

Words Set, Not Sung

the village **VOICE**

Melody Sumner Carnahan

BY KYLE GANN

Nineteenth-century composers had Goethe and Heinrich Heine and Maurice Maeterlinck to set to music. Today we have Santa Fe writer Melody Sumner Carnahan, whose enigmatic texts have formed the basis for more pieces of music I know than any other recent writer can claim. Whenever I hear a piece by Elodie Lauten, Laetitia Sonami, or Larry Polansky with a story elliptically hinted at in evocative images, Sumner Carnahan invariably turns out to be the author. And finally a CD has come out bringing together 15 pieces based on her words: *The Time Is Now* (Frog Peak Music).

It's easy to hear what makes her writing so attractive to composers. Her short, commanding sentences leap off from each other at arresting right angles:

The time is now. It is the year of the simple message. The style is imitation, the technique to cheat. The world has abandoned the lion eagle ox for the 30 second spot. There are no presents for children, everything is obvious, envy has erased all sympathetic response.

This is manna for musicians. Each generality frames a strong image, yet the through line is too ambiguous to force the composer into any particular direction. In this respect hers is probably the most musical prose since Gertrude Stein, only the music of Stein's prose is invested in word repetitions, which assert their own demands on a musical setting. (Then there's Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which I contend can't be made into music because it already is music.) Sumner Carnahan's prose is blanker, startling the listener with its non sequiturs but leaving the composer free to orbit at any distance.

Sometimes she makes stories out of a mosaic of facts so tiny as to draw only a few details; when she then jumps to another part of the picture, the reader/listener has to participate imaginatively to fill in all the gaps. She gives you dozens of concrete truths too small to ever add up to The Truth. For example, in "Ruby's Story," from Sumner Carnahan's book *The Time Is Now*, which San Francisco composer Susan Stone weaves into a heartbreaking monologue on the CD, a woman tells, inarticulately but searingly, about her ex-husband:

He did not tell me about his girl friend for 6 month. His girl friend come to see me at my job and she ask me about Roy. I ask her what for about him. She show me that she has pregnant and I WHAT and I was real surprise because he is real good with me for 22 years. . . . I had to question him about his girl friend. Roy got cried and Yes, he did love and sex with his girl friend and just fun for sex with her and he wants stay be with me.

Gradually, piecing together details, it dawns on you that the protagonist is a deaf-mute.



Sumner Carnahan writes the most musical prose since Gertrude Stein.

All of which makes Sumner Carnahan the perfect writer for those composers who do *not* set words to music. There's nothing so old-fashioned sounding, nothing so redolent of high-brow European pretensions as words sung carefully on pitch. Out of 14 composers on the CD, 13 avoid singing in the foreground, including it only in the accompaniments if at all. Barbara Golden speaks her decadently sultry "My Pleasure" with a scat-singing trio as light background:

I press his hands to my buttocks and bury my face in his neck, breathing in his scent and sweat. When I have spent myself, I let him take care of his needs, anyway he wishes . . . but quickly. I am tiring of him, I want some brandy, my best cognac with a side of soda on the rocks.

Robert Ashley, who has never acknowledged any line between text and music anyway, simply reads her text "Victims." The observations—"The psychology of man is the study of lying as a matter of fact he cannot speak the truth"—sound like many of Ashley's own.

Some of the pieces date back 15 years, and it's to be expected that not all of them rise to the level of the texts. The pieces by Sonami, Golden, and Joan La Barbara sound as natural and intimate as though they had written the texts themselves. The one conventionally musical setting is Elodie Lauten's "Answer," strikingly scored for Baroque ensemble with harpsichord, with the text chanted in a repetitive style reminiscent not of minimalism but of an exotic fusion of Stravinskian chinoiserie and the 17th-century cantata: very beautiful. Some, like Larry Polansky and John Bischoff, use the texts as triggers for electronic processes, while others—like Brian Reinbolt and Nessie Lessons—provide variously subtle or intrusive backgrounds for straight readings.

Such a varied disc isn't optimum for casual listening, but it does serve as a guidebook to the current dazzling array of Downtown text-setting styles. And if you fall in love with Sumner Carnahan's mysterious word pictures, go out and get her books *The Time Is Now* and *13 Stories* (Burning Books). ▣

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