

# Contempo premieres Festinger song cycle

By Joshua Kosman, San Francisco Chronicle | January 24, 2017

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Composers, I suspect, read poetry in a different way than you or I do. Whereas we read for pleasure, for enlightenment, for all the delights that any art form can bring, some composers are also shoppers, always in the market for raw materials for their own work.

You can get a sense of the delight that the Bay Area composer Richard Festinger must have felt on coming across the brilliant creations of the American poet A.E. Stallings, which he then set to music in his new cycle, "Careless Love." Read on the page, her verse is intricate, formal, witty and full of looping self-references, and it does seem to welcome a musical counterpoint.



Festinger’s three-song cycle, which had its world premiere on Friday, Jan. 20, to open a terse chamber concert by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, doesn’t consistently rise to the ingenuity of its source material. But when it does, the results add an entirely new dimension to the workings of Stallings’ poetic imagination.

That proves most enchanting in the cycle’s opening song, which sets two of Stallings’ poems to a nimble three-part plan. One of them, "Fibs," is a taut semi-comic commentary on the story of Adam and Eve, replete with puns that double as rhymes and vice versa; the other, "Olives," is built from short but expressive lines that are near-anagrams of the title.

For both of them, Festinger creates a musical language that mirrors and heightens the poet’s crisp lyricism. A French horn and three string instruments hold plush sustained chords as a backdrop, while the piano and clarinet dart their way through brusque, angular melodic figures that turn corners as sharply as Stallings’ line endings do.

The vocalist, meanwhile — on this occasion the excellent baritone Daniel Cilli — negotiates between the two with a combination of precision and tenderness. The effect is like witnessing a particularly inspired poetic reading.

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song, “Accident Waiting to Happen.” Here again the zip and subtlety of the poetry find a counterpart in vocal writing of rhythmic buoyancy and surprise.

Friday’s concert, led by Artistic Director Steven Schick at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, also included another fine song cycle, by composer Kate Soper. “Door” is based on tiny, elusive poems by Martha Collins, which Soper whittles down even further until they’re barely fragments of fragments.

Yet that’s more than enough space for her to create telling musical aphorisms — a curt melodic repetition here, a sudden upwelling of mood there — that in turn make for an evocative whole. The performance, scored for an eclectic instrumental quartet and featuring bright, expertly placed singing from soprano Amy Foote, was a small marvel.

Michael Pisaro’s “Ricefall,” in which 16 performers drop grains of rice on different surfaces according to a carefully charted matrix, boasted moments of surprising drama, but seemed like a mandarin exercise in the context of political engagement pronounced by Schick in some fiery mid-concert remarks. Ligeti’s 1969 Chamber Concerto, still a masterpiece of modernist passion and formal clarity, concluded the evening in a skillful performance.

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