

Randy Woolf's review for New Music Connoisseur
JUKEBOX IN THE TAVERN OF LOVE
Madrigal comedy by Valeria Vasilevski and Eric Salzman
Commissioned and performed by the Western Wind Vocal Ensemble
The Flea Theater, New York City, May-June 2008

We are in a New York bar during a huge storm and a Con Ed blackout. The bartender, a classic New York type, sets the stage. "We're all in the dark, soaking wet, stranded, strangers in my bar on the worst night of the year. Then, something happened. Hey, you shoulda been there, capish?" He tells the story of the night that the lights went out and a nun, a rabbi, a "dame from Broadway," a poet and a Con Ed worker all took shelter in his establishment!

This is not a joke but rather the premise of an elegant evening of theater and music. "Jukebox in the Tavern of Love" is a melding of a modern life confessional scene and the form and manner of a Renaissance madrigal comedy, intricate and reflecting both contemporary sounds and the style's distant origins. Salzman has succeeded in creating a smooth amalgam of virtuoso counterpoint and avant-garde effects that is fresh and provocative. The text by Valeria Vasilevski (who also directed the premiere) is natural and rhythmically poised, more in the manner of lyrics than high-flown poetry.

The work was commissioned by the Western Wind Vocal Ensemble to go with a 'real' 1605 madrigal comedy ("La Barca di Venezia per Padova" of Adriano Banchieri) and the two pieces were performed together at the downtown Flea Theater. Each of the six singers in the Western Wind portrays one of the characters, taking turns as soloist while the remaining singers in each piece function as a Greek chorus, creating an emotional backdrop for the individual stories.

The first visitor to the bar is the nun who sings the "Dies Irae" -- "Day of Wrath" in honor of the storm -- which turns into a canon with the Italian-American bartender. The others enter one at a time, adding their voices to the mix which adds up to a madrigal of remarkable complexity which somehow never interferes with the simultaneous telling of each character's story. The Broadway dame's tale is next, set as a dance routine to old school Harlem jazz. It loses none of its rhythmic drive as the vocal lines overlap, augment and stretto against each other. When the sextet adds a hocketing handclap accompaniment, the combination suggests that Steve Reich and Cab Calloway have joined forces.

The most touching of the madrigals, "Do You Know What a D.P. Is?" is the rabbi's story of his experience as a displaced person. A Holocaust survivor, he was orphaned at age 3, moved from place to place with no idea of how he would get by without parents, family or home. To the simplest of guitar accompaniments, he sings of a childhood that "had no laughter, that tasted bitter, that had an enemy but not a God." Finally he is adopted by a loving American Catholic family and is more and more drawn in by his new religion, falling in love with all the rituals and a sacraments. When he decides to become a Jesuit priest ("maybe even a saint"), he is told "You can't... You're Jewish", which at first seems like a punch line. But, as it is repeated, it becomes an unsettling metaphor of his displaced person status. The effect of overwhelming inner feeling and its strangled outer expression is rendered perfectly.

The nun then takes her turn, gradually revealing the secret Lesbian inner life of her late aunt. Although the nun never identifies herself as gay, it seems very much implied. She has found letters in a jewel box addressed to her in which the aunt explains how she realized that she was gay from early youth but suffered through the trauma of keeping her feelings secret. Salzman has set this with a tense staccato melody, evoking the repressed inner emotional world of the aunt. The staccato notes spread to the other singers in a tootling circusy texture that is reminiscent of a calliope. This world of frozen feeling never becomes sentimental or manipulative. As the other singers continue, the nun's melody becomes more and more legato and moves into the higher registers. When the aunt's confession finally speaks of her devotion to her one great love, the accompaniment has become legato and the nun's line reduces to a handful of brief, isolated notes.

Next is a paean to lost love, led by the poet. The setting is the closest to its madrigal roots. Each of the singers is given a turn at it, singing over sliding chromatic harmonies that suggest both a barbershop quartet and a Schumann song. This is a showpiece for both Salzman and Vasilevski and a marvel of clarity and contrapuntal reflection. As in all of the text, Vasilevski achieves a natural and effortless flow that is inherently rhythmic and musical. The resulting prosody is seamless.

The final solo, sung by the Con Ed worker, begins with a cadenza of melismas, wonderfully performed by Richard Slade. It leads to the finale, based on a philosophical love poem of Rumi, sung as the lights come up again and six strangers depart.

Ms Vasilevski's text, ranging from the personal to the very comic, is always the equal partner of the music with a flow that is so natural and genuine that it passes almost unnoticed at first. Yet many phrases still echo in my mind, long after the performance. One almost needs to forget the music to realize all the magic of these lyrics.

"Jukebox in the Tavern of Love" is a brilliant entertainment in both the deepest and lightest sense of the word. It occurs to me that I have barely mentioned the visual elements, the moments of dance, and the thoroughly convincing theatrical direction of Ms Vasilevski. The singers of the Western Wind are fantastic, as convincing as actors as they are as singers. Bravo to all.

Randy Woolf