

OPERA NEWS

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"The Leaves of the Butterfly Tree"

By Fred Cohn

The Mirror Visions Ensemble's April 6 concert was an occasion to explore the ways that music and text interact. Entitled "The Leaves of the Butterfly Tree," the hour-long program, given at the downtown club SubCulture, offered settings by six composers of poems by two contemporary poets, Linda Pastan and Jeffrey Greene. All of the works had been commissioned by Mirror Visions, a twenty-two-year-old vocal trio dedicated to music set to poetry.

The setup demanded that we focus on the texts themselves, which is why I enjoyed the compositions in direct proportion to the extent that they let us hear the words clearly. The concert started, logically enough, with a number that presented the three singers in tandem, Tom Cipullo's "Weather Forecast." But the concerted singing drowned Pastan's words, especially when it got high and loud. In general, the text emerged best in solo numbers, or in duets where the singers sang in alternation — for instance, in Richard Lalli's intriguing *Three Greene Songs*, a set of soprano/baritone duets, with the voices deployed so discretely that each word made its full effect. Unlike the rest of the songs on the program, the Lalli set used a flute (the excellent Jennifer Grim) rather than a pianist. I couldn't at first hearing quite follow the musical logic of Lalli's work, but the wandering flute line did give the effect of an inquisitive human mind in active

contemplation, and the hummed ending to "Presence," the last of the three numbers, was an apt illustration of the poem's image of children playing in the obliterating night.

Francine Tester's settings of "The Octopus" and "Mouse Song" matched the whimsy of Greene's texts. The six very short numbers from Christopher Berg's *The Months* (to Pastan texts) each conjured a condensed impressionistic image. The most effective writing for the whole trio came in Richard Pearson Thomas's "The Butterfly Tree" (Pastan again), written in Andrews Sisters-like close harmony. But Russell Platt's contribution — another *Three Greene Songs* — offered the most musical pleasure of the evening, especially in "Extended Night," the meditation of a man caring for his dying mother, with Chopinesque, onomatopoeic raindrops in the piano part, and a rush of melody in the postlude that registered as a surge of emotion.

All three singers — Vira Slywotzky, soprano; Scott Murphree, tenor and Mischa Bouvier, baritone—brought healthy voices and unquestionable commitment to the material, although Slywotzky, in her more exuberant outbursts, did not seem to have fully taken the measure of the intimate performing space. Margaret Kampmeier's work on the piano was beyond reproach.

