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MUSIC REVIEW

# Playing And Singing With Rome As Catalyst

By ALLAN KOZINN

The American Academy in Rome has offered fellowships to composers since 1921, and it seems as though nearly every important voice in American music has spent time there. This season the academy has presented "Americans in Rome," a series devoted to works by its former fellows, and last Wednesday evening at Weill Recital Hall it offered the fourth and final installment.

The first half of the program was devoted to vocal music — 14 songs by 11 composers, offered in three groups. After the intermission, the focus changed to chamber music. The common denominator, apart from the composers' Rome experience, was Donald Berman, an eloquent pianist and the artistic director of the series. Mr. Berman accompanied the singers and played in the chamber works.

Chris Pédro Trakas, an eloquent baritone with a commanding sound, covered a fair amount of stylistic ground in his five-song set, which began with Randall Thompson's attractively straightforward "Siciliano" (1978) setting and the inviting chromatic opening song from Ezra Laderman's "Songs From Michelangelo" (1967). Derek Bermel's "Spider Love" (1999) has the melodic lilt and rich-textured chord progression of a sophisticated cabaret song; now and then one could detect the faint shadow of Kurt Weill. Jack Beeson's "Prescription for Lying" (1978) straddled the worlds of cabaret and opera. And Charles Naginski's "Look Down, Fair Moon" (1940), a setting of a harrowing verse from Whitman's war poetry, ended the set on a dark, sobering note.

Some of the pieces in the group performed by Susan Narucki, the soprano, were more conventional art songs: Leo Sowerby's "Adventurer" (1920) and Vittorio Giannini's "There Were Two Swans" (1943) are attractive settings, but not especially memorable. Scott Lindroth's "Dolphins" (1995) is distinguished by its clustery chromaticism, and David Rakowski's "For . . . Wittgenstein" (1996), has a propulsive, dramatic thrust. The highlight of the set, however, was Aaron Jay Kernis's "Mrs. Midas" (2000), a virtuosic setting of Carol Ann Duffy's poem about the travails of a woman whose husband had Midas's ability to turn everything, to gold, including food, cigarettes and animals.

Meagan Miller, a soprano, closed the first half of the program with Robert Beaser's fiery, seductive "Four Dickinson Songs" (2002), a set that includes not only a demanding vocal line but also some powerful and beautifully detailed writing for the piano.

The chamber works, played after the intermission, were Alexander Lang Steinert's Sonata for Violin and Piano (1929), an energetic work with a tart melodic edge, and Yehudi Wyner's "Horntrio" (1997), a robust, angular work in which the French hornist is asked to match the violinist and pianist in agility and speed. Sometimes it works; sometimes interchanges between the violin and the horn sounded like a dialogue between a blackbird and an elephant.

The musicians in the chamber pieces were Sunghae Anna Lim, violinist; William Purvis, hornist; and Mr. Berman.