Words Set, Not Sung

Melody Sumner Carnahan

BY KYLE GANN

In nineteenth-century composers had Goethe and Heinrich Heine and Maurice Maeterlinck 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, inarticularly but sarcastically, about her ex-husband:

_He did not tell me about his girl friend for six 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.

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 deceptively 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 tired 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 much 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 of minimalism but of an erotic 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 Reimbold and Nesses 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 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).

Addresses: Burning Books: P.O. Box 2638, Santa Fe, NM 87504; Frog Peak Music: Box 1052, Lebanon, NH 03766.