

Review: Freund's endeavor to set Shakespeare to music admirable

By Peter Jacobi | H-T Reviewer | pjacobi@heraldt.com
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I think he's got it. I really think Donald Freund has got it.

For 10 years, Freund, a most versatile and productive composer on the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music faculty, has been at work setting Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" to music. I'm not sure when, along the way, I began to hear his setting, but it certainly has been a while.

From my start with it, I found his concept intriguing. As he cogently explained it once again in program notes for last Thursday evening's concert by the New Music Ensemble in Auer Hall: "I have wished to bring the music I write together with theater, but I must admit that I am generally more moved or delighted by non-musical theater than by opera or Broadway. I've become convinced that there must be another way of experiencing singing and music together with characterization and drama that would match the complexity, subtlety, directness, and broad immediate appeal of a great stage play."

On Thursday's program, composer Freund introduced two completed scenes from his rewrite: the ballroom scene and the balcony scene. In my humble opinion, what he's accomplished works. Previous versions combined voices with piano, just a piano. For me, that result jarred; I couldn't accept the sound combination either for Shakespeare's tragedy itself or for how the vocal and piano lines blended. To my ears, they didn't.

Not at all to suggest that my hesitations, as expressed in reviews, had anything to do with Professor Freund's decision to rewrite, but I stated that his music drama needed a small instrumental ensemble of some sort to help bring out the flavor of the score's very creative lyricism. He's now done it. And I think it really works.

What he prepared for the New Music Ensemble, and for other future ensembles, is beautiful and appropriate, an instrumental score up to date but also etched in the trappings of Early Music, ever so right for a timeless tragedy with a plot of long past occurrences. With fine-tuned amplification, the solo voices came through loud and clear, with Shakespeare's rapturous words absolutely distinct.

The New Music Ensemble, in a configuration of 18 musicians, accomplished its task brilliantly, as one would expect from any collection of players chosen and guided by the ensemble's director, David Dzubay. The singers gathered by Freund — most importantly soprano Maya Vansuch as Juliet and tenor Jeremy Weiss as Romeo — handled their obligations with aplomb. The whole of the effort was a pleasure to experience.

I say to Don Freund: Go on.

Also on the program were two pieces by Dai Fujikura, a Japanese-born composer now living and working in London. He was here on a weeklong visit culminating with the concert. One item performed was "Deconstructing Franz," written in 2009 for string quartet. Fujikura added to the title: "Inspired by Schubert, String Quartet in D Minor, 'Death and the Maiden.'" Sorry to say, I heard no Schubert in the music but appreciated how the wild score was deftly and with seeming ease handled by the Vera Quartet, this year's graduate quartet-in-residence at the Jacobs School.

The other Fujikura composition was a 2015-dated flute concerto that occupied 13 musicians plus a visiting and virtuoso soloist, Claire Chase, respected also for founding the prestigious International Contemporary Ensemble. She was required to conquer four different instruments while negotiating the concerto's score: C flute, piccolo, contrabass flute and bass flute. No matter whether she was asked to puff-puff-puff in maniacal fashion or to actually produce identifiable notes, she did so with relish and skill, miraculously even when blowing into one awkward-looking flute a foot higher than the soloist herself.

Don Freund

