

A new composition on period instruments

By [Stephen Smoliar](#), SF Classical Music Examiner

March 5th, 2011 7:52 am PT

As I had observed in my [preview piece](#), the highlight of last night's Philharmonia Baroque concert at Herbst Theatre was the United States premiere of *Into the Bright Lights*. This composition is a cycle of three songs resulting from a collaboration between mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade, who conceived the texts, and composer Nathaniel Stookey. The work was composed for von Stade's farewell tour and received its premiere in Canada on September 18, 2009 with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra conducted by Edwin Outwater. In [the Schirmer classification scheme](#), this is a work for "Soloist(s) and Orchestra" in the Sub-Category "Chamber Orchestra."

I review these facts to make it clear that this work was not composed with an ensemble like Philharmonia Baroque, with its focus on performing historical works on appropriate period instruments, in mind. However, conductor Nicholas McGegan did not require his ensemble to exchange their usual instruments for modern ones. Rather, he led a performance of *Into the Bright Lights* with his usual band playing their usual instruments; and the result was surprisingly (unusually?) effective for a modern work.

Much of the success has to do with the relationship between McGegan's instrumental resources and the text. These are highly personal words from von Stade, which amount to a no-holds-barred confrontation with the inevitability of aging. Even the poem from which the cycle title is taken, "Into the Bright Lights," with its rather detailed surface-structure account of all the little preparatory routines that precede going "into the bright lights" of the stage, is best read at the metaphorical level as an extended preparation for death. (One might consider Bob Fosse's film *All That Jazz* for comparison, but neither Stookey nor von Stade have anything to do with Fosse's glitz.)

This is a view of life from which the window of future prospects is much smaller than the scope of past memories. In this context the sonorities of Philharmonia Baroque added haunting qualities to the relationship that von Stade's text establishes with a past growing more and more distant. This was particularly evident in the mournful quality of Stephen Schultz' flute sounds and in the somewhat alien idiosyncrasies of the opening solo by concertmaster Lisa Weiss.

For this performance the texts were sung by Zheng Cao, better known for her appearances in the adjacent building on the stage of the San Francisco Opera. Cao had no trouble scaling her voice to chamber orchestra resources, and her interaction with McGegan was always effectively responsive. She also readily established a dramatic context to her execution without

Advertisement



succumbing to full-out “opera style” emotional exhibitionism. The result was a performance that connected excellently with the text, perhaps resonating particularly well with those of us whose vantage points of future and past are not that different from von Stade’s.

Cao also prepared two Handel arias for performance with the Philharmonia Baroque instruments. “Scherza infida” from *Ariodante* was listed on the program; and she took “Lascia ch’io pianga” from *Rinaldo* as an encore after *Into the Bright Lights*. These texts are as emotionally intense as those by von Stade, and Cao delivered them with that same understanding of controlled dramatism. She also participated in a set of selections from *Orfeo ed Euridice* by Christoph Willibald Gluck, singing “Che far senza Euridice,” both preceded and followed by dance selections from the opera. The familiar flute work from the “Dance of the Blessed Spirits” was particularly effective when executed by Schultz and Mindy Rosenfeld on the period instruments.

In a parallel fashion all of the vocal offerings were preceded and followed by ballet suites. The evening began with *Les Caractères de la danse* by Jean-Féry Rebel. This is sort of a CliffsNotes take on French baroque dance forms, compressing abbreviated statements of all of them into a single continuous movement. The more traditional form of a suite in separate movements was saved for the conclusion in the form of orchestral excerpts from Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Les Indes galantes*. This provided an opportunity to feature percussionist Kent Reed, who summoned different instruments suitable to the characters of their respective dances and cranked a wind machine for a storm scene.

Taken as a whole the evening provided a refreshing and informative perspective on what might have been dismissed as a “song and dance routine.”

Tags: [Philharmonia Baroque](#), [Opera](#), [ballet](#), [art song](#)

