

The New York Times

Hushed Tones That Grab Attention

by Anthony Tommasini

The New York Times

August 11, 2013

The contemplative allure of “the whisper opera,” the new piece of lyric theater by the composer David Lang that had its New York premiere on Saturday night at Lincoln Center’s Clark Studio Theater, comes from its pervasive softness, stillness and intimacy. For just over an hour the soprano Tony Arnold, the closest this experimental work has to an actual character, walks atop a small platform stage amid white lace curtains, sometimes humming chants but mostly whispering cryptic sentence fragments and phrases. She was accompanied by four instrumentalists playing cello, percussion, various flutes and clarinets, all members of the International Contemporary Ensemble, known as ICE. And accompanied is the right word, since the musicians actually follow Ms. Arnold, stationing themselves in different corners of the platform, also whispering incomplete sentences and unanswered questions.



But if the contemplative quality of “the whisper opera” comes from its quietude, its dramatic tension comes from the curiosity the piece sparks among audience members who want to know what Ms. Arnold and the instrumentalists are whispering about. In everyday life, when you notice someone whispering something to someone, you assume a secret is being shared. It is human nature to want to know more, to be included. Mr. Lang elicits that tension in this strange and haunting piece.

For the concept to work, of course, “the whisper opera,” presented by the Mostly Mozart festival, had to be performed in a space where the audience was close enough to hear, or almost hear, the musings. At the Clark Studio Theater the audience sits in short rows, back to back, that intersperse sections of the elevated stage platforms. It is like sitting in a trench with the floor of the stage at about chin level. There was one slightly funny element of the staging by the director and designer Jim Findlay: it was eerie to look across the platform and see rows of protruding heads. And not many heads, since only 48 people could be accommodated.

Mr. Lang, who compiled the text, was motivated by his fascination with the Internet as a “public, searchable storage place for the interior and semiprivate thoughts of billions of people,” he writes in a program note. He searched the Web for sentences he hoped

would uncover and elicit some secret phrases. The libretto is a compendium of responses to phrases that became the titles of the four sections of the piece: “when I am alone I always,” “they said I was crazy but I,” “when I think of you I think of” and “it’s not my fault that I am so.” Sometimes I strained to hear what the performers were saying, and sometimes I just basked in the murmuring, indistinct haze of sounds.

On Saturday night, when the piece started, from my vantage point I could hear Ms. Arnold’s chantlike singing in the distance. Right in front of me was the clarinetist Joshua Rubin, who, like the other players at the outset of the piece, started twirling and tapping cymbals, sometimes letting the edge scrape against a long piece of metal to produce almost inaudible steely sounds. When I focused I could just about catch what he was whispering, phrases like: “I wonder where my sister is,” “go to the commissary,” “I feel very upset and alone.”

Each corner of the stage had a cymbal and a suspended bass drum so that the players could move from station to station. As the music unfolded, there were long quizzical episodes. Kivie Cahn-Lipman, the cellist, played what sounded like a ground bass struggling to come together, over which Claire Chase played flickers of flute melodies and Ross Karre played rippling taps on the bass drum. Ms. Arnold was the most audible when she stood near you and you could make out phrases like “I just don’t care,” “I was just a boy” and “think in my mind.”

At one point there was what could be called “the whisper opera grand aria.” Ms. Arnold, standing in the center of the stage, conducted the four players, who accompanied her in halting, staggered chords with echoes of Renaissance harmonies, as she uttered what seemed memories of a love affair: “sunny day,” “us together,” “someone special oh,” “all the things we could do.”

It was somehow utterly right that “the whisper opera” ended with an almost-song: Ms. Arnold, offstage, sang a wistful melody (“so sweet, so hurt, so much”) as the instrumentalists supported her singing with beguiling chords and interweaving lines.

It is impressive that the Mostly Mozart festival has grown adventurous enough to present the local premiere of an experimental work performed by a contemporary music ensemble in residence. How unfortunate that only four performances were scheduled, meaning that few people will have a chance to attend. It would have been an inspired idea to link “the whisper opera” to the overall festival by having the orchestra play a piece by Mr. Lang on one of its Avery Fisher Hall programs.