

or Chopin and as moving as Verdi or Puccini. Seemingly random tonality and rhythms are, in fact, very carefully orchestrated and beautifully express the emotional richness of the text.

Rich is the word I often use to describe this piece. It is certainly not huge or decadent, but it is undeniably rich. I sometimes imagine *Das Buch* as a small, yet infinitely deep, pool of water, and we the listeners as a pebble tossed into that pool. As we journey as pebbles deeper through the pool we become more and more immersed, more and more absorbed in it's strangely beautiful water.

So, my lifelong journey through *Das Buch Der Hangenden Garten* makes its first performance-pause tonight, and I would like to offer sincere thanks to everyone who has helped me along the way:

Irina Petrova for designing the poster and invitations, Erica Beloungie for making slides of the text, Cari Sherburne for running the projector, Ursula Mathers and Inkeri Voutilainen for their time and help, the Music Faculty, Woolley Fund and SEA for financial aid, Sue Jones and Ida Faiella for calmly assisting me in the hectic behind the scenes details, Allen Shawn and Su Lian Tan who have both gently nudged me to open new doors, Elizabeth Kim who has gone vastly above and beyond her call of duty as accompanist and is certainly one of the most dedicated, hardworking, and finest musicians with which I have had the pleasure to work. Finally, I would like to thank my family, particularly my parents, Charles and Joanne Zafonte, for their unwavering, loving support and senses of humor through the years. I am a very lucky person.

Rebecca Zafonte

This concert is made possible in part through the generous support of Judith Rosenberg Hoffberger '54 and the Henry and Ruth Blaustein Rosenberg Foundation.

Bennington College Presents...

Das Buch der hängenden Gärten
(The Book of the Hanging Gardens)
Op.15 (1908-9)

Fifteen Songs on Texts
of
Stefan George
set by
Arnold Schoenberg

Rebecca Zafonte, soprano
Elizabeth Kim, piano

Saturday, May 9, 1998
7:00 p.m.
Deane Carriage Barn

Program Notes

The Book Of The Hanging Gardens, a song cycle which is a setting of fifteen poems by German symbolist poet Stefan George (1868-1933), occupies a special place in the history of twentieth century music and of song literature, but it is seldom performed. To be sure, it is difficult to sing and to play, and it has a very subtle and elusive character; but it is also from start to finish a work of stunning beauty.

George considered himself a kindred spirit to Mallarme, and to Baudelaire (whose "Fleurs du Mal" he translated). Although written in strict, classical metric forms, his poetry explored an evocative and dreamlike inner world full of symbolism drawn from nature. From George's original "Book of The Hanging Gardens", which tells the tale of a heroic oriental potentate in love with a woman intended for his rival, Schoenberg chose fifteen of the more abstract poems, thereby eliminating most of the elements of the original story line and leaving only the emotions expressed by the protagonist and vague suggestions of a plot. Schoenberg's cycle charts a course from vague anticipation (poems 1,2) and longing (3, 4, 5), to obsession (6, 7, 8), frustration (9), reverie (10), brief consummation (11), and finally doomed resignation (12, 13, 14, 15). In Schoenberg's "abstract" of the original poetic cycle, every elements begins to seem symbolic, making it a kind of modern "Song of Songs" in which the "garden" has become almost as important as the "woman".

More Program Notes and Thank You's

"One and a half months ago, I didn't think I would physically be able to see this class through to its entirety. While the others in class listened to Schoenberg's music with quiet attentiveness, I sat in the chair with a knot in my stomach and a lump in my throat, trying as hard as I could to listen, but inevitably tuning out and thinking of other things: homework assignments, previous conversations... anything to block out the assault on my ears, the perversion of what was most sacred and important to me. I felt horrible because I just couldn't, in any of the music I heard, figure out what Schoenberg was attempting to say. Try as I might to make any thread of an emotional connection, find any glimmer of his music's relevance to my 19 year old notion of what was beautiful, or even get through a piece of his without cringing, I always came up with nothing but frustration, disgust, sadness, and a headache. Then on Sunday afternoon, October 13, in the tinier listening room in the Jennings Music Library, something different and wonderful happened. That is the day that Schoenberg's music finally said something to me that I could begin to grasp and even care about. That "something different" was *Das Buch Der Hangenden Garten, The Book of the Hanging Gardens*."

This is a quote from a paper I wrote during the Fall of 1996 for a class Allen Shawn taught about the life and work of Arnold Schoenberg. To my own astonishment, that single listening assignment from Allen has turned into the most challenging and consuming musical experience of my life.

When I began learning *Das Buch* last term, I realized that it is a piece that one could study for an entire lifetime and still find deeper and more beautiful nuances, musically and textually. I understand that it is not an easy piece to listen to for the first time, and can seem quite ethereal if not elusive. However, I have found that once one has delved into the heart of *Das Buch* it becomes as accessible as Mozart

Das Buch der hängenden Gärten
(*The Book of the Hanging Gardens*)

Op.15 (1908-9)

Fifteen Songs on Texts
of

Stefan George

set by

Arnold Schoenberg

1) Under the protection of dense clusters of leaves where delicate flakes snow down from stars, gentle voices proclaim their sorrows, fabulous animals spew streams from their brown maws into the marble basins from which the little brooks hasten away lamentingly: there came tapers to ignite the bushes, white forms to part the waters.

