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[A Gathering for Both Conversing and Playing](#)

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Among opportunities to hear music by the composer David Lang performed live, the best are those in which he is invited to talk about his works. Genial, droll and articulate, Mr. Lang has a knack for making the disparate impulses and methods that mingle in his music seem not just appropriate but also inevitable.

Happily, conversation is part of the point in Carnegie Hall's Making Music series, which hosted Mr. Lang at Zankel Hall on Friday evening. In two onstage interview segments with Jeremy Geffen, the hall's director of artistic planning, Mr. Lang spoke about the daunting prospect of confronting a canon of masterpieces as a young composer and explained the motivations behind the two works on the program.



One, "The Little Match Girl Passion," has had masterpiece status conferred on it by a 2008 Pulitzer Prize and a 2010 Grammy Award. That work, which had its premiere at Zankel in 2007, recasts this Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale in the guise of a Bach Passion. Mr. Lang explained here that as a Jew, he wanted to tap the profundity and ache of Bach's creations without their explicitly Christian subject.

That he succeeded was demonstrated anew in a sublime account by the conductor Paul Hillier and Theater of Voices, the vocal quartet for which the work was written. Even as "The Little Match Girl Passion" becomes more familiar, it retains its capacity to grip and haunt with its icy web of spare lines, insistent repetitions and uneasy dissonances.

"Death Speaks," first performed at Stanford University last Wednesday, resulted from a commission for a companion to "The Little Match Girl Passion." In a more philosophical sense, Mr. Lang said, it rose from the dichotomy of the earlier work's conclusion: listeners in anguish as the protagonist achieves final bliss.

Dissecting songs from Schubert's final years, Mr. Lang extracted verses in which death, as a character, explains the nature of its companionship, and reset them in a five-part

cycle of new songs. Rather than writing for conventional performers, Mr. Lang enlisted four classically trained artists busy in alternative-pop circles, where the confessional spirit of Schubert's lieder is found most readily, he asserted.

Unsurprisingly, given its subject, "Death Speaks" seems unremittingly bleak at first blush. The singer Shara Worden, looking like a hip young Norma Desmond enrobed in severe, quasi-medieval chic for a close-up in Ingmar Bergman's "Seventh Seal," sang coolly of finality, enticement and angels. Her vaguely androgynous tone simultaneously suggested a choirboy and the doomed Velvet Underground chanteuse Nico.

Another Nico, the protean composer Nico Muhly, provided grave piano figures that grounded, and intertwined with, electric-guitar lines from Bryce Dessner, a member of the indie-rock band the National, and murmurs from Owen Pallett's violin.

The results connected the dots between Romantic morbidity and emo rock: "Schubertgaze," a musician in the audience memorably called it afterward. And throughout the work's dolorous scope, numerous subtleties — flickers of distorted guitar amid a gloomy fog of piano and violin in "Pain Changes"; the instruments' sudden absence at the end of "I Am Walking" — showed that Mr. Lang, like Schubert, is an exacting illuminator of mood.