

The New York Times

Arts

Ned Rorem at 79: A Hater of War Faces Mortality

By ALLAN KOZINN
Published: October 28, 2002

To open its fifth season, the Lyric Chamber Music Society presented an elaborate tribute to the composer Ned Rorem on Wednesday evening at the Kosciuszko Foundation. The occasion was Mr. Rorem's 79th birthday, and the salonlike atmosphere of the foundation's concert hall made the event seem like a party in a patron's living room.

The principal draw was the New York premiere of "Aftermath," a 10-song cycle for baritone and piano trio that Mr. Rorem composed soon after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Mr. Rorem's choice of texts (by poets from the 16th through 20th centuries) largely reflects his abhorrence of war, but also his more general ruminations on mortality.

Many of the settings are as striking for their simplicity as for their intensity. Mr. Rorem's elucidation of Borges's "Remorse for Any Death," for example, has a vocal line that, sung a bit more slowly and without accompaniment, could almost pass for plainchant. His settings of Randall Jarrell's "Losses," Richard Eberhart's "Fury of Aerial Bombardment" and Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 64, by contrast, are exquisite for the palpable depth and dimension they give to the poets' concise, artful expressions of the tragic. The cycle had its premiere at the Ravinia Festival in July and was offered here by the same young musicians who gave that first performance. Nathaniel Webster, a baritone, sang these pieces with passion and eloquence, qualities matched by Lisa Shihoten, violinist; Amy Sue Barston, cellist; and Ieva Jokubaviciute, pianist.

Mr. Rorem's feelings about war informed the evening's other song cycle as well. With the composer at the piano, Leon Williams, a baritone, gave a powerfully direct performance of "War Scenes" (1969), Mr. Rorem's vivid but clear-eyed setting of prose texts drawn from Walt Whitman's harrowing Civil War accounts.

The String Quartet No. 4 (1995) and the Trio (1958) are vivid, picturesque works, full of interesting rhythmic twists, inviting melodic lines and inventive harmonies. They make the case, persuasively, that Mr. Rorem's instrumental writing deserves better than to lurk in the shadows of his vocal music. Valerie Chermiset, a flutist; Semyon Fridman, a cellist; and Richard Bishop, a pianist, gave a polished reading of the Trio.

The Quartet performance, by members of the Locrian Chamber Players (Calvin Wiersma and Conrad Harris, violinists; Dan Paner, violist; and Chris Finckel, cellist) sounded underrehearsed but conveyed much of the music's profile.

The writer John Simon, the actress Marian Seldes and the composers John Corigliano and David Del Tredici offered spoken tributes, and the singer Judy Collins led a chorus of "Happy Birthday" and gave a lovely performance of Mr. Rorem's "Early in the Morning," with the composer at the piano.