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MUSIC REVIEW; A Libretto via Ginsberg Captures a City's Spirit

By ALLAN KOZINN
Published: June 6, 2001

Elodie Lauten became friendly with the poet Allen Ginsberg in the 1970's, soon after she moved to New York from Paris, and for a time she accompanied him at the keyboard when he chanted and sang. In 1996, Ms. Lauten persuaded Ginsberg to write a libretto for an opera she was planning about life in New York.

What Ginsberg provided was a collection of published poems that used New York as a vivid backdrop, with Ginsberg's own concerns -- aging, illness and the approach of death, primarily, but also a measure of politics and mordantly humorous observation -- holding the foreground.

Ms. Lauten completed and first performed the work, "Waking in New York," in 1999, and on Saturday evening the Downtown Chamber and Opera Players, conducted by Mimi Stern-Wolfe, revived it at the 14th Street Y. Ms. Lauten performed as a keyboardist in the ensemble, which also included a string quartet, flute, bass and two percussionists. And since the performance was underwritten by Meet the Composer, Ms. Lauten spoke briefly at the end.

Among her remarks was a rationalization for calling the work an opera. Her argument, that the definition of opera can be expanded to include nonnarrative works, is not new. Still, one is hard pressed to stretch the idea of opera around "Waking in New York."

Joining plot on the absentee list were staging (apart from a series of evocative slides of New York, by Phyllis Stevens), action and characters. Granted, the singers are meant to personify Compassion, Freedom, Liberation and Ginsberg himself, but if not for an assertion to that effect in the program a listener would not have known it.

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Nomenclature isn't everything, of course, but it seems silly to insist that "Waking in New York" is an opera without opera's attributes when it is actually a lovely, effective and affecting example of something else: a song cycle, for vocal ensemble and chamber orchestra.

Ms. Lauten has treated Ginsberg's poetry and its underlying spirit carefully, even reverently. She tucked his personal and sometimes diarylike texts into her own agreeably melodic and eclectic style, but she also appears to have listened carefully for traces of the music that animated Ginsberg's soul.

When she found them, both in direct references and by implication, she incorporated them into her settings in the form of blues melodies, the soulful wail of the gospel singer, hints of jazz and the insistent rhythms and bright melodies of pop music. Perhaps most crucially, she presented Ginsberg's texts with clarity and directness, never obscuring his ideas or pacing for the sake of a purely musical effect.

The singers projected the music and texts ably. Mark Duer, a baritone, and Tyler Azelton, a soprano, were particularly agile. Sherrita Duran put across "Song" powerfully and with an interestingly dusky timbre. Laura Wolfe, a mezzo-soprano, sang in a theatrical style on her own, but blended nicely in the ensembles with Mr. Duer and Ms. Azelton.

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