2) Grove in these paradises alternates with flowery meadows, pavilions, brightly painted flagstones. Slender storks' bills ripple ponds that gleam with fish, rows of birds in a dull glow trill on the oblique roof ridges and the golden sedges rustle—but my dream pursues only one thing.

3) As a novice I entered your enclosure; previously there was no amazement in my attitudes, no wish stirring in me before I caught sight of you. Look graciously upon the clasping of my young hands, choose me as one of those who serve you, and with merciful patience spare the one who is still stumbling on such an unfamiliar path.

4) Since my lips are immobile and burn, I begin to observe where my feet have come to: into the splendid domain of other masters. It was perhaps still possible to break away, but then it seemed as if through high gate rails the glance before which I knelt untiringly was seeking me questioningly or was giving signs.

5) Tell me on which path she will walk by today, so that I can fetch soft silk weaves from the richest chest, can pick roses and violets, so that I can lay down my cheeks as a footstool beneath her soles.

6) I am henceforth dead to all efforts. To call you near me with my senses, to spin out new conversations with you, service and payment, permission and prohibition, of all things only this is necessary, and to weep because the images that flourished in the beautiful darkness always vanish when the cold, clear morning threatens.

7) Anxiety and hope oppress me in alternation, my words are prolonged into sighs, I am afflicted with such impetuous longing that I pay no heed to rest and sleep, that tears soak my bed, that I keep every joy away from me, that I desire no friend's comforting.

8) If I do not touch your body today, the thread of my soul will tear like a sinew that has been stretched too far. Let mourning crepes be beloved signs for me, who have been suffering since I have belonged to you. Judge whether I deserve such torment; sprinkle cool water on me, I am hot with fever and unsteadily leaning outside.

9) Fortune is severe and obstinate with us; what could a brief kiss do? The fall of a raindrop on a parched, bleached desert, which swallows it without pleasure, which must do without new refreshment and which cracks open from new heat waves.

10) I contemplate the beautiful flowerbed as I tarry; it is enclosed by purple-black thorn in which flower cups with speckled spurs tower, and velvet-feathered inclining ferns and fluffy-tufted flowers watery-green and round, and in the center bellflowers white and gentle—their moist mouth is of a fragrance like that of the sweet fruit from the fields of heaven.

11) When behind the flowered gate, we finally felt only our own breathing, did we obtain the blisses we had imagined? I recall that we both began to tremble like weak reeds whenever we merely touched each other lightly, and that our eyes teared—you remained at my side a long time that way.

12) Whenever, resting blissfully in deep meadows, we join our hands around our temples, veneration mitigates the burning of our limbs: and so, do not think about the misshapen shadows that rock up and down on the wall, (do) not (think) about the watchers who may separate us swiftly, and (do) not (reflect) that the white sand outside the city is ready to sip our warm blood.

13) You lean against a white willow by the bank; with the stiff points of your fan you protect your head as if with lightning bolts, and you roll you jewelry as if you were playing. I am in the boat which arches of foliage are guarding and which I invited you in vain to step into...I see the willows, which are bending lower, and flowers that are floating scattered on the water.

14) Do not always speak about the leaves, prey of the wind, about the shattering of ripe quinces, about the steps of the annihilators late in the year. About the trembling of the dragonflies in storms and (the trembling) of lights whose gleam is changeable.

15) We peopled the evening-gloomy arbors, bright temples, path and flowerbed joyfully—she with smiling, I with whispering—Now it is true that she is going forever. Tall flowers pale or break, the glass of the pools grows pale and breaks, and I stumble in the decaying grass; palms jab with their pointy fingers. Unseen hands jerkily drive the hissing throng of withered leaves outside around the dun walls of the Eden. The night is cloudy and sultry.

As for the musical language, few works sit so squarely between worlds as this one, and this too lends the piece a dream-like quality. Written during the same period (1908-09) as the Three Piano Pieces op. 11, and the Five Pieces For Orchestra op. 16, "Das Buch der hängenden Gärten" represents such an expanded use of what used to be called "chromaticism" in tonal music as to defy tonal explanation. yet at the same time the exquisite vocal lines, built on thirds, and sonorous piano accompaniments, which are full of triads and seventh chords, suggest at every turn the great late nineteenth century German song tradition from which this music comes. Like the hero slowly drifting away from his beloved in a boat in poem 13 ("You lean against a white willow by the bank"), Schoenberg's music has torn itself loose from the shores of the old meanings.

Although melodies and fragments return from time to time throughout the cycle, the very flexible forms of the songs and the form of the cycle as a whole are distinctly at odds with the structures of the poems. So, too, the vocal part interprets the metre of the texts very freely. As H. H. Stuckenschmidt says in his biography of Schoenberg: "George's strict metres are as it were unmasked by Schoenberg. ...Schoenberg's sounds and rhythms shine behind this order and disclose the spiritual organism which hides behind it."

Allen Shawn