The New York Times

December 7, 2012

Romance, From Tristan und Isolde to Today by Anthony Tommasini The New York Times

In its first moments, the composer David Lang's new vocal work "love fail" establishes the subdued and mystical mood it will sustain for more than an hour.

Written for Anonymous 4, the remarkable female vocal quartet that performed the piece at the Harvey Theater at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Thursday night, "love fail" is Mr. Lang's distillation, in his own words, of various medieval tellings of the Tristan and Isolde myth. His text is also based on, and crucially enlivened by, contemporary microfiction stories by the writer Lydia Davis. Mr. Lang has removed all



specific references to Tristan and Isolde, the better to plumb a deeper theme: while love claims us, it is bound by our mortality and doomed to fail.

It was Mr. Lang's music, and the ethereal, pure-toned singing of Anonymous 4, that claimed me in the first section of the piece, which begins with the line "he was a blessed man." In overlapping textures, the words "he was" are turned into a two-note musical mantra, prolonged with gently clashing sustained intervals, spun into fragments of melodic lines. Finally, at the word "blessed," the quartet settles on an austerely hovering harmony. When the heroine is introduced ("she was so wise/she was so fair"), the music slightly shifts in mood and character, unfolding in block chords at once resonant and self-possessed.

Throughout this skillfully written piece the four vocalists punctuate their singing with sounds from a few instruments, including a drum and a sea conch. Mr. Lang has written a score that finds common ground between the austere language of medieval music and crunchy, pungent modern styles.

Still, "love fail" is a dramatically amorphous work. Mr. Lang shows skill in adapting and translating the texts and — in his debut as a director — staging the performance. The singers are seated in a half circle with atmospheric lighting (by Jennifer Tipton) and background screens for projected texts. But I did not get the point of the curious videos (by Jim Findlay) showing silent characters in heavy facial makeup, wearing high-camp costumes designed by Enver Chakartash.

Is "love fail" a theatrical song cycle? A work of musical drama? The piece avoids clear narrative. Mr. Lang takes a risk by keeping the mood and tone of the music so subdued and meditative. At times the ethereal qualities of "love fail" become rarefied.

Yet Mr. Lang mostly manages to hook you. For me the music was at its best in Mr. Lang's settings of Ms. Davis's texts, especially "Forbidden Subjects," which finally introduced some humor. The text gingerly explains the touchy subjects that a couple has learned to avoid, which include "certain members of her family, his working hours, her working hours" and more. The enticing music becomes a little impish and jittery.

And Mr. Lang's riff on the "Liebestod" from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" brings the work to a conclusion with its most varied, astringent and intense music.