

note to a friend

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DAVID LANG'S chamber opera *note to a friend*, which received its world premiere as part of this season's Prototype Festival, announces its subject matter in the first startling line: "People who kill themselves/don't usually tell you what they think about killing themselves." Lang based his piece, for baritone and string quartet, on writings of the Japanese novelist Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927), commonly regarded as the father of the Japanese short story. (Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, a film for which Lang developed admiration in high school, is based on two of Akutagawa's stories.) Akutagawa's suicide note, which he addressed to a fellow writer friend, was published after Akutagawa took his own life. It serves as the springboard for Lang's libretto, although the composer drew from other writings of Akutagawa as well.

The piece (seen Jan. 12) is a monodrama but in this production it featured two performers. The wonderfully pure and eloquent baritone Theo Bleckmann, as "the dead man," did all the singing, but performer/martial artist Cyrus Moshrefi (as "the friend") was onstage with him nearly the whole time, as if Bleckmann were back from the grave in a vision, singing to his friend about why he took his own life. One of the most touching moments, in fact, came soon after Bleckmann first appeared and the two men embraced. (Imagine how happy you would be to be able to hug a departed loved one.)

Lang's musical language in the piece is simple and triadic, as it often is, but he knows how to set his texts effectively and to combine his materials skillfully. Generally, the words are straightforwardly narrative, but Lang's music, distilled and polished, makes them lyrical and poetic, elevating the piece to a different artistic level.

In the first section, the dead man informs us that what people normally think about why people kill themselves—problems with money, health or love—is usually wrong. "People," he sings, "are complicated.... People who kill themselves are complicated too." We subsequently hear passages about the man's mother (who went crazy), his father (ditto) and his sister (who died before he was born). In one imaginative bit of staging by director Yoshi Oida, the dead man, while cycling the phrase "My mother and my sister and my father" with increasing intensity, implies a comparison between his dead relatives and the apple, pear and orange he removes from a bowl and later places in the candle holders of a large candelabra. When the dead man speaks of visiting his family at their graves, Lang reduces the accompaniment to just one solo violin, a distinctly poignant effect.

The frequently slow-motion, balletic movement by Bleckmann, a Grammy-nominated jazz singer, and Moshrefi matched the elegant beauty of the music. The tone of the piece is indeed primarily peaceful and soothing, but in one passage of great intensity ("It is in our animal

nature to be afraid of death”), Bleckmann moved into his upper range, increasing his volume considerably. The pace of the instrumental cycling accelerated commensurately, even as the harmonies remained steadfastly triadic, save the occasional added seconds and other subtle dissonances.

In the vivid final section, the dead man describes the long silence at the moment of death, and his sense that someone was coming near him in the darkness. “But it was too late,” he sings. “I had found what I was looking for, and I was gone.” The piece ended serenely and left the capacity crowd at Japan Society rapt. It was a triumph for Lang, Bleckmann and Moshrefi (who was unfailingly expressive, even in his silence), director Oida and designer Tom Schenk, the four dimly visible musicians (who played evocatively and brilliantly), and co-commissioners Japan Society and Tokyo Bunka Kaikan (a performing-arts venue in Japan dedicated to Western classical music)—as well as the admirable, ever-adventurous Prototype Festival. —*Joshua Rosenblum*