

Grisey masterpiece crowns Contemporary Players' opener

By **Joshua Kosman** Updated 2:46 pm, Thursday, October 22, 2015



Alice Teysier gives a vibrant performance.

In his magnificent “Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil” (“Four Songs for Crossing the Threshold”), the French composer **Gérard Grisey** undertook a sweeping reckoning with the specter of death, setting a strange litany of texts to music that is unsettling and profound.

This 40-minute piece, which capped Wednesday’s richly rewarding season-opening concert by the **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players**, would register as a stirring masterpiece under any circumstances. To learn that it was Grisey’s final composition — completed shortly before, and premiered soon after, his sudden death at 52 in 1998 from an aneurysm — feels like a horrifying and tasteless joke.

But whatever the circumstances, the majesty and evocative grandeur of Grisey’s writing are

irresistible. And Wednesday's performance at the [San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#), with Artistic Director [Steven Schick](#) leading a large instrumental ensemble and soprano [Alice Teyssier](#) serving as the virtuosic soloist, made a potent case for the work. (The Players continue their season on Saturday, Oct. 24, with a different program devoted to music by [Kaija Saariaho](#) and [Jean-Baptiste Barrière](#).)

Grisey (who taught briefly at UC Berkeley in the late 1980s) was a pioneering figure in what became known as spectral music, which sought to anchor compositions in the physical properties of sound. What that means in practical terms for the listener is music that resonates — often in surprising and apparently mystical ways — with the overtones produced by instruments, and late by the human voice.

The “Four Songs” offer a classic example of this process. In the songs themselves, the vocal line moves in and out of harmonic phase with the instrumental group — meeting up with the trumpet or the violin, for example, in a melodic unison that flashes a brief moment of epiphany, or raging against the full weight of the ensemble in the explosive fourth song. The instrumental interludes that separate the songs are no less magical, bursting with new sounds and cunning harmonic sleights of hand.

Grisey's text-setting is a work of sorcery itself, from the first song's pointillistic treatment of a poem by [Guez Ricord](#) — a mix of acerbic syllabic shards and gently blurred notes — to the ferocious final treatment of a bit of the Gilgamesh Epic. The most improbable and most haunting episode is in the second song, where Grisey sets a museum catalog of ancient Egyptian sarcophag — many of them obscured or destroyed — in an eerily beautiful litany redolent of both loss and timelessness.

Teyssier gave a vibrant, clear-toned performance, unleashing torrents of sound at one moment and gentle waves of lyricism at the next. She brought an equally apt vein of tenderness and expressive immediacy to “Death Speaks,” [David Lang](#)'s 2012 compilation of fragments from Schubert songs set to moody minor harmonies. It was an apt companion piece, opening the program in a gentle performance featuring violinist [Roy Malan](#), guitarist [Travis Andrews](#) and pianist [Kate Campbell](#).

In between, the shadow of death was joyfully chased away by [Lee Hyla](#)'s exuberantly witty duo “We Speak Etruscan,” in a compelling performance by bass clarinetist [Jeff Anderle](#) and baritone saxophonist [David Wegehaupt](#), and by an oddly engrossing joint improvisation by vocalist and composer [Ken Ueno](#) (deploying Tuvan throat-singing techniques through a bullhorn) and oboist [Kyle Bruckmann](#).

Joshua Kosman is The San Francisco Chronicle's music critic. E-mail: jkosman@sfgchronicle.com

Twitter: @JoshuaKosman

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24. JCC of San Francisco, 3200 California St., S.F. \$25-\$35. (415) 278-9566. www.sfcmp.org.

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