

Music & Musical Performance

Issue 2

November 2022

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Recommended Citation

Haskins, Rob. "Christopher Fox: *Trostlieder*. Kairos 0220005KAI, 2022 [review]." *Music & Musical Performance: An International Journal*. Issue 2, article 10 (November 2022): 1–2.

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Audio Review

Christopher Fox: *Trostlieder*. Kairos 0220005KAI, 2022

Performers: EXAUDI, conducted by James Weeks

In his opening comments in the liner notes, James Weeks situates Christopher Fox's aesthetic and practice in a space motivated by his many years as a professor at Darmstadt; the experimental tradition of Cage, Feldman, and others; and an interest in found materials and in process. While all this is probably true—and occasionally evident in the works on this disc—it leaves unacknowledged what I perceive as an incredible gift for sonority, lyricism, and above all an urgency that compels me to listen. The works are of course challenging—no Eric Whitacre here—but the music richly repays the effort.

The program comprises works written from 2004 to 2018, and while they explore varying kinds of materials and procedures, they nevertheless form a very coherent whole. The *Trostlieder in Widerwertigkeit des Kriegs* (2015) were written for a program that included excerpts from Heinrich Schütz's *Geistliche Chormusik*. Fox selected excerpts from the great seventeenth-century poet Martin Oppitz's *Trost-Gedichte in Widerwertigkeit des Kriegs* (Poems of Comfort in the Awfulness of War); the excerpts address the terrors and inevitability of war and the need for hope in such troubled times. No doubt knowing the severity of Schütz helps to appreciate better the sober quality of Fox's settings. He even takes care to begin the first with harmonies that reappropriate triadic harmonies, but never in a way that evokes nostalgia. A sudden, dissonant outburst in the first song leads the work into further explorations of such harmony in the later movements. Still, there is tremendous variety here. Particularly striking is the registral economy of the second song (where the melodic ideas remain restricted by a range of four or five semitones) and the sudden switch to unison melody, sinewy and tortuous, in the last song. It is a powerful work; Fox noted in his commentary his feelings about the conflict in Syria as he was writing, while I contemplate the current situation in Ukraine, arguably even more desperate and portentous.

I'm equally impressed with the nine-minute *Preluding* (2006), the text drawn from the first part of Wordsworth's immense autobiographical poem that came to be known as *The Prelude*. The work is also written in memory of Sir Michael Tippett, which again—I think—offers a clue to its content and character. Fox writes,

The singers vocalise on the words of William Wordsworth's ecstatic, animistic recollection of his childhood in the Lake District, *Was it for this* (1798). Every word of the 150-line poem is sung, the words used only to colour the singers' voices, not to be

understood by the listener. The score instructs that the music should be sung “like a gale.”

Fox’s music recalls (but sounds nothing like) the ecstatic, endless-sounding melody that appears in so much of Tippett’s music. I think, for instance, of the extended blues that concludes act 1 of *The Knot Garden* or passages of his fifth string quartet. The longer duration of the work contributes to this effect.

In the three madrigals of *Canti del carcere* (2012–2018), Fox sets texts from Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. The first, *fantasma*, sets a text in which Gramsci considers Dante’s ideas about society; the second and third of the madrigals, *senso commune* and *suo tormento*, include settings of Dante (from *Rime petrose* and the *Inferno* section of *The Divine Comedy*). Just as the departure point for the *Trostlieder* was Schütz, the *Canti* obliquely refer to many of the characteristic techniques and stylistic aspects of the Italian madrigal. But the music itself is gritty and unyielding, very well suited to Gramsci’s work. The second of the pieces is especially satisfying, beginning with a particularly well-known excerpt from Gramsci (about the “common sense” as “the folklore of philosophy”) where the singers only sing the vowels of the text in a continuous sonic stream and, for a coda, a near-unison setting of the *Rime petrose* that sounds a bit like hyperchromatic plainsong.

The remainder of the program is given over to two shorter works. *A Spousal Verse* (2004), setting a Spenser text, weaves the last line as a mellifluous, continually sounding refrain along with the setting of the rest of the poem, much simpler and straightforward. *Song (24.iv.1916)* uses fragments of W. B. Yeats’s *Easter 1916*; the singers have some freedoms with respect to how many voices are sounding at a particular time and the choice of what Fox describes as “recurrent melismatic figures.” The changing densities of choral sound put special emphasis on these melismas, which involve a single pitch that is subtly colored by quick stepwise motion a semitone or so above or below.

The eight singers of EXAUDI have already recorded two albums of Fox’s choral music and seem to have the authority of co-creators rather than merely faithful executants. The variety of tone and its generally creamy character well match the intensity of Fox’s music.

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