherd who pines for a woman, but the song is sung by a woman. This fact has never shocked anyone, and women have always loved to sing this great lied. But the anti-queer rhetoric of today's conservatives makes one wonder if this Schubert song—and others in which gender roles are switched around—will become *verboten*.